

THE DAILY OFFICE IN ANGLICAN DEVOTION

The Revd Canon Michael Paternoster

Scottish Episcopal Church, Aberdeen

Whenever members of a Trade Union "work to rule" the result is total chaos. It might seem inadvisable therefore for Christians to make working to rule a goal to be aimed at, particularly in view of the New Testament's rather negative view of legalism: we are not in bondage to the Law but enjoy the freedom of the children of God. Nonetheless, John Keble told his congregation at Hursley, "we must walk orderly before our God, we must set ourselves rules and try to keep them, and examine ourselves regularly how we have kept and are keeping them". There are dangers here of Pharisaism and scrupulosity, but clearly we need a disciplined framework if we are to progress and not merely drift through life. The late Father Martin Thornton spent a lifetime expatiating with considerable eloquence on the centrality of Rule. Rule, not rules: he had little patience with "rules of life" that consisted of all sorts of devotional and disciplinary odds and ends. By Rule he meant a simple framework for the Christian life which kept the various elements necessary for healthy spiritual development in proper balance and proportion. He held that there were three elements in a soundly Trinitarian pattern of devotion, and one of his disciples coined the acronym MOP for these elements: MOP standing for Mass, Office, Prayer.

Thornton argues, with some plausibility, that Cranmer's intention in translating and editing the Book of Common Prayer was to take a basically Benedictine pattern of devotion out of the monasteries into the parishes. Instead of daily corporate prayer being, as it had become during the Middle Ages, largely the concern of a spiritual elite, the laity were to be encouraged to share in it. The monastic sevenfold office was simplified into relatively brief forms of morning and evening prayer, which the curate of the parish was instructed to say publicly at set times every day in the parish church, joined by as many of the faithful as could possibly be present. The rest of the neighbourhood would at least know, by the ringing of the bell, that prayer was being offered on their behalf. In the early seventeenth century George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar, with their households at Bemerton and Little Gidding, made valiant efforts by precept and example to see Cranmer's intentions fulfilled. Even in the comparatively lax days of the eighteenth century, the detailed study of *The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship* by Addleshaw and Etchells shows that in some cathedrals and larger churches a chapel known as the Morning Prayer Chapel was set aside and furnished specifically not for the celebration of communion but for the weekday recitation of the daily offices. Daily attendance at chapel remained compulsory in the colleges of the two older English Universities almost into living memory; they, of course, with their seating arranged in such a way as to face inwards across a central gangway instead of all facing towards the altar perpetuate the monastic arrangement, devised for the antiphonal chanting of the office rather than for eucharistic worship. It has to be admitted, however, that Cranmer's vision of a daily worshipping community in every parish has only rarely been translated into reality. For most lay people, the office was reduced to Sunday Matins and Evensong, which largely replaced the weekly eucharist which the Reformers had intended to be the main act of worship of the People of God. On weekdays, saying the office has again become, as it was in the Middle Ages, a priestly duty often performed undertaken in private, in which few laity every participate, and the value of which is openly questioned even by some of the clergy who are supposed to be diligent in its recitation. This is partly due to the otherwise welcome recovery of the eucharist, which in a great many Anglican churches is the main, if not the only, Sunday service. Consequently, a generation of Anglicans has grown up to whom matins and evensong are alien, and who therefore are relatively unfamiliar with the psalms, the canticles and much of the Old Testament - and unused incidentally to a substantial diet of preaching. Not long ago, Cardinal Hume expressed the hope that an influx of Anglicans might lead in time to something like Anglican Matins and Evensong in Roman Catholic churches. This seems highly unlikely, since those who seek a spiritual home in the Roman obedience tend to be those already nurtured on a Tridentine pattern of devotion, with frequent celebrations of the mass - daily, if possible - and an emphasis on private prayer organised into elaborate schemes of meditation such as the Ignatian and the Salesian. People with such a background may say diligently some form of office - usually the Roman breviary - but have little sense of the office as the daily worship of God's people. Modern Anglo-Catholicism is far removed from the primitive Benedictine balance which Cranmer tried to restore and extend to the parishes. When I first visited the Anglican Benedictine abbey at Nashdom nearly forty years ago, every priest - which is to say, nearly every monk - said his daily mass, and the climax of each day's worship was the conventual high mass, which all attended, but at which none but the celebrant communicated. That was not in the least like an

early Benedictine community, in which, as in Celtic monasteries, most of the monks were laymen and the liturgy was celebrated only on Sundays and major feasts. Eastern Orthodox monasticism still retains this primitive pattern. The day was divided between corporate worship and manual labour, both being regarded as work and as prayer - the dictum *laborare est orare* is reversible. The office is the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God. Prayer at set times was intended to sanctify the whole of time. The Rule of St Benedict gives detailed instructions on how the office is to be said, hardly mentions the mass, and lays down no formal directions on private prayer. It is assumed that the oratory will always be open and that anyone with a moment or two to spare will slip in to pray quietly; private prayer should be "little and often". The aim is to cultivate a spirit of habitual recollection rather than to spend long periods on formal and solitary devotional exercises.

The Anglican post-Reformation pattern restored and reproduced this faithfully, even if unintentionally, in the parishes, and the Oxford Movement's imitation of counter-Reformation romanism was not a return but a departure from tradition. You may remember John Betjeman's poem on the death of George V in which he speaks of the King's contemporaries as

Old men who never cheated, never doubted, Communicated monthly (1)

Older confirmation manuals such as my father was given as a boy, contain devotions for the week before receiving the sacrament and for the week following. If everyone receives communion every Sunday (and sometimes on weekdays as well) such devotions become obsolete, and this represents loss as well as gain. People did at least prepare seriously, and one of Archbishop Ramsey's misgivings about the Parish Communion Movement was that it encouraged too many people to trip thoughtlessly to the altar. Benedict described his work as "a minimum rule which we have written for beginners" and in the same spirit classical Anglicanism put before people a goal which may have been less than ideal but which was attainable and which bred a kind of thoughtful holiness - sober, unexciting, not given to extremes, but solid, reliable and satisfying. Partly through religious zeal in various forms, partly through insidious secular pressures, the old Anglican pattern has broken up, and the chief casualty is the office.

Sister Benedicta Ward, writing twenty years ago at a time of widespread liturgical experiment in the church as large and in the religious communities which had restored and kept alive the old pattern of a sevenfold daily office, tried to clarify what she called the "why" of the Divine Office: what is the purpose of its recitation? She pointed out that the Biblical text Benedict uses is "seven times a day will I praise thee" (Ps 119.164) and that this well expressed the purpose of the office up until the Reformation. After that, she thought, a more appropriate verse from the same psalm would be "they word is a lantern unto my feet" (Ps 119.106).

There are in these verses two approaches to the "why" of the Office; the first sees it as objective praise offered to God, which is to define the Office in relation to the Person to whom it is addressed: the second sees the purpose of the Office as edification, and defines it in relation to those who perform it.

(2)

Benedict certainly saw the purpose of the Office as "the praise of our Creator" and this emphasis has been reaffirmed by the Joint Liturgical Group. In the introduction to the revised Daily Office of 1968 they state, "the primary purpose of the office is to offer praise to God."

The Anglican Reformers, under the impression that they were restoring primitive usage, introduced something new. They inherited a tradition which made the backbone of the Office the recitation of the Psalms "in course". The Benedictine Rule, and until recently the Roman breviary, provided for the whole psalter to be read once a week. Cranmer reduced this to once a month, but caused the psalms to be said or sung in strict sequence from 1 to 150. He also assumed, probably mistakenly, that the early church had arranged for the whole Bible to be read through once a year, and so took steps to restore this supposedly primitive and edifying practice, giving to those who faithfully followed the directions of the Book of Common Prayer four chapters of Scripture to digest each day. While keeping the basic structure of the Christian year, he enormously simplified it, so that there would be far fewer occasions for interrupting the orderly sequence of psalms and readings in order to make way for saints' days and festivals, and he rigorously pruned practically all the non-Biblical material in the offices: hymns, antiphons and readings from extra-canonical writings. His aim was to ensure that those who attended regularly would become increasingly familiar with Holy Scripture and would be thereby "stirred up to godliness" and "continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God and be the more inflamed by the love of his true religion".(3)

The trouble is that what was designed to be edifying can on occasion be singularly unedifying. If you switch on the wireless on Wednesday afternoons to listen to Choral Evensong, you will hear the objective praise of God reverently and beautifully offered, but you will probably hear two lessons which bear no relation to each other

and which out of context and without explanation convey either little or no meaning or, worse still, an apparent meaning at variance with the gospel of Christ.

This problem was first faced more than a century ago when it was apparent that most people attended only Sunday services and that a lectionary which went straight through the year tended to provide for Sundays disjointed and unhelpful readings and a random selection of psalms. It is normal now to provide what are thought to be appropriate psalms and readings for every Sunday, and for a limited number of major festivals that fall on weekdays, but to maintain the principle of *lectio continua* on ordinary weekdays, which is fair enough for those who do recite the office daily, but does not altogether deal with the problem. Familiarity with scripture and appropriation of its teaching to our daily lives is best achieved in other ways than by over-long readings in the course of worship, and providing it is being achieved by other means, such as individual or group study and meditation, it is better to reduce the sheer quantity of Biblical material in the offices to more manageable proportions. This means abandoning the ideal of reading the whole Bible through every year. Modern lectionaries tend to be selective and also to work on a two or three year cycle.

Some years ago I organised a diocesan school of prayer, asking five different people to lead the five sessions. To one I gave the title "Praying the Bible" expecting that he would offer training and guidance on some simple form of meditation - prepare, picture, ponder, pray, promise - the sort of thing many Christians do every day. The speaker, however, said that he himself found that kind of prayer unhelpful and he would take my title more literally, as meaning using the words of the Bible as prayer. This, in fact, is exactly what the traditional office does. It prays the psalms and the canticles, and turns other scriptural passages into prayer, usually by providing a mere sentence or two and allowing it to become familiar with use and to resonate in the mind. Nowadays it is becoming increasingly common to provide brief periods of silence after reading, so that the words can sink in and help to lift the heart and mind to God. For centuries it has been customary to Christianise the psalter, so to speak, by ending every psalm with the *Gloria Patri*, thus turning it explicitly into a hymn of praise to the Trinity. An alternative usage of earlier days which has recently been revived, notable in the daily office currently authorised for experimental use in the Scottish Episcopal Church, is to sum of each psalm in a short collect which takes phrases from the psalm and turns them into Christian prayer.

The trend then is away from "edification" as the Reformers understood it, and back to the previous emphasis on the office as the corporate and objective worship of Almighty God, the Church's daily offering of prayer, praise and thanksgiving. The office should be God-centred and not man-centred. That does not mean, of course, that it is no longer edifying. It is probably more so. Sister Benedicta, borrowing a phrase from Wesley, calls it a "converting ordinance". She quotes the decree *Mediator Dei*:

The office is no mere matter of recitation ... It is a matter of raising our minds and hearts to God so that united with Jesus Christ we may devote ourselves and our actions utterly to him.⁴

The great Anglican Evangelical Charles Simeon put it like this:

There are but two objects that I have ever desired for these forty years to behold: the one is my own vileness; and the other is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And I have always thought that they should be viewed together By this I seek to be humbled in thankfulness before my God and Saviour continually. This is the religion that pervades the whole liturgy and makes it inexpressibly sweet to me.⁵

In calling the office a converting ordinance Sister Benedicta hardly means that someone totally unfamiliar with Anglican worship would necessarily undergo an instantaneous conversion as a result of a chance attendance at evensong in a cathedral or college chapel, though it could happen. He or she would probably not understand what was going on; but if it was apparent that those participating did understand and regarded what they were doing as infinitely worthwhile and precious, it might lead to a determination to find out more about the way of life that found such an expression in worship. However, what I think she had in mind is rather that the faithful recitation of a set form of daily prayer which is so completely scriptural will over a lifetime deepen our Christian discipleship and help us not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of our minds. One of the vows taken by a Benedictine monk is *conversatio morum*, the conversion of manners, conversion seen as a lifelong process. It is conversion in this sense for which Martin Thornton prescribed a balanced rule of mass, office and prayer.

It has to be admitted, however, that it is really only in religious communities and to some extent in cathedrals with a choral foundation that the office still works as it was intended to. In the parishes, it has fallen increasingly into disuse. The devout laymen will attend the eucharist on Sunday mornings and will try to say his prayers daily and find time for Bible study; but he will probably be quite unfamiliar with the offices in either the Prayer Book form or in any revised and simplified form of which there are several available. If he is

asked to add the recitation of an office to his daily routine he will see it as an unnecessary and unhelpful burden rather than as a means of grace. When I was a curate more than thirty years ago, Sunday evensong was still fairly well attended, and when the clergy said evensong together on weekdays, they were usually joined by one or two lay people. The parish had a large Sunday congregation and a nucleus of daily worshippers. The places where this is still true are few and far between. How this trend is to be reversed, or what to put in the place of what appears to have gone beyond recall, I have to admit I do not know; but I remain convinced that the office stands for an essential ingredient in a balanced Christian life, and one that needs to be recovered.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his Reith Lectures *The Persistence of Faith*, borrowed from the sociologists the concept of mediation structures: "those associations like the family, the local community and the religious congregation that stand between the individual and the state and provide us with our more enduring sense of identity."⁶

It is precisely such mediating structures that he sees as threatened by current trends in our society. As they are weakened or disappear the individual is left naked and alone. He claims that "without the communities that sustain it, there is no such thing as private virtue" and again "without community and tradition there is no self-expression". He insists that there is a continuing need for "a series of environments in which we learn the local languages of identities alongside a public language of collective aspiration" and that "the task of religious institutions is less to influence governments than to create communities of faith" - which points to the priority of worship and its role as a converting ordinance.

The examples he gives of mediating structures - the family, the local community and the religious congregation - used to be intimately linked. The parish church was the focus of the local community, and the public worship of the whole community on Sundays was echoed in the everyday family worship of each household within it.

Schism and secularism have led to a situation where worshipping on Sunday is an individual choice, one option among many. Sunday congregations, at least in the city and the suburbs, are composed of anonymous and isolated individuals. If society as a whole needs a middle term between the individual and the state, the church increasingly needs a middle term between the individual and the congregation. The Sunday assembly for worship is no longer a community of communities but a random collection of atoms. One way of remedying this, if only we can see how to do it, is to reinstate the office. The eucharist is or ought to be the worship of the whole people of God; prayer is generally and unavoidably "what an individual does with his solitariness"; between the two, the office can bridge the gap, providing daily worship for groups of Christians who can meet but providing also a form of prayer for those who have little or no Christian contact from one Sunday to the next. By its very nature it is a reminder that no Christian prayer is strictly speaking private but always part of the common prayer of the people of God; hence the insistence of St Peter Damian in *The Book of the Dominus Vobiscum* that even hermits should not omit saying "The Lord be with you. And with thy Spirit." The family, says Rabbi Sacks, is a narrative institution: "the place where we tell the story of where we came from". So, surely, is the Church, and one way in which this narrative function is articulated is in the reciting of the office, which reminds us of the rock from which we were hewn, the root from which we have sprung.

Liturgical experiment and revision has had one unfortunate and unintended effect which undermines the value of the office as narrative institution and mediating structure. At one time an Anglican priest saying his office alone in the more depressing circumstances and the most unpromising surroundings, knew for a fact that all over the world on that day people were reciting the same psalms and praying the same collects, and that knowledge gave him strength and encouragement and helped to keep him faithful. Now there are too many divergent forms and permitted alternatives for there to be much sense left of joining in a genuinely corporate prayer. It is much to be desired that we should all work towards a renewed and agreed form of common prayer, with a common psalter and lectionary. Some flexibility and variety there must needs be but we must try to get away from the present "Pick and mix" which has almost completely replaced the old impressive unanimity and thus largely destroyed the whole point of the office, which was its objectivity.

It would be enormously helpful if instead of each denomination providing forms of worship for its own members, however good they may be, the authorities would actively encourage the use of an ecumenically acceptable form of office, and help to make members of different traditions familiar with it by using it on all appropriate occasions. It goes without saying that such forms of worship should be made readily available to all worshippers and not merely provided in handbooks for the clergy.

Let me end with a quotation from Alan Ecclestone's anthology *Gather the Fragments*:

The true meaning of tradition is not to be locked in to what we have inherited and to be unable to see outside it. Nor is it to repel the new. But it is to evaluate what is new from the richness of the past. Adjustments and refashioning do not destroy our sense of continuity - though it needs great

- 1 John Betjeman, Death of King George V" in *Collected Poems* Murray 1958) p.43
- 2 Sister Benedicta Ward *Liturgy Today* (S L G Press 1974) p.9
- 3 Preface to *The Book of Common Prayer*
- 4 Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, ch.153
- 5 Quoted by Max Warren, *Strange Victory* (Canterbury Press 1946) pp.106-7
- 6 This and the following quotations from Jonathan Sacks,
The Persistence of Faith (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1991)
- 7 Alan Ecclestone, *Gathering the Fragments* (Cairns 1993) p.158