

Abbey Letter
Easter 2009
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In Romans, St. Paul says that neither height nor depth will separate us from Christ. The hymn in Philippians tells us that this is so because Jesus Himself descended from the height of His godhead to the depths of dying on the cross, the most shameful death possible in his time, and then rose with a name above all other names back to the height from which He came. Let us take comfort that the dead and risen Christ has been everywhere that we ever find ourselves, no matter how high or how low.

A BLESSED AND GLORIOUS EASTER TO ALL!

— Abbot Andrew



washing the feet of guests on Maundy Thursday

Seven Times A Day I Praise You

It is not uncommon for individuals to ask what breviary or prayer book we use for our daily liturgical prayer. We do not use a specific breviary. Rather, the office used here is one of our own making, following the guidelines of the *Benedictine Thesaurus* (a guide book of various ways a given Benedictine community may use to develop their own particular Daily Office). The system we use at St. Gregory's is a modern adaptation of the office as set forth in *St. Benedict's Rule*.

Since so many who ask about our Daily Office are searching for a prayer book to enrich their prayer life, and since our Daily Offices are too time consuming for most people outside of a monastic context, I wish to offer some thoughts and recommendations on various office books that are available.

My first recommendation is perhaps an obvious one: *The Book of Common Prayer*. In the Daily Offices one will find a system of daily prayer that will include the principal forms of prayer (adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, offering, intercession, and petition), readings from Scripture, and a sharing in the worship of the Church at large (even if one is praying the office alone). The Daily Office lectionary offers one of the finest overviews of the Bible offered anywhere. The BCP (*Book of Common Prayer*) Daily Offices are an excellent place to begin (and to continue) using a structured round of prayer and listening to scripture. (In one way or another, all of the prayer books I will mention do this as well.)

For those who wish a more monastic flavor for their daily prayer, yet wish to have a form similar to the BCP offices, there is *A Monastic Breviary* from the Order of the Holy Cross, and *The St. Helena Breviary* from the Order of St. Helena. Both books offer a pattern similar to that of the BCP, with some variations that reflect their monastic context, mainly in their emphasis on the Psalms. Both breviaries offer a two week cycle of psalmody distributed throughout their four daily offices (matins, diurnum, vespers, compline). In *The St. Helena Breviary*, there are two other options offered for the psalmody: that of the BCP Daily Office lectionary, and the traditional monthly cycle of psalms developed by Cranmer. Of the two breviaries, *The St. Helena Breviary* is the more recent adaptation (2006) and is therefore more up to date concerning inclusive language. Holy Cross' *A Monastic Breviary* is a product of the mid 70s, so its language is that of the BCP. Both books use the Daily Office lectionary from the BCP. The main offices of matins and vespers in each breviary will take anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes each, so if one cannot commit to such blocks of time on a daily basis, I would recommend a shorter, simpler office book. Otherwise, these are both worthwhile books to consider.

Another prayer book from a monastic context is *Celebrating Common Prayer*. This is a version of the Daily Office used by the Anglican Franciscans in England. While borrowing much from the American BCP (it uses the BCP translation of the Psalms, for example), its structure is different than the BCP Daily Office. In fact, one should say ‘structures’, for it provides more than one way to pray the office, ranging from the highly involved to the bare minimum. It is therefore one of the most adaptable of office books available. There is much that is attractive here. I am particularly taken with the idea of assigning each day of the week with a seasonal theme (for example, Sunday is Easter, Monday is Pentecost, Tuesday is Advent...), using appropriate psalms, canticles, and prayers for each. If one is attracted to creativity in a Daily Office, I would recommend this book very highly.

Also coming from the Church of England is the latest offering of the Daily Office called *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*. This is a fascinating office book, and like *Celebrating Common Prayer* (from which it has borrowed material), offers a variety of structures for keeping a Daily Office. So it, too, is highly adaptable according to one’s circumstances. I personally find its translation of the Psalms very nice indeed. A Daily Office lectionary is printed in a separate book, but there would be no difficulty in using the American BCP lectionary while using this book for everything else. I must say that the quality of this book took me by surprise, since much in the past that has come from the Church of England has been disappointing. So once again, this is a highly adaptable prayer book with much to recommend it.

Coming from, of all things, the Mennonite tradition, is *Take Our Moments and Our Days: An Anabaptist Prayerbook*. This is a wonderful and easy to use prayer book, providing a four week cycle of morning and evening prayer. Cleverly, each week has a theme assigned to it, with that week’s office somehow a reflection of its theme. Week One’s theme is the Lord’s Prayer, Week Two is the Beatitudes, Week Three is the Parables, Week Four is Signs and Wonders. Each office follows a pattern of praising, listening, and responding. This is a very charming (in the best sense of the word) prayer book, and I recommend it for those who require simplicity in their prayer structure.

For those who deeply yearn for a truly Benedictine inspired prayer book, there is *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary*. This office book follows and adapts the office as set down in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. It is an adaptable office book, for one can keep all seven of the traditional monastic offices, or one can pray however many one is inclined to pray. This office book is the closest book available to the offices prayed here at St. Gregory’s Abbey. For example, the psalmody is on a weekly cycle, and uses the same psalms at lauds and vespers that we use (following the *Rule of St. Benedict*). Because it is designed for use by those who do not live in a monastery, and since it follows a weekly cycle, not all

of the psalms are used. This is because most people do not have the time to pray 12 different psalms daily for the office of vigils alone. The psalms used are a moderately inclusive language version of the *Grail Psalms*, and the scriptures are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). This is the office book I use whenever I'm out of the monastery. Again, for anyone who wishes to pray an office that is close to the traditional Benedictine monastic office, this is the one to get.

A word of warning. When starting to keep a Daily Office, it may be tempting to think a given office is too complicated or confusing. Let me encourage you to keep at it. It becomes easier over time, for you will learn what's next as you go through it, and thus it will become a normal part of your life. The main trick is to learn what the structure of an office is. The maintenance of the spiritual life is not always easy, but it is worth the effort.

Finally, it is crucial to be faithful in praying the office. There will be times when you will feel you are not getting anything out of the practice of the Daily Office, or that you are not as focused as you should be. Don't be too worried about that. There is more going on than meets the eye. Over time you will have found that you have absorbed more than you thought you were. Praying a Daily Office is bound to become routine and at times thoughtless. This is unavoidable. Remain faithful in the practice anyway. You'll be thankful that you did.

— Br. Martin

Sources for prayer books:

For most of the books reviewed:

Christian Book Distributors
140 Summit Street
Peabody, MA 01960
christianbook.com

A Monastic Breviary

(around \$20.00)
Order of the Holy Cross
P. O. Box 99
West Park, NY 12493

The St. Helena Breviary

(around \$60.00)

Common Worship: Daily Prayer

(around \$40.00)

Church Publishing Inc.
445 5th Avenue
New York, NY 10016
churchpublishing.org

Benedictine Prayer: A Short Breviary

(around \$50.00)

The Liturgical Press
St. John's Abbey
P. O. Box 7500
Collegeville, MN 56321
litpress.org

NOTES

Several members of Episcopal religious orders were with us November 11th - 14th for the CAROA Midwest Focus Group meeting, discussing ways the different communities can work together for mutual benefit. "CAROA" stands for "Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas."

Abbot Andrew traveled to St. Bernard's Abbey in Cullman, Alabama for the Benedictine abbots' workshop February 13th -17th. The focus of the meeting was "Confreses in Need of Special Attention and Care."

discussion at the CAROA meeting



Br. Abraham is scheduled to travel to Trinity Church in Belleville, Michigan on March 4th to speak on monastic life as one of many expressions of Christian vocation.

The new bell tower and church entrance are nearing completion. Updates (including photos) can be seen at our website. Also available are links to purchase calendars and books, request prayers, make donations, and update mailing list information.
saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Books and articles read in the monastic refectory during lunch and supper 2008

Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain
by Oliver Sacks

The Moral Instinct (The New York Times Magazine: January 13, 2008)
by Steven Pinker

Head and Heart: American Christianities
by Garry Wills

Shakespeare: The World As Stage
by Bill Bryson

Barbara Jordan: American Hero
by Mary Beth Rogers

Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain
by Christopher Merrill

Hotel: An American History
by A. K. Sandoval-Strausz

I Don't Believe in Atheists
by Chris Hedges

The Biography of Alice B. Toklas
by Linda Simon

Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and A Writer's Life
by Kathleen Norris

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a monastery within the Episcopal
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*For more information and an application form, use the envelope bound in
this issue of the Abbey Letter or write:*

July Program Director
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Saint Gregory's Abbey is the home of a community of men living under the Rule of Saint Benedict within the Episcopal Church. The center of the monastery's life is the Abbey Church, where God is worshiped in the daily round of Eucharist, Divine Office, and private prayer. Also offered to God are the monks' daily manual work, study and correspondence, ministry to guests, and occasional outside engagements.

The continuing existence of Saint Gregory's is made possible by the support of those who believe that the contemplative vocation within the Church finds valid expression there.

The monks ask your prayers and will be grateful for your offerings.

<http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org/donate.html> to donate online

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Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595