

Keeping Time with God: An Overview of the Daily Office

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There are many demands upon our time and energy, with more things to do than there is time to do them. Frequently, our "name is legion" (cf. Luke 8:30) for our lives are fragmented and disjointed as we are overwhelmed by the competing demands of church and culture, family and friends, self and service. We hear again the scriptural admonition:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16)

How are we to redeem the time? Some of us cry out from harried, hurried lives the same cry that comes from others in the lonely solitude of the soul: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). We know that the call to redeem the time must involve every moment of every day. As the Apostle Paul writes: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." (I Thessalonians 5:16-19)

However, we also know that focused times of prayer are essential, for in them we are formed in such a way that we can live into Paul's admonition. Setting aside times for prayer is already part of the spirituality of our Jewish forbears in the faith, for in the psalms we read: "Seven times a day I praise you." (Psalm 119:164a) Patterns for daily prayer were inherited and carried on by the New Testament church, and even though set patterns took centuries to develop, the punctuation of each day with prayer is present in the Church's life from the beginning.

Nor is the daily office some kind of sporadic pattern of prayer dependent on a given cultural and temporal spiritual milieu. It is a form of prayer shared by East and West, by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, by Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists among others, and as Robert Taft observes, the daily office has been there in one form or another "from the early centuries until our own day. That is a very respectable track record, one that the Church could not ignore and remain true to its heritage."¹

Yet for many Christians, attention to corporate services of the church has been focused primarily on services of Word and Table, and largely on those services which take place on the Lord's Day. This relative inattention to the Daily Office is quite different from the experience of the ancient church. Take for example the *Apostolic Constitutions*, written in Greek around 380 by a Syrian living near Antioch, where we read:

Do not be neglectful of yourselves nor rob the savior of his members nor divide his body nor scatter his members, nor prefer the needs of this life to the Word of

¹ Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

God, but assemble each day morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's houses But especially on the Sabbath and the Lord's Day of the resurrection of the Lord, meet even more diligently, sending up praise to God.²

Both daily services of prayer and Lord's Day services were important for the ancient church. But over the centuries, that balance has eroded. While never entirely forsaken by the Church at large, and consistently maintained in one form or another by religious orders, the role of the Daily Office in the life of the whole Church has been severely limited.

Current attention to the reclamation of the Daily Office is evident in an article by Arthur Paul Boers in *The Christian Century*: "Reviving an Ancient Practice: The Office of Prayer."³ There he reviews six recently published daily office prayerbooks beyond those prepared by a number of denominations and religious orders. The Order of Saint Luke is part of that renewal movement, heir of both the practice of the ancient church as a whole and its continued appropriation through the ages by religious orders.

What is the Daily Office? What is its inner nature?

In the "Preface" to each of the volumes of *The Daily Office After the Use of The Order of Saint Luke*, we read:

People who pray daily do so in a variety of ways. Our intent is to reclaim the practice of praying the "Daily Office"--a pattern of praise, prayer, scripture and reflection related to the historic "canonical hours"--specified times for focusing our prayer.⁴

The Daily Office thus has to do with a daily pattern of prayer, rather than a weekly one focused on the Lord's Day, or a yearly one focused on Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

However, not just any pattern will do. Neither private nor personal "devotions" on the one hand, nor corporate "prayer meetings" or "group devotions" on the other, automatically qualify. Rather, the Daily Office reflects the historic prayer of the Church related to "canonical hours"--those specified times which are a "measuring stick" (a "canon") for our prayer life together.

Furthermore, this historic pattern is an "office" for us. An office is a task or responsibility entrusted to us. It is not something which we can opt in or out of on the basis of our preferences and feelings at the moment. This is a "stewardship" of prayer to which we are called, and it entails our taking responsibility for that a life of prayer in a particular way. While those in The Order of Saint Luke have considerable flexibility in how we pray the Daily Office, to be a member of the Order is to have received this

² *Apostolic Constitutions*, II, 59.

³ *The Christian Century*, March 21-28, 2001, pp. 14-15.

⁴ For example, see Volume 3, p. vii.

“trust,” this “office” of daily prayer. (Ah, but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to be sure, and even here, God’s grace is sufficient--a point to which we will return.)

Having given a general answer to the question “what is the Daily Office?” we turn now to the question “what is the nature of the Daily Office?”

Through both study and practice, I am convinced that the depth dynamic of the Daily Office is profoundly Trinitarian. That is true in an overt way by the constant use of the Gloria, and by references to the Trinity in hymns and blessings. However, it is not only the use of Trinitarian words to which I refer. If any one of the following three dimensions are missing, the Daily Office is not all that it can and should be.

The Daily Office is marked by a sense of the Transcendent God. Praying the office makes us aware of the presence of the Holy One who is above and beyond us and all that we know or experience. God is always present, but we are not always aware of that presence. The Daily Office removes the veil and reminds us that God is not made in the image of our emotions, that whether we feel God’s presence or not, God is present and we have intentionally put ourselves in holy time and space. We dare to claim that God is present even when what we sense is God’s absence.

The Daily Office is rooted in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The conclusion of Robert Taft, which I quote in *Food for Pilgrims*, is as vibrant an insight now as when I first read it:

The hours take their meaning not from the Eucharist, nor from Christian daily life as opposed to an otherworldly eschatological expectation, nor from the cycle of morning and evening, nor from personal devotion and edification as distinct from the work of the community. Rather, they take their meaning from that which alone gives meaning to all these things: the paschal mystery of salvation in Christ Jesus.⁵

The paschal mystery centers in the celebration of the Pasch by the early church--the death and resurrection of Jesus. But it reaches back before that through Jesus’ life and ministry to his incarnation, and through the affirmation that “all things were made through him” to “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1). It reaches forward through ascension and the gift of the Spirit to the final consummation. And as if that were not enough, the paschal mystery reaches out and includes the church at all times and places, and in a very immediate way, how you and I as individuals-in-community embody and live out all of the above. It is this all-encompassing understanding of the paschal mystery which is the central meaning of the Daily Office, and “the wellspring of all Christian prayer.”⁶

⁵ Taft, p. 334.

⁶ Taft, p. 358.

Moreover, *the Daily Office is empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit*. For it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that the work of Christ is made present in and among us. The Holy Spirit is the relational power of God vibrantly relating us to God, to one other, and to the world. If we do not recognize this, praying the office easily becomes one more example of our attempt to justify ourselves, to merit God's approval, to become self-righteous. Indeed, our praying can go seriously amiss as the apostle Paul well knew:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27)

The longer and more faithfully we pray the Daily Office the more we come to know that it is not something we do, but something we allow the Holy Spirit to do in us. We start by seeking to pray the Daily Office; we come to discover that the Holy Spirit prays the Daily Office in us!

These Trinitarian dynamics are deeply embedded in the structure, practice, and theological foundations of praying the Daily Office. These three dimensions are not independent of one another. They are integrally related, just as the persons of the Trinity are inter-related even as we pray:

Glory to God: Source of All, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit;
One God, holy and blessed Trinity,
Who is now, ever was, and ever shall be to endless ages. Amen.⁷

In addition to this Trinitarian nature of the Daily Office, the following affirmations enrich our understanding of the Office:

The Daily Office is a celebration of the Christian life. It recognizes who we are, celebrates who we are called to be, forms us into who we are becoming, and nourishes and directs us in what we are called to do. Because "Christian life is shared life," we do this not as individuals but with one another.⁸ There must be a continual interconnection between the life of prayer and the prayer of life; that is, between the times we set aside for intentional prayer and the rest of our lives. If our times of prayer are vital, we bring all of our lives to them, and we leave those times of prayer reformed so that all our living is offered up to God. The pattern of turning to God as day begins and ends, at mid-morning, mid-day, and mid-afternoon, is a recognition of what must interpenetrate every moment of life: the continual offering up of ourselves to the praise

⁷ See the marker cover of any of the volumes of *The Daily Office After the Use of the Order of Saint Luke*.

⁸ Taft, p. 347.

and glory of God in thanksgiving for the paschal mystery. As Taft observes: "If we do not live what we celebrate, our liturgy is a meaningless expression of what we are not."⁹

In the Daily Office, just as in the Eucharist, we "do this in remembrance." For the meaning behind the word "remembrance" (*anamnesis* in Greek) is the making present in vital and life-changing ways of the mighty acts of God in the past. What God has done, God does again in us as we bring to mind and heart those saving events which make us whole as they penetrate ever more deeply within and among us. This salvation, this act of God making us whole, is "just as real and active in the ritual celebration as it was in the historical event."¹⁰ The Daily Office is permeated with the perspective expressed in the Magnificat: "You, the Almighty, have done great things for me and holy is your Name."¹¹

Just as this anamnestic dimension of our celebration of Christian life makes present the past, so also the future invades the present and transforms it. This eschatological dimension is not only concerned with the coming consummation, although that is certainly present. When we pray "thy kingdom come," it is not only a plea for that future reign and rule of God, but a proleptic affirmation that "thy will be done" here and now on earth, in you and me, among us "as it is in heaven." As Abbot Patrick Regan reminds us, the eschaton is not so much a time as the new creation in which the life of Jesus Christ is lived in us.¹² The Daily Office celebrates Christ's life lived in us.

The Daily Office is a school of prayer, an ongoing novitiate in which we are taught how the Church through the ages has glorified God and entered into the paschal mystery through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. From day to day, week to week, season to season, festival to festival, we are plunged into the great mysteries of God's grace. By our continual participation in this rhythm, our lives resonate with it. We begin to understand and embody "Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). We are drawn again and again away from the peripheral to what is central to the life of faith.

These basic rhythms of day and week and year are grounded in the historic experience of the Church rather than the ebb and flow of our transitory moods. As Taft puts it, this ongoing school of prayer "pulls us out of whatever bourgeois sentimentalism and inverted egoism there may be in our 'private' devotions, and draws us inexorably into the objective spiritual values of a life lived according to the mystery that is Christ."¹³

This school of prayer provides a discipline of learning, which frees us from bondage to our own emotions and preferences. It takes the state of our own soul seriously, inviting

⁹ Taft, p. 360.

¹⁰ Taft, p. 340.

¹¹ The Lukan form by Timothy J. Crouch, OSL; See the cover of any of the volumes of *The Daily Office After the Use of the Order of Saint Luke*.

¹² "Pneumatological and Eschatological Aspects of Liturgical Celebration," *Worship* 51 (1977), p. 347.

¹³ Taft, p. 369.

us to confession, to lament, to thanksgiving, to supplication, to service. It provides us with core experiences so that in the daily rounds of our existence, we have words and images and patterns so deeply imbedded in us that we learn to see and experience and interpret life in light of that schooling.

The Daily Office is the prayer of the Church. This recognition has been pivotal for me. It was the basic ingredient in changing my approach to daily disciplines for spirituality from private devotions to the Daily Office. It is not that my own concerns and prayers and praises are canceled out as unimportant or irrelevant. Rather they are placed within the framework of the prayer of the Church through the ages and around the world. I do not pray alone. It is always "Our Father" not "My Father." For example, when I pray the Magnificat at Evening Prayer, I am doing what Christians have done at every evening prayer of every day of every week of every year since the time of the early church. Furthermore it is an ecumenical act, for it is prayed by an amazing multitude of Christian traditions and denominations from East to West and North to South around the world. In the Daily Office we are part of the "communion of the saints" at prayer.

We have spoken of an "office" as a task or responsibility with which we are entrusted. In *Food for Pilgrims* I wrote: "the responsibility here is to fulfill the Church's task of prayer on behalf of the Church day by day."¹⁴ It is not that those who pray the Daily Office pray so that the rest of the Church is freed from that responsibility. Rather, as the Church, we pray the Church's prayer; part of that prayer involves praying *for* the Church! But I do not do it alone. The weight of the responsibility for prayer is mine, but not mine alone. We are members one of another. When I pray I pray for those others, lifting up their prayers and mine, praying for them even as they pray for me. And when, through weariness of the flesh or spirit, or poor stewardship of time and energy, or sheer forgetfulness, I do not pray the office, it is still prayed by others around the world and throughout the ages, and with grace, I am included in their prayers. It is a treasure still, even though I am an earthen vessel!

St. Chrodegang, an eighth century bishop of Metz, provided that "whoever cannot be in church for the hours in common must say them in private."¹⁵ That direction has had far-reaching effects. However, the Daily Office is always corporate prayer, even when prayed as a solitary office rather than in the immediate presence of a community. Whether we do it alone or in company does not change the nature of the prayer-- although if we do not do it together as often as possible, we are not likely to be truthful with ourselves about our belief that it is corporate! Unlike the Eucharist which by its very nature must be done in the presence of others, the Daily Office is prayer, and prayer can be done individually or with others, but that prayer will always be the Church's prayer.

¹⁴ *Food for Pilgrims*, p. 89

¹⁵ Taft, p. 299.

While the Daily Office is the prayer of the Church, the Daily Office can also be a *communal act of an Order or other covenant community*. It is the way in which we as an Order of Saint Luke undertake the responsibility for prayer. Community is dependent on what we do together, and as a dispersed order, the Order of Saint Luke seems unable to do very much face to face. Once a year some of us gather in retreat and chapters meet from time to time but not all members are present. But praying the Daily Office whether alone, with our life-partner, with a few others or with many, is a communal act to which the Order is committed.

Having said that, the Order of Saint Luke has intentionally left how we pray the Daily Office quite flexible. Of course, I believe that the best way to insure our sense of the Daily Office as a communal act is for us to use the resources the Order provides. That includes *The Book of Offices and Services* with its various forms of the offices, the "tan card rite" (which I've called the "portable office"), and the five volume series whose completion we are celebrating. That already provides considerable flexibility, not to mention other resources for the Daily Office which are also acceptable. Our commitment is to pray the Daily Office, not to use a specific form or set of words. But whatever the form, whatever the words, when you pray it with me and I pray it with you, it is a communal act, something we do together even when we are apart. I believe it is what constitutes the community essential to our being an Order. Through it we become who we are.

One of the vows members of the Order of Saint Luke take is to "live the sacramental life." It is in that context that we pray the Daily Office, for *the Daily Office is a symbol of sacramental living*. In *Food for Pilgrims*, I speak of the office as "a window on the presence of the holy in all of time."¹⁶ To live sacramentally is to be translucent so that the reality of God's grace that is beyond us can be embodied within us.

One of the characteristics which distinguishes the Daily Office from private prayer is that is "a symbolic movement both expressing what we are and calling us to be it more fully."¹⁷ Praying the Daily Office must not become an end in itself. Rather, it expresses and forms our life together in Christ, speaking to us and for us in ways that provide basic patterns for the whole of life.

As a symbol of sacramental living, the Daily Office is a *sacramental ritual act*. I believe it is important to recognize the Daily Office as ritual. We are learning that humans are "hard-wired" for ritual.¹⁸ Ritual is the pattern of words and signs and actions that both interpret and embody who we are, and how we are related to one another, to the world, and to God. It includes re-memembering our past that has formed us into who we are, our present with its cares and joys and responsibilities, and the future toward

¹⁶ *Food for Pilgrims*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Taft, p. 361.

¹⁸ Kimberly Anne Willis, OSL, *The Ritual Procession Toward Justice and Transformation: Altering Perceptions of Disability* (Evanston, Illinois: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Northwestern University, 2001). Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

which we move even as we seek to make it present.¹⁹ These ritual offices are sacramental, symbolic of God's presence and activity in all of time. They proclaim and embody our faith, claim and celebrate our charisms--our gifts, and engage us in our mission, our apostolate, in the world. As God's priestly people, we lift up ourselves, our Order, our Church and our world with our needs, our joys, our gifts, and our service.

In the words of *The Rule of Life and Service of the Order of Saint Luke*:

WE SEEK THE SACRAMENTAL LIFE.

. . . We join the Church through the ages and around the world in recognizing that all time is in God's hands. As we faithfully pray the Daily Office, and live so as to embody our prayers, we endeavor to live the sacramental life. By so doing, we seek to be formed as a means of grace for all those we meet and serve in Christ's name.²⁰

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¹⁹ Taft, pp. 338-339.

²⁰ As adopted by the Council of the General Chapter of the Order, October, 2000.