

The Shape of the Daily Office ***(with special reference to its use by The Order of Saint Luke)***

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Setting aside certain times of the day for prayer is rooted in traditional Jewish practice and the life of the early church. Faithful Jews today still engage in morning, afternoon, and evening prayer. With regard to the experience of the early church, Robert Taft observes:

Christians by faith had the supreme joy of knowing that they lived a new life in Christ, a life of love shared with all of the same faith. What could have been more normal then, than for those who were able to gather at daybreak to turn the first thoughts of the day to this mystery of their salvation and to praise and glorify God for it? And at the close of the day they came together once again to ask forgiveness for the failings of the day and to praise God once more for his mighty deeds. In this way the natural rhythm of time was turned into a hymn of praise to God and a proclamation before the world of faith in his salvation in Christ.¹

Thus, morning prayer and evening prayer provide a basis for the Daily Office and are rooted, not in the monastic experience of the "hours," but in the life of ordinary Christian communities. Hence, they are often called "people's offices" to distinguish them from the "monastic offices," the prayer life of communities whose whole life and work was oriented around the schedule set by the canonical hours.

In *Food for Pilgrims*, I suggested that "when members of an order pray the Daily Office, individually or corporately, it is a 'monastic office,'" when an office is shared with our congregation, it is a 'people's office.'" It turns out that this distinction is not particularly helpful. The basic structure of the office is the same for both monastic and people's offices, and there is no office that only members of an Order can pray--thanks be to God!

The historical development of the times for, and names of, the various offices is complex and conditioned by many factors.³ When we began work on the Daily Office project for the Order of Saint Luke, the Order had orders for three offices in its *Book of Offices and Services*: the historic "people's offices" of Morning and Evening Prayer, of course, and the delightful monastic gem of Compline (bedtime prayer, as it were). In

¹ □ Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East of West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 359.

² *Food for Pilgrims*, p. 42.

³ The history of the development of the offices is a fascinating study, and I commend Taft's book to all who would like to know more about it.

developing additional resources for praying the Daily Office, which of the many historic patterns available were we to follow?

We took our cues from two sources, one Biblical and the other historical. In a previous article, we have already made reference to Psalm 119:164 which reads: "Seven times a day I praise you." The number seven is symbolic of completeness, or wholeness. Thus, having seven offices should remind us that all of life is to be prayer.

Our historical cue comes from Basil the Great in the fourth century. Not only does he list seven offices (the same seven we have adopted for the Order of Saint Luke's Daily Office), but he clearly rejects the idea that those who pray these prayers are monks. Rather, they are Christians who take the stewardship of prayer seriously.⁴ He lays out the pattern of the seven offices in this way:

In the morning [we pray] so that the first movements of the soul and mind may be consecrated to God, and nothing else be taken into consideration before we have been delighted by the thought of God . . . Again at the third hour we must stand up to pray . . . recalling the gift of the Spirit given to the apostles at the third hour (Acts 2:15). . . . And we judge prayer to be necessary at the sixth hour, in imitation of the saints who say: "Evening and morning and at noon I will speak and declare and he shall hear my voice" (Ps. 54:17). . . . The ninth [hour] was handed down to us as necessary for prayer by the apostles themselves in Acts where it is related that "Peter and John went up to the temple at the ninth hour of prayer" (Acts 3:11). And when the day is finished, thanksgiving should be offered for what has been given us during the day or for what we have done rightly and confession made of what we have failed to do . . . And again at the beginning of the night we ask that our rest may be without offence . . . And Paul and Silas have handed on to us midnight as necessary for prayer, as the story of Acts proves, saying: "And at midnight Paul and Silas praised God" (Acts 16:25).⁵

Here we have (A) the two great people's offices (Morning and Evening Prayer), (B) three offices during the day (mid-morning, mid-day, and mid-afternoon prayer) and "bedtime prayer" from the monastic tradition, and (C) something new for the Daily Office, but already present in the life of the early church, namely the Vigil. These seven offices, penetrating the day with prayer, form the pattern for the Daily Office of The Order of Saint Luke:

Morning Prayer
Mid-morning Prayer (Terce)
Mid-day Prayer (Sext)
Mid-afternoon Prayer (None--rhymes with "own")

⁴ *Longer Rules*, 3:1.

⁵ *Longer Rules*, 37:2-5. See Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 31, pp. 1012ff.

That brings us to a crucial and sensitive question: if, in seeking to live the sacramental life, we undertake the stewardship of praying the daily office, what have we committed ourselves to do? To put it boldly: just how much of the office does one have to pray in order to be faithful to that stewardship? Asking the question that way betrays our temptation to see praying the daily office as a burden to carry.

That brings us to two additional dangers. For many of us, who do not succeed in praying the Office as faithfully as we intend, there is a burden of greater guilt. And guilt, the gift that keeps on giving, is counterproductive since it rarely is adequate motivation for more than a short period of time. On the other hand, those who do succeed in praying seven offices a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year have to face the danger of spiritual pride and the disquieting recognition that even accomplishing that pattern of prayer is not an automatic guarantee of spiritual growth.

Beyond guilt and self-righteousness, however, is a perspective that sees the daily office as both duty and delight. We receive the daily office as a gift to empower our spiritual growth. The daily office is a means to be in communion with our brothers and sisters in the Order, with other communities who pray the office, with the Church throughout the world and through the ages, and with God. If that is the healthy way to approach our stewardship of prayer, it means that we cannot prescribe what is the only valid way to pray the office for someone else, or even that our own pattern of spiritual discipline does not change during our pilgrimage of life.

I am not talking about what is most convenient or most comfortable---the prayer life for each of us needs stretching; that means we must expect some growing pains. Sometimes we will be called to the pattern of praying seven offices a day. Sometimes morning and/or evening prayer is the time for our spiritual centering. Sometimes it is a block of time each week. We are not called to exercise our stewardship of prayer in exactly the same way as everyone else in the Order. We are called to respond as faithfully as possible to what God is calling us to do.

Thus, I cannot tell you how you ought to pray the office. I will dare to share with you the way I pray it. Not the way I intend to pray it, or want to pray it, or would like you to think I pray it, but how I actually pray it. I seek to pray all of the offices of the five volume Lukan Daily Office in the course of the liturgical year. I accomplish that, but it doesn't mean that I pray everything at the time indicated! Sometimes I am able to be quite faithful about praying the Office. Linda and I share in morning or evening prayer during some seasons of the year. But sometimes there are long desert times and I suddenly realize I'm really behind. Then I take a block of time and pray a whole series of offices one right after the other. That isn't the best way to do it, but I've concluded that its better than just giving up in discouragement and not praying them at all. It gives me a sense of the over-all patterns and themes and concerns and rhythms.

Every day I try to pray some of the Office. My goal is to pray both Morning and Evening Prayer, but except when Linda and I pray Morning Prayer at breakfast, I do better with evening prayer or compline than morning prayer. Sometimes or some days, because of some little cards with the diurnal hours on them that Brother Jack Fahey gave me, my desk becomes the place where I can pray those "little hours of the day." Some days, when I fall into bed and realize I haven't prayed any of the office, I pray the commendation and the *nunc dimmitis* before falling asleep. And some days, I confess to you my brothers and sisters, I do none of the above and receive as grace your prayers for me and the Church, even as on other days, I pray for you. I keep seeking to grow into the stewardship of prayer entrusted to me, and to act in specific ways to actualize that stewardship. I believe that is what the Rule of Life and Service of the Order of Saint Luke requires of me, gently but firmly calling me to a life of prayer.

What is more important is that these times of prayer be unhurried so that, as Romano Guardini puts it, "that which has been heard or read has time to cease echoing and to sink into the mind."⁶

The basic pattern can be found in what we call "the tan card rite," a portable daily office provided by the Order of Saint Luke which can be prayed morning, noon or night. It has been a great blessing to me, particularly when I'm traveling. The office begins with a call to praise and prayer, followed by a hymn, the Kyrie which functions as a prayer for any day, a reading from the psalter and the Gloria, scripture followed by either the morning or evening canticle, prayers (including the Lord's Prayer) and a concluding prayer, taken from the mid-day office.

This pattern, which we will see developed or adapted in relation to each of the seven offices, is thus composed of the following elements:

- Call to Praise and Prayer
- Hymn or Act of Praise
- Prayer for the Day or Hour
- Psalter and Gloria
- Scripture
- Canticle
- Prayers (including the Lord's Prayer)
- Concluding Hymn, Prayer and/or Sending Forth

This order grows out of the experience of the Church through the ages and in many times and places. It provides us with a reliable guide as we seek to be faithful to our stewardship of prayer.

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⁶ *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (first published in 1918; current edition--New York: Herder and Herder, 1997), p. 21.

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