

Rivendell Postulant's Guide, Unit A

The Sanctification of Time The Daily Office and the Rhythms of Sacred Time

A-2: The Daily Office

Last time we considered the “rhythms of sacred time” in overview. We turn our attention now to a primary daily means of the sanctification of time, the Daily Office, also known as

The Divine Office; which is equivalent to
The Opus Dei (i.e., the “divine work”);

The liturgy of the hours

First, some general “Prayer Book Owner’s Guide” information. (If you would like to get right into the practical aspects of praying the Office, feel free to skip over this material and come back to it later, and go directly to the section heading “Praying the Daily Office”)

A little background

The place of the Daily Office is reflected in the *Book of Common Prayer*:
“The Holy Eucharist ... and Daily Morning and Evening Prayer... are the regular services appointed for public worship.” (BCP, p. 13)

The BCP assumes that the Daily Office is part of the fabric of Christian life. The offices are the first services in the prayer book. Especially prior to the liturgical renewal which produced the 1979 Prayer Book, it was more common for Morning Prayer to serve as the principal Sunday service in Episcopal churches. While there are still certain churches which follow this practice, either by preference or, more commonly, because a priest is not available, the Prayer Book reflects their original role as a form of *daily* prayer, for clergy, religious and laity alike. (The expectation of the BCP, of course, is that Christians pray daily!)

These times of daily prayer reflect the practice of the earliest Church, and are rooted in Jewish prayer, both personal and synagogue. (Traditionally, personal daily prayer, including reciting the *Shema* upon rising and retiring, is incumbent upon all Jewish men; synagogue worship is usually carried out, on behalf of the whole congregation, by a smaller group.)

The monastic tradition developed the Divine Office with great beauty and complexity. However, prior to the time of the Reformation, the full office with its seven or eight times of daily prayer had become so complex that it was next to unusable except by religious. One of Thomas Cranmer’s very successful innovations was simplifying and revising the Daily Office, consolidating and combining elements of these offices into two major offices, Morning Prayer

(Matins) and Evening Prayer (Vespers), available to all the faithful, and required of clergy. These forms of prayer have been retained, with relatively little change, through the various prayer book revisions. To these, the 1979 BCP adds two “lesser” offices of Noonday Prayer and Compline. The “Order of Worship for the Evening,” also new to the 1979 prayer book, provides a very flexible and adaptable “Cathedral office” (appropriate for occasional public worship with musical and/or ceremonial adornment) which can also be used in households.

Also included are four simple, brief, one-page forms of “Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families” (pp. 137-140), which can be used “as is” or with the Daily Office Lectionary or some other system of scripture readings.

The Daily Office can be prayed in many ways, from very simple to more elaborate, and is for both personal and corporate use.

While it’s by no means unique to religious life—many clergy and laity find the Office a significant part of their spiritual discipline—praying the Daily Office is generally acknowledged as an important responsibility and privilege of members of religious orders and Christian communities. Although it is not required or necessary for every member of the Church to pray in this way, it does seem to be of great value for *some* to take responsibility for this continual offering of prayer and praise, for and on behalf of the entire Church.

Some purposes and values of the Daily Office

- § While they are non-sacramental services, they are nevertheless “sacramental” in quality, in that they sanctify the ordinary stuff of life, and, by outward and visible forms, signify the inward intention of constant prayer
- § The Daily Office is a powerful way of structuring daily life around prayer; regular times of prayer are the “weight-bearing walls” or divisions of the day; and so
- § Praying the Office affirms that all our life belongs to God: it is a means of constant self-offering
- § Regular prayer at certain set times of the day is a traditional strategy for “prayer without ceasing”
- § The Office educates and forms us in prayer; it provides a “balanced diet” of scripture reading, praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition
- § At the core of this form of prayer is recitation of the Psalms, the very ancient and nearly universal “hymnal” of both Jewish and Christian tradition – and the prayer book of Jesus. Praying these psalms can become a way of entering more fully into the mind of Christ.
- § It provides a concrete, practical way to pray for and on behalf of the Church and the world.
- § It offers both stability and variety in prayer.
- § It reflects and celebrates seasons and feasts; gives texture and richness to life
- § The Office expresses and actualizes community with other praying Christians around the world, even when done “privately”; the Office is always “common” prayer.
- § It informs and fuels our work; many find that praying the Office opens us more fully to

practicing the presence of God at other times

§ Adoration and praise are an end in themselves. (The Benedictine understanding is that we work in order to pray, rather than vice versa. In some Jewish tradition, truly human life is considered to be present only when there is a possibility of offering a prayer of praise to God.)

“The liturgy of the Church, the Daily Office, is part of the heavenly liturgy, of the office of Christ and the angels, presenting before the throne of the Father the prayers of the saints, together with their own praise and intercession.” *The Taizé Office*

“You must prefer liturgical prayer to private devotions, because whenever the liturgy is celebrated “through your lips, the whole world prays.” You make up for the defection of those who do not pray, and through you the voice of love drowns that of sin.” *The Hermitage*

Praying the Office

For many Postulants, learning to pray the Daily Office and acquiring the practice of praying it regularly will be one of the most important aspects of formation, and, for those new to this discipline, probably the one which involves the most obvious rearrangement of daily life. Praying the Office on behalf of the Church and the world, as well as for our own spiritual lives, is a key responsibility with which the Church entrusts us.

While Postulants have no formal commitment, learning to pray the Office, and experimenting with doing so regularly so as to test one’s ability and willingness to maintain this form of prayer and its vocational appropriateness and “fit,” is an important component in discerning a vocation to religious community, and to this Community in particular. This section will help you get started. A little later we will consider some more specifics, such as how to choose among the canticles and other options.

If you are beginning the Office with little or no previous experience, the first task is simply to figure out how it works and get comfortable with the “mechanics.” If you are familiar with the Daily Office and have experience including it in your daily prayers, but haven’t been saying the Office on a regular basis (i.e., as part of your own rule or pattern of life), please experiment with praying it regularly. If this is already part of your practice, this section may be an opportunity to reflect again on its significance and value for you, as well as to compare your current pattern with what is typical in this Community. In any case, please do share your experience and your insights, as well as whatever questions or difficulties you may encounter.

Practical hurdles

One practical hurdle is likely to be figuring out how and when to fit the Daily Office in to your daily life. This can be harder than it might appear! For many, the best strategy will be the direct approach: set the alarm clock a quarter of an hour earlier, and insert Morning Prayer into your morning routine—preferably, for those with families and typically hectic mornings, as early as

possible, so that you have the peace and quiet of early morning. You can sip your coffee, or sit out on the porch; but resist the temptation to start some laundry or pick up the newspaper. It's amazing how easily the time allotted gets usurped by "piddly" tasks! Encroachment on designated prayer time by "busy-ness" must be vehemently resisted; this is generally a significant challenge for contemporary people who want a disciplined life of prayer outside a monastery.

For most people, it will be very helpful to have a fixed time and place. It's much more practical to make exceptions, as needed, to a set time than to assume prayer will just fit in somewhere. If possible, choose a room or area where you can have some privacy and quiet. You can create a little oratory as simply as placing a small table with your office books conveniently by a chair, and perhaps having a cross, a crucifix or an icon as a focal point. You might also have some space for a candle, flowers, and/or some other significant objects. Having such a place helps most people become quiet, recollected and disposed to prayer more readily.

If you have family or others living with you, you'll want to discuss this a bit with them, so they can be aware of your need and intention for a few minutes as free of distraction and interruption as possible. If you have children, remember that, far from ignoring their needs, you're offering an example and "picture" of relationship with God that will very likely remain with them permanently. If you have a spouse or other adult household members who might be receptive, you may want to invite them to pray with you, regularly or occasionally. It's fine to describe it as an "experiment" with a form of spirituality you're exploring. (This for the benefit of those who fear family and friends might roll their eyes at the prospect of your being a "religious" person!)

Very typically, people who try this today will hear, sooner or later, softer or louder, those little "voices" that suggest that it would be better to get up and do something useful and constructive, or even that it's "selfish" to set apart time for one's own life of prayer. These "voices" are, in my view, typical forms taken in contemporary times by those forces our forebears identified as "demonic." They can be quite convincing; so it's important to recognize them for what they are! As these same forebears point out, we can expect quite a lot of opposition from the Powers That Be to any initiative we undertake to deepen our Christian commitment. Remember that a) God is calling you to this prayer; and b) all any of us ever has to offer anyone else, authentically, is our own true selves; therefore, to pray faithfully is not "selfish," but is of the essence to becoming a person truly capable of love. None of us has a more important life task than this—for ourselves, for those we love, for the world.

Now... how do you do it?

Structure of the major Offices

Note that bracketed material may be included or omitted. Whenever the rubrics specify that something "may" be done, it is optional.

[Opening sentences]
[Confession and absolution or prayer for forgiveness]
Opening versicle
Invitatory psalm (MP) or Phos hilaron (EP)
Psalm(s)
Lesson(s), each followed by
Canticle(s)
Apostles Creed (When Morning and Evening Prayer are both prayed, the Creed may be omitted at one or the other, if desired.)
The Lord's Prayer
Suffrages
Collects
[Hymn]
[Additional prayers and thanksgivings]
[Dismissal; "Grace" or other scripture verse]

An extra-biblical reading, for example from a book of meditations or classic spiritual reading, may be included.

Noonday Prayer and Compline follow similar structures, though briefer and simpler. Both are simple and repetitive enough to be done from memory, when prayed regularly; Compline is intended to be do-able in the dark.

General considerations for using the Daily Office

- § Officiant may be lay or ordained, with equal appropriateness
- § May be simple or elaborate, formal or informal
- § Part, most, or all of the Office may be sung. Psalms and Canticles are frequently sung, even when other parts are not. (Sung Evening Prayer is often called "Evensong.")
- § Individuals, families, and small groups may choose to pray the office simply, remaining seated.
- § Individuals praying the office privately may prefer to omit "dialog," e.g., "... and also with you."
- § Major offices can be prayed privately in about 10 to 15 minutes; or can serve as a framework for personal prayer, including Lectio Divina, journaling, "centering prayer" or other contemplative approaches, etc.
- § Some people like to use the form available on line at www.missionstclare.com

The Daily Office lectionary, BCP, pp. 936ff:

- § Two-year cycle; 2005, an odd-numbered year, is Year One (until Advent, when we will begin Year Two)
 - § Seven-week cycle of Psalms. Some of the psalms are placed appropriately for the day of the week or time of day.
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- § Two psalms or sets of psalms are included for each day: Those before the marker are used in the morning, those following it in the evening.
- § Bracketed psalms may be replaced by the alternatives listed. Bracketed verses may be omitted. (Bracketed psalms and verses are frequently imprecatory, or simply less edifying. Making these substitutions and omissions is recommended as a general practice, except for those who want to use the entire Psalter.)
- § Three readings are provided for each day: Old Testament (usually), New Testament, Gospel. It is suggested that in Year One the first and second reading be used in the morning, and the Gospel in the evening, while in Year Two the first reading and the Gospel be used in the morning, and the second reading in the evening.
- § “Over the course of two years, the lectionary leads the Church through the New Testament twice. All the relevant portions of the Old Testament are read once.” (Joseph P. Russell, “The Lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer,” in *Liturgical Studies 3: A Prayer Book for the 21st Century*)
- § Special out-of-sequence psalms and readings are provided for major feasts. See pages 996ff.

Notes about Rivendell Community customs:

- § The Motherhouse, along with a number of other Community members, use *The Prayer Book Office*, which provides Scriptural and traditional antiphons for the psalms and canticles and other liturgical enrichments. Unfortunately, this volume is no longer in print. If you’re interested, you may be able to find an unused one in a parish library. Several copies have turned up on e-Bay, as well. The Community has plans eventually to produce a version of the office, incorporating some of these traditional materials, for its own use.
- § Except when the Office is prayed in a public setting (e.g., in a local parish church), most members follow the very common practice of remaining seated, rather than standing, sitting and kneeling, both for private and for communal praying of the office. This often encourages a reflective recitation. Some, however, may find that following the rubrical directions for posture assists attentiveness and reverence.
- § The Rivendell Calendar includes several feasts and commemorations which are either not included on the Episcopal Church calendar or are given as lesser feasts. Celebrating these occasions, all of which are significant in some particular way to our Community, helps us live into the particular ethos of Rivendell.

Please try praying Morning Prayer regularly for the next couple of weeks, and write something of your experience.

Questions:

If you have been praying the Daily Office prior to Postulancy—

How and why did you adopt this practice?

How do you generally do it (e.g., by yourself or corporately? At a fixed time? How regularly? Do you use options or enrichments, such as hymns, material from *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, a version such as the *Prayer Book Office*, on-line resources?)

How have you found it helpful, significant, or vocationally appropriate? How has it affected or shaped your life to this point?

What questions, comments or suggestions do you have?

If you have not previously prayed the Daily Office regularly—

You will need a *Book of Common Prayer* and a Bible. (As readings from the Apocrypha are sometimes used, you'll want a Bible which includes these books.) If you have access to one, you may want to use convenient volumes which include both the offices themselves and the lessons for each day, such as the *Contemporary Office*. These save the trouble of looking up and marking the Scripture readings, a frequent frustration for those who are learning to pray the office. However, the volumes are quite expensive, so you may want to borrow one, if possible, and try it out before deciding whether to invest in your own. Optional resources are a Hymnal and *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. If you're just beginning, though, you probably won't want more books to juggle. You might also want to check out the website listed above; this provides a suggested hymn as well as saints' day commemorations.

Read through the services of Morning and Evening Prayer carefully, noting the rubrics (the italicized directions). Look at the Daily Office Lectionary, BCP 934ff, beginning with the explanations on the first two pages. If this is new to you, the best approach is simply to review the services and then plunge in! The mechanics of finding your way around may be awkward at first, but will soon become very familiar.

Try praying Morning Prayer over the next couple of weeks. What is your experience with it like? What questions do you have? (If you get lost, or have trouble figuring out some aspect, don't hesitate to ask about it right away.)