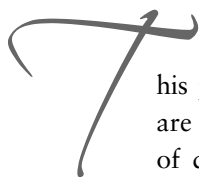


# INTRODUCTION



## THE HABIT OF PRAYER



his prayer book is designed for people who are looking for a simple and adaptable form of daily prayer. It is meant to be said by people who usually pray alone and yet like to feel that they are tapping into the prayer of the wider community of the Church.

I designed it for my own use during the early 1980s. It lived in my daily planner between the calendar and the address book. I hoped, by compiling this office, to find a way of locating my daily life and work within the great sacrifice which, the Church teaches, Christ offered to the Father on the cross, and which is recalled and reenacted at the Eucharist. I was trying to discover if prayer could bridge two worlds: the world of faith, on the one hand, and the secular, apparently godless world on the other. During the period in which the office was composed I was aware of a painful dissonance between these two ends of my experience. I could not understand how my working life could relate to what happened at the altar.

I think many of us find ourselves in a state of dissonance. Priests, nuns, and other religious may feel they are not very good at prayer, but at least

they live a life which is structured in such a way that prayer time is expected and actually makes sense. But for many of us who live and work anonymously in a relentless secular environment, this is not so. Our Christian identity is something that can get lost, swallowed up by the general expectation that Christianity is simply dying on us. R.S. Thomas writes,

The last quarter of the moon  
of Jesus gives way  
to the dark; the serpent  
digests the egg. . . .

. . . Religion is over, and  
what will emerge from the body  
of the new moon, no one  
can say.

At such a time of uncertainty, prayer seems to be something we almost dare not attempt. Our “godless” humanity is all too apparent to us, all the time. We are suspicious of churches and creeds and holy books. But our doubts have not brought new insights. We are driven back on our private and personal lives, which now carry a weight of expectation and unsatisfied longing that they were perhaps never meant to bear. If we are created to

find our rest in God alone, then the hunger for God will not go away when we cease to believe and practice faith. It will simply seek out a new focus. We deify work or success or pleasure or particular individuals.

Even among believers, prayer often seems a distracting luxury when children need taking to school or there's a pile of mail to be answered, or we're waiting anxiously for a phone call, or we don't know how the bills are going to be paid. We so easily feel judged, excluded by the failure to live up to what we think we should be. We would rather forget that we are Christians when our language and mood are foul, when we're behaving badly with our families, or we are being bullied at work. It seems almost dishonest to call upon God, to use words and phrases which the saints have used about our own often confusing or less than inspiring lives.

My question, when I began working with this prayer book, was whether I could find a way of being that confused and uninspired self in the presence of God. Could the dissonance between belief and life lead me to a new integrity? I found that when I was most aware of dissonance there were particular phrases from the Bible that came into my mind. One of the most persistent was, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity," words from Isaiah 49, one of the so-called Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. It summed up a sense of

frustration and inadequacy. I found myself wondering whether I could link my personal response to those words to some universal meaning. The Servant Songs were to be one of the pivots of the office.

For a time I called the prayer book “The Office of the Servant.” This was partly because of the Isaiah passages, but also because there was also a lot of interest at the time in the role of deacons. The word “deacon” comes straight from the Greek “*diakonos*,” which means “servant.” I had always had difficulties with the concept of service. Although I had been brought up in a school environment where “service” to society was an ideal, it was one I found mildly oppressive. The word itself sounded demeaning, humiliating. Milton’s Lucifer, who lost his place in heaven because he said, “I will not serve,” was a character I had some sympathy with. I was also aware of a kind of rhetoric of service that is often applied to women, particularly in the churches. I was sensitive to the way in which women are often welcomed in subordinate, supportive roles, but have a much harder time as leaders. Given all this I could not understand what it was about the Servant theme which drew me, but it continued to do so.

There was another surprise too. I had always thought of myself as more of a “God-centered” believer than a “Christ-centered” one. Yet as I went

on working at the structure of this office I found I was drawn to the Christ-centered themes of incarnation, cross, and resurrection. It was as though I was held between opposites. The Christ-story was the counter-story to the life I felt I was actually living. At the time I was working in the glamorous and self-promoting world of television documentaries. So much of Christ's ministry was silent, patient, enclosed in a pattern of prayer and withdrawal. It was from this silence that he was able to engage, to preach the kingdom and heal, to accept rejection and failure as well as success and adulation. I wondered if I would ever be able to find a pattern which led me closer to equanimity.

People need forms of prayer which can be used at any time and in any place with the minimum of books and fuss, and which also make sense of the dilemmas of our world. What is important is to try to be faithful in the midst of frustration, to find the resources just to go on with a difficult and unfulfilling task, to deal with one's own anxiety and frequent loss of courage. Doubt and difficulty can be plowed into the prayer and become part of what is offered.

I once spent a few days with the Sisters of the Love of God at Fairacres in Oxford. Their chapel is an Anglican version of an old-style Roman Catholic convent church. Their community literature and tradition places great importance on the sacrifice of

Christ, and the self-offering that is at the heart of their hidden contemplative life. They believe that, as Christ offers himself to the Father, so their offering of themselves is included and enclosed, its human failures made strong by his strength.

I thought of that band of women gathered in chapel for the cycle of the Daily Office. They had “put on the habit”—in their case, a chocolate-brown habit with a black veil. Together they seemed formidable in their anonymity. Yet I knew they were a strange mix of intelligence, eccentricity, wisdom, and fragility. Consecrated women as they were, they had their corporate and personal traumas just like everyone else. Was it hypocritical of them to devote themselves to prayer, to “wear” the habit of their profession? Or was part of what they brought to prayer the same ghastly mistakes, vanities, and stupidities that belong to all of us?

Many people never really get started on prayer because they feel they are not good enough for God to pay any attention to. Sometimes they suffer from childhood hurts that have never been healed; sometimes they are poor or ill-educated, or chronically ill; often they have been shamed by the loss of work, a damaging addiction, or the breakdown of a relationship. The Church seems to them to be for people who don't have these problems. They are wrong, of course. Church people have all these

problems, but I wonder how often any of us hear the message that it is precisely *because* we are humiliated, weak, and nervous that God calls us into his company? The misery is often where we start from. The ingredients of despair are sometimes all we have to offer. As I prayed the Office I began to see that the meaning of Christ was a great exchange between humanity and God. The weak and fitful desire that I brought to prayer could be plunged into the immortal fire of Christ's self-sacrifice.

The clue to what was going on seemed to me to have something to do with *kenosis*, the renunciation of the divine nature, at least in part, by Christ in the incarnation. The word comes from the Greek word for "empty": the "self-emptying" of God is implied by the incarnation, and is spelled out in St. Paul's famous meditation on the humility of Christ in Philippians 2. *Kenosis* is the pattern by which God relates to us. There is a humiliation in God's coming to share our condition in Christ, and an exaltation, by which Christ is raised to glory, taking us with him. There is a vertical movement from glory to humility and back to glory.

By way of contrast, in the pattern of my own life there seemed to be a horizontal movement, from belief to unbelief and back again. I wanted to see whether the two movements could be related, to discover whether I could make sense of the

dissonance between my two worlds by reflecting on the “distance” that the Son of God travels in coming to share our nature. And by reflecting on what it means to be offered in Christ, to be accepted within his sacrifice.

Look, Father, look on his anointed face  
And only look on us as found in him. . . .

Perhaps praying was a way of “putting on a habit,” “putting on Christ.” This is difficult because we live in an age which believes in the absolute validity of personal self-expression. Emotional sincerity is a primary virtue. Acknowledging a gap between our ideals and our actual behavior is a vice, condemned as “hypocrisy.” This is why people think that churchgoers must be hypocrites. They are pretending to be good, but everyone knows they cannot be really. To *not* go to church is at least to be honest and sincere, better than those hypocrites who go.

I was aware of this attitude as my own when I wanted to take up active Christian faith as a teenager. It seemed to me then that any “gap” in my believing or in behavior invalidated my commitment. If I wasn’t being a perfect Christian I couldn’t be one at all. There *had* to be identity between my inner experience and my outer self.

This relentless requirement that we be all of a piece is heightened in a media age. The media jump on “hypocrisy” because our fear of gaps and holes in the moral structure of the self is so enormous that we cannot endure it in others. No one can afford to have a private life unless it is the mirror image of their public life. We insist on “transparency” even while we find ourselves opaque.

I find this obsession with “hypocrisy” puzzling. Jesus condemned people as “hypocrites” when they had no access to their inner lives and sense of sin and weakness. We on the other hand admire precisely those who appear to be shiny bright all the way through. What Jesus saw as hypocritical we applaud as sincere. Yet when a public figure acknowledges a gap between his public and private selves we are ready to brand him as a hypocritical liar. What has happened to our capacity for moral discernment?

I think what is happening is that as Christianity is becoming less available as a normal way of life, we are becoming vulnerable to all kinds of pagan concepts of the self and God. Some of these have value and should not always be dismissed, but one which I think can be pernicious is the notion that the true self is a kind of *naked* self, a transparent self with no secrets. The true self is the one that talks about itself, that is cleansed by open confession. Reparation is not necessary because the very act of speaking

frankly restores transparency and gives others grounds for confidence. The true self is realized in this life, not by *practicing* faith, patience, or courage, but simply by self-exposure. To practice a virtue brings a note of artificiality into the process, a touch of “hypocrisy.” We are all being turned relentlessly into emotional flashers.

Yet although our society appears to believe in the value of the spontaneous self, it only half believes that the true self is a good self. Transparency is actually very threatening to most of us, precisely because we do have an inner life which needs its own space and privacy in which to grow. This may or may not be full of dark secrets, but it is ours, and it is often a yearning from this inner self which leads us to long to be able to pray. Our society denies the validity of the inner self and so it will always label prayer as hypocritical.

Spirituality, on the other hand, has become something of an “in” word. It is cool, it is a skill, a technique of self-improvement. And that brings us to the paradox which is inherent in our desire for naturalness. We are afflicted by the pressure of an endless demand for endless self-improvement. So, the pure body is not only a naked body, but a *trained* body, muscular and male, even for women, hard, free of softness and fat. The trained body can be shown off. It is a window to the soul. The physical

and mental discipline displayed by the smooth lines announce that we are integrated through and through. The trained body is a guarantee that we are pure, sincere, straightforward, transparent selves. What you see is what you get. No lumps or bumps or unexpected crevices.

This idealization of the body has come to us through the culture of ancient Greece. The Greeks celebrated the male human form in sculpture, making images more perfect than any real body could ever be. The illusion of this trained nudity is that bodily perfection is somehow natural. Of course it is anything but natural. Thin bodies and muscular limbs are a highly artificial creation determined by our cultural preferences. Habit, discipline, and training are certainly relevant to Christian discipleship, and St. Paul uses an athletic contest as a metaphor for Christian perseverance.

But on the whole Christianity uses a rather different set of traditions in its depiction of the self. These come from the Hebrew Bible. The ancient Hebrews were uncomfortable with nudity. They seem to have experienced nakedness as a kind of shameful, of being less than human, rather than most fully human. Adam's recognition of his nakedness in the Garden of Eden is a moment of humiliation. His instinct is to cover himself. To be human is not to be naked but to be clothed, and God in his mercy

clothes Adam and Eve in fur skins to cover their vulnerability. We need to have something added to us in order to be ourselves.

The metaphor of clothing has different consequences from the metaphor of nakedness. In the Greek view it is by taking away or removing our clothing, habits, surplus flesh, that we become natural and so fulfilled. In biblical and Christian language it is by being clothed and covered that we become the selves we are destined to become. What is natural is weak and unformed; nature needs to be fired by spirit.

The usual “habit” of Christian prayer is a habit that assumes we need to have something added to us rather than taken away. St. Paul’s writings are full of metaphors of clothing. We are to “put on the armor of light” (Romans 13:12). In the resurrection the mortal will put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:54). “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul says, “and make no provision for the lusts of the flesh.” “While we are still in this (earthly) tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5:4). What is the “clothing” that is added to us through the acceptance of Christian faith? What is the habit that we have to learn to wear?

It is surely the story of Christ, the pattern of Christ, the clothing of Christ, which is the template

in which our own story, pattern, habit is to grow to maturity. To a “Greek” mindset this may look like a form of hypocrisy. Who am I to “put on” Christ? Shall I lose my authenticity, my “nakedness,” my transparency and spontaneity, that of myself which is unique and which I value?

The experience of struggling with prayer at a time like ours is that these questions are put to us and will accompany us. We need such questions to provoke and inspire, but I believe that in experience they are actually transcended without ever being answered directly. The mystery is to find that our story is also Christ’s story. It is naked that we come to Christ and helpless that we look to him for dress. So to pray the prayer of Christ is to move between weakness and power, vulnerability and strength. What began in painful dissonance continues as a purposeful cycle in which we are made aware of our vulnerability as we are given a secure identity in Christ.

## WHAT IS AN OFFICE?

“OFFICE” is anglicized from the Latin word *officium*, which means a dutiful or respectful action. The offices of the Church are the obligatory prayers said by priests, monks, and nuns, usually at set times of day and night. Sometimes they are joined by lay volunteers. Traditionally, the regular offices are Morning and Evening Prayer. If you are an enclosed contemplative there may be seven daily offices of which Lauds and Vespers are the two most important. Some groups of Christians add to a morning and evening office a brief form of common mid-day prayer and Compline, bedtime prayer.

The idea of girding the twenty-four-hour cycle of the day with structured regular prayer has Jewish origins. There is a reference in the 119th Psalm to praising God seven times a day, and Psalm 134 calls on the servants of the Lord to stand before him in the temple at night. Early Christian worship stemmed from Jewish liturgy. It developed as a pattern of psalms, readings, and prayers, all based on the Scriptures.

The basic elements of an office are psalms, readings from Scripture, canticles, and prayers. Often there is

also a hymn and a responsive form of prayer. To take part in an office is like taking part in a conversation with the Word of God. You listen to the Word, and you respond with the Word. But paradoxically, though the words of Scripture and psalmody are the building blocks of the office, they are also a vehicle for contemplation which passes beyond words. The words are taken up by the Word. The Word moves us to silence.

Alongside the formal office of the Church there has been a tendency to make simpler versions for those whose commitments did not permit them to participate in the whole thing. There is, for example, a Little Office of Our Lady which came into use in the tenth century. It is shaped like the Divine Office, but is much shorter, and uses the same psalms each day. It became particularly popular among laypeople, who could say it while about their other tasks. Although not an office as such, the Rosary performs a similar function, as does the Jesus Prayer. These forms of prayer are based on limited, repeated material—in the case of the Jesus Prayer this is a single sentence! These forms of prayer don't take long to say and they don't require extra books or lectionaries. This is the tradition that this Little Office is seeking to follow.

# THE STRUCTURE OF EVERYDAY CATHOLIC PRAYER



## *Invocation*

“O come. . . .” These words come from the daily prayer used by Eastern Orthodox Christians. They echo the psalms of invitation, like Psalm 95, the *Venite*, which begins with the words, “O come, let us sing to the Lord . . .,” and is often used at the beginning of worship. Here, the focus of worship is Christ the Lord. We do not worship God in the abstract or in theory, but as he is in his personal relationship with us.

The Office begins with a call to worship that is both solemn and celebratory. When you say this alone, the words “O come . . .” are an invitation to gather oneself together, joining the communion of saints in earth and heaven in the worship of God revealed in Christ.

“Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega. . . .” These words are adapted from the opening prayers of the Easter liturgy.

## *Refrains on the Psalms*

Because the set psalms are the same every day, the refrains are used at the beginning and end to give a

particular color to each day of the week. All the refrains are phrases taken from other psalms. The psalms are set out with a colon in the middle of each verse. This is because one meditative way of saying the psalms is to make a brief pause at the colon. This is particularly helpful in establishing a rhythm when a group is saying the psalms together, but it will slow you down and help you not to rush if you are saying them alone.

### *The Psalms*

Christians have always used the Psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures as a treasury both of personal prayer and communal worship. The psalms have an extraordinary capacity for expressing feelings, whether of praise or pain. When they are used in a structured office like this, they have three levels of meaning.

*First*, they are simply marvelous prayers to God, expressing trust, thanksgiving, grief, and hope. They can be personal and universal at the same time.

*Second*, they unite us with the past. They link us to the worship of the ancient temple in Jerusalem and with the hopes of the Jewish people. The psalms were composed over five centuries. Some probably go back to the earliest days of King David's dynasty, others reflect the time after the exile.

They link us very directly with Jesus. As a Jew he would have known the psalms. He quoted them in his teaching, and, according to three of the Gospels, he was praying words from them when he died on the cross. The psalms also link us to the Church down through the ages, to monks and hermits, priests and scribes, matriarchs and patriarchs, saints and sinners.

*Third*, they are the prayer of Christ, praying through us and for us. The expressions of trust and fear, love and anxiety all belong to our human condition. It is this condition which the Son of God took on in the Incarnation and in which he suffered, died, and rose again. So praying the psalms is enclosing ourselves within the being of Christ, making his story our own, and our own, his.

The three psalms set here belong to a collection which is described as “songs of ascents.” This means that they were probably originally sung as pilgrimage songs by Jews on the way up to Jerusalem for the great festivals of the Jewish year. They remind us that the drama of salvation was played out in Jerusalem. It was the city of the crucifixion and resurrection, of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. They also remind us of our own life’s journey. We move daily towards the city of engagement with others and the tasks we have to fulfill, and at the same time towards the heavenly city of fulfillment.