

# OEN

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## The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Office Reader

by Barbara Mitchell

The Daily Office, that rich and glorious compilation of the Church's daily prayer, is meant first to be community prayer. It began that way in the early moments of the Christian Church, and before, in the synagogue worship which inspired it, and through the Church's history, in both its monastic and cathedral adaptations, it continued to be corporate prayer. Its dialogue pattern of versicles and responses and its use of plural pronouns logically require the biblical two or three gathered. And more subtly, its intention, as the Church's constant offering to God of itself, for his people, demands and insists upon the recognition of our corporate nature as the Body of Christ. History, structure, intention, and spirituality all call us to believe and attend to Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline as a *corporate* venture in daily worship. And yet so many of us who by personal desire, vocation, or curiosity are called to pray the Daily Office, find ourselves by circumstance forced to pray it alone.

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Praying the Office alone is for many an experience of loneliness, frustration, a discovery of the 'Desert'; it can become dry, distracting, and a chore. And yet for some others it has become fulfilling and even preferable. In this article I wish to reflect upon some of these experiences hoping they may be helpful to those of us who attempt to pray the Office at long distance from the Body gathered.

### *Praying with others an aid*

Many experience the corporate saying or singing of the Office as its own support system. The presence of others tends to encourage our continued attendance; keeping the discipline of doing the Office is not so difficult with others as it may be when prayed alone. Also, we do not have to bear the entire weight of the prayer ourselves; when we personally are too distracted, impatient, hurt, bored, or enraptured by a particular image it invoked, those we pray with will keep it flowing for us. At those inevitable times when the Office becomes a chore, the 'two or three gathered' shows its wisdom by carrying us. The corporate Office has a built-in teaching function.



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By nature it is its own direct experience of God's saving grace as that intended for all people: as we pray with the rich, the poor, the small, ailing, healthy, foreign, and eccentric, those we like and those we dislike, we experience that this motley sinful limited bunch is the same group as the redeemed for whose salvation we intercede. With the use of very little imagination, then, our prayers can remain earthy, incarnate, and firmly fixed in our present clay-foot reality. For those of us prone to introspection and brooding, the presence of others can lift us out of using this prayer time for dwelling on our own problems. Similarly, the demands of the corporate prevent us from making this into private devotions. And again more subtly, we can discover in the presence of others that for Christians the 'personal' is that which we discover through the calling forth of self in relationship with others and with God. In this age of individuality we are very prone to trying to follow the world's concept of personhood as something created (rather than evoked and developed), and created in isolation from others, and I believe a corporate round of prayer can help us overcome this mistaken notion.

However, these supports can disappear when we pray alone. So, when and if we must, it becomes apparent we need to become aware of our own personal danger points and use some creativity to develop our own aids.

*Finding the integrity in praying the  
Office alone*

To begin by saying the Office is corporate, not individual, is personal but not private, means that to pray it alone requires an understanding of how we each relate to the corporate Body of Christ and an attempt to maintain that relationship when praying alone. As Christians we believe that the corporate is not merely the *collective* from which we can extract ourselves and retain the same notion of prayer; no, a new being is formed out of the gathering of the people of God. We do not simply remain the sum of our parts, we become the Body of Christ. And as I have said, it is from within that Body that we discover our personhood. So when we pray alone we need to find a way of remaining aware of that place we have in

the Body, and of praying from quite within its reality. It can be done. Some can actively imagine themselves praying with the saints. Some are daily aware, either through keeping contact with religious communities in other places or through world-wide intercessions, that somewhere in the world others are also praying through the day and night, and they can mentally enjoin themselves with them. It may also help to remember that we never pray alone but that it is the Holy Spirit who prays through us. And he/she is readily invoked!

**W**hile these concepts may be helpful to some, others find them entirely too esoteric to be of practical use. Despite the fact that some people will object to any tampering with the Office, several to whom I talked said there came a point in their journey when they had to consciously make a shift in the style of the Office for it to remain viable for them. Prayed as written, it created in them an odd schizophrenia: they felt silly and embarrassed trying to be both people at either end of the versicles and responses. At this point some went through the Prayer Book and collected up prayers from various places; others switched to the Roman breviary which is specifically designed for praying alone. For some the silent rote reading of the same prayers too easily left them personally unengaged. One priest I spoke with said when his moment of desperation hit he asked himself what elements of prayer and study were being asked of him and entirely reshaped that structure to his temperament and spiritual quest. He still uses the lectionary, but as a springboard to meditation on his own life situation and that of his parish, and twice a week he joins with two other parish priests to take turns describing how they have appropriated it. For prayers they refer to Frank Colquoun's books, *Parish Prayers*, *Contemporary Parish Prayers*, and *New Parish Prayers*. (1) As well, during Lent this particular pilgrim marks the forty days on his calendar with the names of forty people he feels called to pray for, and he prays for one a day with his morning prayers, tries to keep that person in his thoughts during the day, and in the evening sits down and writes him or her a letter. This is part of his attempt to maintain a very real relationship with the people of God and with his

(Mitchell - cont.)

spirituality in relationship with them. A good example of using one's creativity and imagination to find and maintain one's place in the corporate reality of the Church, I say!

While I am not in a position to evaluate them, it might be practical to mention studies which have been done to match up personality types with the traditional schools of prayer and spirituality. These studies begin by administering a Myers-Briggs personality inventory, then suggest which of the many avenues of spirituality a particular personality might be most successful in following. That may be useful to look at in order to work with one's personal spirituality instead of against it, to shape an appropriate style of Office for oneself. One such study is available from the Open Door, in Charlottesville, Virginia. (2)

Some people have no difficulty whatever praying the Office alone over long periods of time. They suffer neither dryness nor self-consciousness in doing so, but remain marvelously aware of their place among the saints at prayer. For those of us who are not among them, it seems the very fact of being alone might need to be faced straight on and transformed into something creative. Henri Nouwen, in his book, *Reaching Out*, (3) challenges the experience of loneliness and bids us to turn it into its positive face, solitude. He then urges us to discover in that solitude the seeds of hospitality toward others. I offer that book to you. And it might be helpful to meditate on the numerous accounts of loneliness and of the 'desert experience' found in the Gospels, prophets, and early fathers and mothers to develop more ease with the fact of being alone and responsible for the prayer of God's Church. While few of us are called to be hermits, we can certainly learn from their struggles when we pray a hermit's Office!

### *Engaging time creatively*

If we are to be successful at maintaining this discipline I believe it is important to assess our time commitment and come to peace with it. Spiritual manuals and directors rightly encourage us to set aside time

each day to pray; a sacred time, into which nothing short of emergencies can intrude. For those who can manage it, this is wonderful. For 'morning people' this time is appropriately some early hour, but there is no point for those who remain unregenerate until mid-afternoon to even attempt it. Cooperating with one's biological clock only makes good sense. My husband and I get up at six during the summer, but as soon as that means rising in darkness come fall, our temperaments become all that the dark symbolizes and we need a different pattern between equinoxes. A lay couple I know put their children to bed at night, then gather around the piano to sing Evensong in plainchant. Not only does that make it fun for them, the lulling strains of Tonus Peregrinus must surely bless their little ones' sleep! Some others who were bothered by middle-of-the-night insomnia suddenly decided this time would be their time for prayer. As one put it, it has the extra benefit of keeping his mind off the dreary things he might otherwise be dwelling upon! Or Compline might be read in bed before turning out the lights.

Yet many argue their schedules are too busy or too changeable for a consistent time for prayer. While some might question their priorities, I would prefer to take Thomas Merton's view of all time as a sacrament and suggest the use of otherwise wasted moments for prayer. The half hour while the cake bakes or the glue sets, the hour spent apart in traffic jams (which is where I memorized the Office, and while doing so developed a new appreciation for red lights!), the time on the crowded bus or waiting for the next client or the dentist, can become times of prayer. If we are called to pray constantly, using such moments this way is only good training.

### *Other styles of Office*

Since the 'how, and how much' seem to be big questions for long-distance Office readers, here are a few more ideas gleaned from the experienced. Last spring, a minister from a Protestant tradition which does not use the Office gave a lecture to our local ministerial association about the need to encourage private devotion. Borrowing from the decate structure of the Rosary, he suggested we employ our fingers to count

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on and design our own 'Rosary', incorporating ten items including several canticles, psalms, a Creed, confession, and some intercessions, all of which would be memorized for easy access. What he came up with was not so much a Rosary as an Office, but it certainly is mobile and adaptable to individual styles. And for those who find reading the words of the printed Office a matter of simply glossing over it, its memorization can encourage alertness and deeper meditation on its images. Bible readings get left out of this system; they could be read at another time, or another idea might help: I have heard of people forming Anglican carpools so the Office gets said on the way to and from work, and then the backseat drivers can read the lessons for everyone. (It goes without saying that except for those who prefer to pray the Office alone, any opportunity to create a corporate situation, even if less than optimum, is to be considered!) And I think we can make creative adaptations with confidence. If we really believe it is God who has called us to our various vocations, and even though it may not be God but fallen creation which puts constraints on our prayer time, we need not feel guilty because we cannot be in the corner of the chapel every day for prayer. God will show us how we can use that lifestyle Gracefully. While he redeems all creation he can certainly redeem our chaotic schedules if we let him.

**A**s I hinted earlier, other adaptations to the system include singing the Office. Using Anglican chant or plainchant (neither of which requires accompaniment) is very useful to some for centering their minds and spirits and for creating a meditative mood. Books on both are readily available from the usual Anglican book dealers, and there are some good modern arrangements that are easy to learn. (4) Psalms may become more meaningful when one prays some needy individual (including oneself) into the situation being described. Likewise, actively imagining yourself in the scene of the day's scriptural passage(s) does help to bring it/them alive and is a classic means of allowing the Word of God to speak to your life. As an Anglican monk once exhorted me, if it does speak, for heaven's sake stop right there and go with it. After all, that is the purpose of the

thing! Prayer has just happened, so there is no need to finish the rest of the Office just to get it done! Finally, some people find referring to the Collects and Lessons in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (5) not only keeps them abreast of our liturgical year but also helps enliven their sense of the communion of saints and hence, the rich personality of the Body of Christ.

### *Maintaining the discipline*

It also makes sense to be alert to our weaknesses in keeping up our practice and to utilize the means of strengthening it. I am aware in my faulty attempts to form new habits that I tend to do well for the first two weeks, but in the third week the novelty wanes and that week I will be prone to packing it in. So now I try to design some extra treats and boosts that week to get me over my slump. Some people maintain if you can keep up a practice for ninety days you truly have a new habit, but it is getting there that may be the problem! Those who have prayed the Office alone for a long time reflect that it can become like a 'positive addiction' without which their day is incomplete, and it might be useful to strive toward this as an attitude or goal.

Some women are conscious that their spiritual cycle is tied to their biological cycle, and in order for them to keep at the Office they deliberately vary their prayer patterns to their monthly ups and downs rather than fight them by rigidly conforming to the Church's cycle. However that works for the reader, it is reasonable to expect discipline to be easier when one is cooperating with one's rhythms and moods, and if theological justification is necessary for doing that, well, it is certainly incarnational! Obviously, discernment is required here as to how far one can go without obliterating the intent of the liturgical week and seasons, but if approached as flexible things, the adaptation of the Church's weekly and seasonal cycles can provide real strength.

As well, so can variation of rite. A priest I know who loves the modern rite found while dealing with the breakup of his marriage that he gravitated back to the penitential comfort of the old rite.



(Mitchell - cont.)

Similarly, others who were confronted with trauma or uncertainty over which they had little control reached back into the marrow of their spiritual leg-bones where the comfort of their earliest experience rattled around in the form of 'thee's' and 'thou's'. It only takes being alert to the options and not being afraid to use them.

From these experiences it would seem that it is those who have found an integrity in praying a corporate form of wor-

ship in their own solitude, and who have managed to adapt it to their own lifestyle and temperament, using the time available to them creatively and harmonizing the many options offered by the Church with their own life rhythms, who have had the most success and pleasure(!) in keeping the discipline of praying the Office at long distance from the Body gathered. I hope something of their various solutions will be of inspiration in your attempts. I can only add my own encouragement. God be with you! +++

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) Colquoun, Frank. *Parish Prayers, Contemporary Parish Prayers, New Parish Prayers*. Hodder & Stoughton. London. 1967, 1975, 1982, respectively.
- (2) The Open Door, Inc. P.O. Box 855, Charlottesville, Va. 22902
- (3) Nouwen, Henri. *Reaching Out*. Doubleday and Co. Ltd. Garden City, N.Y. 1975.
- (4) Church Hymnal Series. *The Book of Canticles*. The Church Hymnal Corp., New York. 1979. (Contains both plainchant and Anglican chant versions of the canticles, invitatory antiphons, and psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer.)
- (4 cont.) *Gelineau Psalter*. Gregorian Institute of America, 225 W. 63rd St., Chicago, Ill. 61136.  
*The Nashotah House Psalter*. Privately published by Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary. Limited copies of this plainchant arrangement of the 1979 American Prayer Book psalter are available through the Sacristan, Nashotah House, Nashotah, Wisconsin 53058.
- (5) *The Proper for Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, third edition. Church Hymnal Corp. New York, N.Y. 1980.

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## CORRECTIONS

Your transcriber/*OPEN*-putter-together allowed two egregious errors to creep into the letter from the Rev. Gregory Howe in *OPEN* for July 1983. On page 6, left hand column, line 34 from the top, the word 'not' appears where it should not. The sentence should read, 'For example, the initiation rites begin with the presumption of a pro-anaphoral form, but do include a convenient, relatively clear, non-eucharistic ending.' The second error appears on the same page, right hand column, fourth line up from the bottom. The word 'he' was intended to be 'we'. The sentence should read, 'I only wish we took his predicate more seriously...' My regrets and apologies!  
Art Jenkins

In his review of Aidan Kavanagh's *Elements of Style* and O. C. Edwards's *Elements of Homiletics*, editor Henry Breul cited another *Elements of Style* as having been written by Rudolph Flesch. The authors of that book were actually William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White.