

The office of prayer: Reviving an ancient practice

by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [March 21, 2001](#) issue

For Those We Love But See No Longer: Daily Offices for Times of Grief by Lisa Belcher Hamilton

Venite: A Book of Daily Prayer by Robert Benson

Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night by J. Philip Newell

The Prymer: The Prayer Book of the Medieval Era Adapted for Contemporary Use, translated and adapted by Robert E. Webber

The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime by Phyllis Tickle

The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime by Phyllis Tickle

The current interest in spirituality is breaking down traditional dividing lines between Christians. People from various Protestant traditions have been turning to the wisdom found in the pre-Reformation church (East and West), in Franciscan spirituality, in Celtic Christianity and in the writings of various mystics.

Monasticism is also getting increased attention. I've even heard that some Baptists have started a Benedictine-style monastery. Consider the best-selling status of Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk* and the avalanche of popular literature on Benedictines by Elizabeth Canham, Joan Chittister, Esther de Waal, John McQuiston, Basil Pennington, David Steindl-Rast, Benet Tvedten and Norvene Vest. While monastic vocations decline, the number of monastic lay affiliates, or oblates, grows.

In *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* Robert Wuthnow describes the emergence of a "practice-oriented spirituality," rooted in disciplines, institutions and ethical commitments. In a recent interview, Phyllis Tickle spoke of the highly unusual "surge of prayerbooks." She says one publisher described this trend as "rapidly hastening toward the third century." Tickle added: "That's exactly where the market's going, taking us back to original Christianity, before the Reformation, back before East and West even began to act as if they were separate."

Given this interest in spiritual practices and things monastic, it is not surprising that more and more people are practicing the daily office (also called “divine office,” “office,” “liturgy of the hours” or “common prayer”). The office is a pattern of nonsacramental prayer services that are celebrated at regular times of the day or night, primarily lauds in the morning and vespers at night. Its history goes back to the earliest centuries of the church. Various offices are found in Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, with some Protestant variations.

Recent fiction reflects this interest. Gail Godwin’s *Evensong* presents an Anglican priest’s life and her daily office practice. A popular writer of hard-boiled mysteries, Loren D. Estleman, centers *The Hours of the Virgin* around a medieval breviary. Mark Salzman’s acclaimed novel about a cloistered Carmelite monastery, *Lying Awake*, reflects on the office.

Other recent books reinforce the importance and opportunity of the office. John Reeves’s poems about Christ’s life take the form of *A Book of Hours*. C. W. McPherson’s *Grace at This Time: Praying the Daily Office* is a theological commentary and practical guide. Suzanne Guthrie’s reflective *Praying the Hours* ponders the hallowing of time. *Chant Made Simple*, by Robert M. Fowells, is a beginner’s guide to Gregorian chant. In *Shaping of a Life*, Phyllis Tickle reflects on how she has been formed and informed by the office.

The Book of Common Prayer has received new attention. In celebration of its 450th anniversary, C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F. M. Zahl edited an attractive volume, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*, which includes historical notes and devotional reflections. Eerdmans has published a daily devotional based on the BCP, *Daily Book of Common Prayer: Readings and Prayers Through the Year*.

Historical interest in missals and psalters is indicated in two recent books by Janet Backhouse, *The Sherbourne Missal* and *Medieval Rural Life in the Luttrell Psalter*. Both contain interesting and accessible essays, but are especially delightful for their illuminated manuscript excerpts. Many reproductions are beautifully done in color and all reflect charmingly on the spirituality and nature of their society and culture.

Most impressive, however, are several new offices. Lisa Belcher Hamilton, an Episcopal priest and young widow, offers a great pastoral service with *For Those We Love But See No Longer: Daily Offices for Times of Grief*. She organizes BCP prayers into a one-week cycle of four daily prayer services. Each service includes short

scripture readings, petitions regarding mourning, suggestions for reflection, and room for journaling. Its portable size makes it easy to carry and use anywhere. Hamilton notes that regular prayer can give people a needed structure in the chaos of mourning. It also connects us to the communion of the saints, living and dead.

Furthermore, praying the office with others is important at a time when we are prone to feeling isolated. She notes that Cranmer began work on the BCP after the loss of his wife and child in childbirth. Hamilton stays close to the text of the BCP. While I appreciate her respect for tradition, I wonder whether she—and indeed all the office compilers here reviewed—could have been more attentive to inclusive language.

Venite: A Book of Daily Prayer is a lovely contribution by Robert Benson. Though raised as an evangelical, Robert Benson was gradually drawn into the power of the office. He discovered that most prayerbooks were difficult to use, and so wrote a one-volume daily prayerbook for his own use and was gradually persuaded to share it with others. His book is designed for up to four daily offices (morning, noon, evening and night). The helpful introduction explains how to use the book and how to develop an office discipline. (Benson recommends beginning with only a part of one or two services and building up gradually.) Everything necessary for daily observance is here: church season prayers, saints' days, canticles, selected psalms, and a 30-day cycle of New Testament readings. The book also includes mealtime prayers, a communion service, a solitary commemoration service and occasional prayers.

I appreciate Benson's reminder that these prayers are not meant to be said alone and indeed are very difficult to say alone: "One of the keys to the discipline of the prayer of the office is the realization that . . . we are joining our voices with a great multitude unknown to us who are marking the same office at the same time each day." As one does need to jump around in the book—from office to season collects, canticles, Psalter and New Testament readings—ribbons to mark one's place would have been helpful. And limiting oneself to abridged psalms and short New Testament texts is too skimpy; better to follow a lectionary, I think. Benson's rewriting of various psalms also raised questions for me, and I would prefer a little more variety in the daily services.

J. Phillip Newell is a Scottish writer, formerly affiliated with the Iona Community. His *Celtic Benediction* is the most appealing but least substantial of the offices under

review. Newell presents a seven-day cycle of morning and evening prayers written in the “Celtic tradition,” which emphasizes the goodness of creation. Though the image of God in us is distorted by sin, it has not been erased by sin. “Redemption in this tradition is about being reconnected to the presence of this glory deep within us and among us in creation.” Thus this office is shaped by the seven days of creation. It is beautifully illustrated with colorful Celtic knotwork from the Lindisfarne Gospels. Each office includes short Bible verses for silent pondering, lovely opening prayers (connected to nature themes), thanksgiving prayers and a closing prayer. The book’s weakness is that it is not clearly enough connected to office traditions.

Robert Webber created two previous office books, *The Book of Daily Prayer* and *The Book of Family Prayer*. He has now translated a 15th-century prayerbook or Prymer from Latin into contemporary English. Prymers were a popular form of individual devotion for medieval layfolk. Webber’s book is a compilation of the “Hours of the Blessed Virgin,” which reflect on Jesus’ last hours through his mother’s eyes. As well as daily offices, Webber includes “Prayers and Readings for a Time of Grief.” Such an office of the dead or “dirge” was timely in the Middle Ages when so many people died young. Webber includes helpful comments on the meaning of ancient Latin terms and is a gold mine of introductory information on the office. He argues that the Prymer is a particularly appropriate form for this postmodern time when “we are undergoing a . . . shift from the emphasis on objective truth to a desire for a more subjective experience of truth.”

The book lays out all the material for praying the services and includes 63 psalms. Webber wants us to “ruminate” on scripture by praying the texts slowly and digesting them thoroughly. He leaves wide margins for notes. One can either pray through this material as a one-day retreat or as a weekly or even a monthly cycle. The book is biblically and liturgically substantial and worthwhile. As ecumenical as I fancy myself, however, I am still ambivalent about all the prayers to Mary.

After praying the office for 30 years, Phyllis Tickle decided to help others do so. Last winter her first volume quickly became an Amazon.com best-selling book on prayer; within months the first 10,000 sold out. Tickle’s *Divine Hours* series (two of the three have been published) are the most impressive of all the recent volumes. They provide psalms, prayers and readings for four services every day. Tickle incorporates prayers and readings from a host of good sources. She also includes excellent hymn suggestions for vespers. Everything is beautifully laid out on good quality paper. Versions in paperback, CD and electronic format are in the works. The latter will be a

publishing first. The books are easy to use. Everything needed for each service is in one place. They include an introduction to the history of the office, helpful instructions on how to pray the office, and even guidance on how to chant the psalms. I quickly began using these manuals as additional resources for some of my prayers.

But I would have liked more help with the intercessions and also more readings from the Old Testament. Also, the size and weight of these volumes makes them difficult to carry around. More seriously, such efforts written for individuals, with no specific communities in mind, reinforce a sensibility of individual edification rather than common prayer. On the other hand, these prayers and services are brief enough for almost anyone to work into their lives.

It is unfortunate that the third volume, *Prayers for Springtime*, will not be available until fall. That means people who have used the manuals from June 2000 until January 2001 are without a prayer book for Lent, Easter and springtime. Tickle told me that various “nonliturgically reared” church folk have told her that these books are “the missing piece” in their lives. She says that among the gifts of the office one looms especially large: “If you do it, it forces you to drop out for a few minutes. People who haven’t done it would be amazed at how much perspective you suddenly get from thinking, ‘I just stopped to talk to God, and what a pile of foolishness the rest of this looks like.’ If you do it with any thought at all, the world you come back to four minutes later is vastly different from the hysteria you left.”

The current interest in the office is a healthy development at a time when all manner of phenomena go under the guise of spiritual renewal. Disciplined use of the office helps us pray regularly and—by hallowing our time—even unceasingly. Furthermore, it helps us to pray objectively. Rather than focusing on our personal priorities we are formed by praise, confession and listening to God’s word, and enabled to pray whether we feel like it or not. The office’s daily nature, its joys and challenges (even its monotony) help us to pay attention to God in all of life’s joys and challenges. The office is also ecumenical. It is the only Roman Catholic liturgy in which all Christians may fully participate. As places like Taizé demonstrate, common prayer can bring people together in ways that no other ecumenical ventures have achieved.

Even so, the rash of new offices raises some concerns. I certainly hope we do not start seeing “specialty offices” like all those “specialty Bibles” (for men, women, teens, codependents, whomever). The danger is that we will become subjective and

individualistic in our prayer, when one of the most important advantages of the office is that we pray it in common with others, whether or not we are in their physical presence at the time.