

A priest's life

What did parishioners expect of their priest in the 1400s?

'Seven times a day I shall give you praise' said the Psalmist and parish priests were expected to do just that, keeping the *Canonical Hours* in their churches with music and devotion. At daybreak, it was *Matins* then *Prime* with *Terce* at about 9:00 am. *Sext* came at around noon with *Nones* mid-afternoon then *Vespers* and *Compline* towards dusk.



Canonical hours

In addition, parishioners expected a daily Mass. No law required this but it had become custom in the 1300s. There were rules about the times of Mass on Holy Days but parishioners' wishes usually over-rode these. The good folk of Masham, Yorkshire, for instance, liked Mass at 9:00 am on weekdays and 10:00 am on holy days.

At Christmas, Easter and on holy days, there were two or three Masses to celebrate. Furthermore, on any day, there could be a second Mass for a funeral, pilgrims, travellers, the sick, an anniversary or an urgent marriage. Then there were parish and diocesan feast days . . .

At least, the church kept baptism and marriage to just a few months of the year.

More exacting, physically and emotionally, was visiting and administering to the sick, especially during the frequent plagues.

On top of all this, our Rector had to instruct his parishioners in their faith. Preaching the faith was obligatory at least four times a year but priests seized every opportunity and what better occasion than confession? Each parishioner, on pain of excommunication, had to confess at Easter (in some parishes at Pentecost and Christmas too).

The priest had to examine a penitent's belief in the *Pater Noster* and articles of the Creed, investigate their observance of the Ten Commandments, questioning each closely about the venial and deadly sins thus leaving sinners no place to hide, though to some priests, it must have revealed a range of experience outside their imagination! All this took place in the church in front of other villagers – there were no private confession boxes then!

This was work for our rector *every day of every month of every year*. If he carried out these duties conscientiously, he would have very little time to cultivate his glebe, let alone his mind.