



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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DAILY OFFICE

The three basic elements of a balanced Christian life of prayer are the Eucharist, the Daily Office, and daily prayer of quiet (meditation, contemplation, colloquy: it has many names). All three are needed in some form for virtually all of us if we are to gain the full stature of Christ in our prayer. As we grow in Christian life, we grow in the fulness of these kinds of prayer. Most of us start by going to Church: we learn first of all about the prayer of the Eucharist on Sunday. This is not necessarily the easiest form of prayer, but it is where we usually start.

The prayer of quiet is also hard for most of us to learn, and is usually the last to become well established in our lives. We spend so much time being busy with one thing and another, and are so used to doing things for the sake of accomplishing something, it is hard for us to learn to sit and be quiet in the presence of God with no other goal than that. It takes a lot of practice and discipline to develop such prayer. It is sometimes said that this prayer is really only for the very few Christians: monks and nuns and such. But it is in fact the calling of virtually all Christians. It is a natural part of being with God. The problem for most of us is that we have not developed an adequate foundation for this prayer.

The daily office is a highly structured form of daily prayer, which can be said corporately -- many parishes have Morning and Evening Prayer read publicly day by day -- or by individuals. It is most often the second type of prayer to be undertaken, after one has been faithful for a time at the Sunday Eucharist. The principal elements of the daily office are the regular use of the Psalms, reading of Scripture in course, and set prayers. It may also include a number of other things, but these are the main ones.

Its essential characteristic is that it is structured. Sometimes you find people who want to pray without any structure at all. They want to pray in their own words as the Spirit moves them. This is a legitimate kind of prayer (the prayer of quiet), but by itself it is incomplete. When we are trying to pray without any external structure, we tend to become preoccupied with ourselves. We think the same basic thoughts over and over. We pray for the same things in the same way. We pray, but our prayer tends to narrow us in on ourselves and make us ever more concerned with the details of our own spiritual experience.

The prayer of the daily office is the corrective to this tendency of personal prayer. The use of the Psalter (for example) takes us through the riches of the experience of a man before God. Sometimes the Psalmist exults in the glory of God who has made him and redeemed him. Other times, he is hard pressed by his enemies and seems to be lost. By reading through the Psalter day by day according to a systematic schedule, we broaden our understanding of what it means to stand before God. We are exposed to aspects of this relationship that we have only dimly perceived within ourselves. Instead of being closed in on ourselves -- as we might well be if we chose every day the Psalms we wanted to read that day -- we are opened to a vast range of Christian experience. This helps us to put our own experience in perspective. It also gives us the resources for understanding what is happening when our own situation changes. For example, we usually start our enterprise of prayer with some enthusiasm and good feelings for God. If later we encounter difficulty, our knowledge of the Psalms will help us to deal with it all.

Second, if we are to pray only when we feel like it, we are not likely to pray very often, at least over the long term. Without some structure -- of time and place, as well as of form -- we are not likely to get very far. Prayer is a learned skill as well as a gift from God. It is learned by practice. We would not expect to sit down at the piano and after an hour play Beethoven. Nor would we expect to go swimming a couple of times and be ready for the Olympics. These take practice and discipline over a period of time: prayer is no different.

The daily office gives us the structure we need to teach us what prayer is all about. We learn from the Psalter and from the set prayers. The structure helps us to experience prayer in the forms the Church has given us (for this is the prayer of the Church) in order to develop our own prayer. By submitting ourselves to the structure, we give ourselves to God's authority manifested in the form which we receive through the Church. We give ourselves to Him. This frees us from having to decide whether to pray and how to pray each day. The form is there, and having once decided to use it, we need decide nothing further. This frees up a great deal of energy for getting on with the work of prayer. This is in fact the basic pattern of Christian life: we give ourselves over to God, and He provides what we need in order to grow. We grow in prayer as soon as we allow ourselves to be mastered by it, rather than trying to master it as our own accomplishment.

Having once established the daily office as part of our prayer, it will then be in position to assist us in times of adversity. We are all bound to encounter such times: times when it seems nearly impossible to pray or to find the strength to think good thoughts for God. This can come from the death of a loved one, or a time of turmoil in employment, or some basic confusion over where one's life is going, or a time of emotional difficulty. In those times, the prayer of quiet seems impossible and at the Eucharist, we are overwhelmed with distractions. These are the times that the daily office will see us through. It will be the foundation for the life of the spirit. Because it is structured, we will be able to continue this prayer when the prayer of quiet seems beyond our resources. In the Psalter, we will find the consolation of those who have experienced adversity before us. It will see us through when the soul cries out to God for help.

The daily office delivers us from our particular whims, and exposes us to the riches of the Church's prayer. The soul is able to learn from the great prayers (the fixed and variable collects of Morning and Evening Prayer and the intercessions) and from the Psalter, what prayer is all about. This in turn will shape the prayer of quiet and allow it to be fruitful as Christian prayer. It gives a standard which will keep our private prayer on track. So often, left to our own devices, we get sidetracked. The daily office is a great defense against that danger.

The daily office has one great danger of its own: formalism. It can degenerate into merely reading the words without any real attention or devotion. This is a real danger, since many of the prayers are repeated regularly. But the danger is no reason to throw out the whole enterprise. The solution is to maintain the devotion, to learn not just to read the daily office but to pray it. This will be hard at times. But it is worth the effort. For once the prayers become familiar, it is possible for us to pray them from the soul and not just on the surface of the mind. They enter into the soul and are with us always; and not just during the time when we are praying the office. The phrases and images will come up from time to time in our quiet prayer and in the course of the day. This cannot happen except as the result of regular repetition.

In combating the temptation to formalism, we must remember that it is prayer, and that means that we are doing it in the presence of God. If we expect to encounter God then we will have no real problem. We will dedicate ourselves to the encounter: it will be a personal time and not just a mechanical one. There will be times, of course, when we are incapable of feeling much in our prayer. Then we must persevere in the daily office as an act of love. Then we will be training our wills to pray, even when this is unsupported by our feelings.

Formalism may lead to another problem. We may begin to think that we are doing something especially meritorious: that we are earning points by saying the office. We may begin to take pride in the fact that we say the office every day. The accomplishment may become more important than the

prayer, the encounter with God. This temptation is inherent with all prayer and spiritual effort. We are tempted to think that it is our effort that gets us God's favor, and not His great love freely offered. Whenever this happens, the solution is to abandon ourselves anew to God's mercy, and recognize that it is His act that saves us, without any merit of our own.

A few words on the practical aspects of praying the office. To establish the practice, we must set aside a specific time, generally the same time each day, and a specific place. These must be relatively free from distraction and noise, so far as possible. Most people find the best time is in the morning before getting too involved in the cares of the day. This usually means rising a little earlier to allow time for the office. Some people prefer a time after they come home from work. A very few can do it just before going to bed: most people are simply too tired for any sustained prayer at that time.

Having found a time and place to suit your particular situation, you will need to decide what form of the office you will use. Morning and Evening Prayer in the Prayer Book are splendid. If you do not now pray the office, start with either Morning or Evening Prayer -- you can always add the other later if it seems good. These offices from the Prayer Book will take you through the Psalter on a regular basis, and through virtually all of the New Testament and much of the Old in the course of the year. The set prayers are marvellous. In addition, there is provision for Confession (particularly useful after a brief, daily self-examination in the evening), intercessory prayers and thanksgivings, the Apostles' Creed (this is the baptismal creed and appears in the office as the foundation of all our Christian life), and the great canticles of praise (the Magnificat, the Te Deum, etc.) of the Church's ancient use.

The details may take a little while to master: where to find the tables of lessons and which canticles to use and where everything is in the Prayer Book. Don't worry much about it. Soon it will all be second nature. It will help a lot to use bookmarks: the Scripture readings follow along pretty steadily day by day, and likewise the collects, the Psalms and the Lectionary in the Prayer Book. Leaving the markers in the Prayer Book and Bible makes things faster.

After you are familiar with the offices, they will take fifteen or twenty minutes each. That will be a time set apart to be with God day by day. It will be a time when you need worry about nothing else. Sometimes it will take some effort to sit down and do it. But it will become part of you, and will be a time you look forward to. For (as will all prayer) it will leave you with more energy than it consumes. That is not to say you may not be tired after praying or that it does not take effort. Rather it refreshes through its communion with God, and leaves us more able to do all that God has given us to do. Moreover, it is a sound foundation on which to build the intimacy of the prayer of quiet. By itself it is incomplete, but it is a vital part of the foundation of Christian prayer.