

An Attitude of Silence in the Daily Office and the Holy Eucharist

The Daily Office is our tradition's first way of developing a deeper inner silence in the baptized person. Day-by-day we are fed by the Word. We may engage the grace of this pathway in the Office itself and possibly even more as we move through the day in moments of recollection.

The Office has three primary elements: psalms, readings, the common prayers. It also has a rhythm. Our focus in this workshop will be on the practices that nurture that rhythm.

As you say the Daily Office with others there are several traditional practices that will aid the harmony of the community and nurture an attitude of silence within you. Together the practices allow you to express, and thereby experience, a stillness and silence that is outward and physical as well as inner, of the mind and spirit.

These pages focus on the Daily Office practices that nurture stillness and silence within us; and more, what Martin Thornton called "habitual recollection" – the "constant recollection of Christ's presence."

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee*

The Temple, George Herbert

If we bring to the Eucharist the habitual recollection we have attained in the Office and holy reflection, we will experience the Eucharist more fully. This is because the Eucharist is part of a spiritual system. From Chapter 2 of *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*.

Our worship tradition as Episcopalians is based on a three-part structure. Michael Ramsey, the one-hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury, referred to it as the "Benedictine triangle." Martin Thornton called it the "Catholic Threefold Rule of Prayer." It is the Prayer Book's way of prayer. The three elements, Eucharist, Daily Office, and Personal Devotions, comprise the fundamentals of a disciplined Christian spirituality in the Anglican tradition.

The use of this pattern can help individuals and parishes move away from the attempt to base our prayer life on a self-made, unintegrated list of "rules" toward an integrated Rule grounded in *The Book of Common Prayer*. It is as a parish, as a local expression of the Body of Christ, that we may fully participate in and offer this threefold pattern. As individuals we will at times participate in this pattern, carrying others in prayer. At other times we will be carried.

The active relationship among *Eucharist/Daily Office/Personal Devotions* can be seen in how the Office is deepened and enriched by a person's personal devotions, how all three influence one another, and how the Office and personal devotions are focused and completed in the Eucharist. It's common for parish leaders to think about improving something by focusing on the thing itself. So, if we want to improve the parish's celebration of the Eucharist we might train those assisting at the altar to carry themselves with more grace and dignity, to hold their hands folded in front of the belly, and so on. Also, we might train the congregation for its participation. Both are worth doing and are likely to result in improvement. What we often miss is how

dramatically our eucharistic celebration is improved when a critical mass or even a core of those gathered has said the Office, in some form, that week and engaged in a way of personal devotions that nurtures and possibly stretches them.

What we bring to the Eucharist has a great impact on what happens in the Eucharist. This is a systems view of what takes place in the Eucharist and of the process of liturgical renewal. Thornton notes the same reality, “Eucharist—Office—private prayer forms one whole balanced organic life,” and “private prayer is absolutely dependent on the Office and the Eucharist.”

Evelyn Underhill wrote of the role of Office and Eucharist:

The peculiarity of the Anglican tradition is the equal emphasis which it gives to the Divine Office and the Eucharist; that is to say, to Biblical and to Sacramental worship. Where this balance is disturbed, its special character is lost. ... It is, I believe, by the balanced and instructed development of these two great instruments of Christian worship—carrying them forward without deflection from their supernatural orientation, yet keeping them flexible to the changing spiritual needs and spiritual insights of the world—that the Anglican Communion will best fulfill its liturgical office within the Body of Christ. Here support and stimulus is given to the Godward life of the individual, while the solemn objectivity of true Catholic worship is preserved. (*Worship* by Evelyn Underhill, 1936, pp. 335–336)

Underhill refers to the pattern we see in *The Book of Common Prayer*: More than two-thirds of the book is taken up with the Eucharist, the Office, and materials to support those acts of worship (lectionaries, the Psalms). *The Book of Common Prayer* isn't a book of personal devotions, but its spirituality does assume that the Christian will find ways of personal devotion that are appropriate to their own personality and growth in love. The “equal emphasis” that she writes of isn't the distortion that many Anglicans once made of using the Office as an alternative to the Eucharist on Sundays. She's affirming a balance that is more to be seen in a parish that celebrates the Holy Eucharist each Sunday as its primary expression of worship and offers Morning, Noonday or Evening Prayer on all, or most, of the other days of the week.

The Practices

These are spiritual practices that can assist us as we enter into the Office and Eucharist.

Arrive early

Saint Benedict understood that nothing was “to be preferred to the Work of God”, that is, to the Daily Office. The saint wanted the community to set aside whatever other tasks they were involved with and go to the chapel when it was time to pray.

It nurtures our inner silence when we are not rushed and preoccupied during the Office or Eucharist. It is also courteous to others as our arriving late disrupts their silence. Arriving just a few minutes early allows us to settle down, mark our Prayer Book, and become present.

We might also note that Benedict was gentle in his expectation. The first morning psalm was to be said slowly so as to allow a kind of grace period for those slow arriving. He made space for our frailty while expecting our full participation.

Mark the pages

Before the Eucharist or Office begins use the ribbons, or bookmarks, in the Prayer Book to mark the pages for today's service. Do the same with the Hymnal for all the hymns to be sung.

Note: All this assumes that those leading the service have the sense to announce the pages before beginning begins instead of having to exercise control step-by-step through the Office. The information might also be in a bulletin or on a small chalkboard or a card outlining the order of service, or some other method.

Silence and stillness

Outward silence and stillness before beginning the Eucharist or Office, and after each reading. Some parishes use the ringing of a bell to mark silences. It may help you to keep in mind that your lack of silence and stillness isn't just about you; it takes away the silence and stillness of others.

Making silence

It may help you to think of silence as something you make happen. We "make" silence in the same sense that we "make" noise." So, no whispering or foot tapping. One more thing – be sure your cell phone is off or on airplane mode.

Being still

You are seeking a relaxed stillness. Manage your twitching. It's not the time to take a drink of water, or flip pages in the Prayer Book, or read the order of service. Be still!

Ringling a bell

Some parishes make use of a small prayer bell. It is rung softly before the office begins. It's an invitation to enter into stillness and silence. After 90 seconds +/- the bell is rung a second time. Remain still and silent until you cannot hear the bell. We leave silence, not abruptly, but gently.

Rhythm and pace

Congregations develop their own rhythm and pace. Allow yourself to become aware of the rhythm and pace of the community before jumping in.

Gentleness

There are several aspects of the gentleness needed. You might invite yourself into calmness and lightness. As appropriate, when gathering acknowledging others and asking after them and those they love.

In saying and singing offer a voice that is neither loud or so quiet that you seem disengaged. We are seeking to be in harmony with one another in our adoration and praise of God. The ability of the gathered community to have a shared rhythm and pace is made easier if each speaks and sings so they can hear themselves and others.

Your gentleness allows you and others to be in God's presence in a manner that gives God room to touch us. We may find joy and peace, or truth and justice; we may find a deep tranquility or a nudge that unsettles us. Loud, rushed voices make it hard for us to hear.

Don't compete

There may be someone in the congregation who hasn't yet learned to use a gentle voice. They don't seem to be aware of the pace, rhythm, and volume of the group. You may feel tempted to raise your own voice in order to assert the norm. Don't; it will only add to the problem. Gently maintain the norms or if that becomes impossible, allow yourself to be silent.

Saying the psalms

There are two practices during the Daily Office (but not during the Eucharist) that help feed an inner silence – alternating the saying of the verses of a psalm from side-to-side and pausing at the asterisk. They help us avoid the runaway train system of saying the psalms. Reflection comes more naturally.

Here's what the Prayer Book says in doing the psalms at the Office –

Antiphonal recitation is the verse-by-verse alternation between groups of singers or readers; e.g., between choir and congregation, or between one side of the congregation and the other. The alternate recitation concludes either with the Gloria Patri, or with a refrain (called the antiphon) recited in unison. This is probably the most satisfying method for reciting the psalms in the Daily Office. (BCP p. 582)

An asterisk divides each verse into two parts for reading or chanting. In reading, a distinct pause should be made at the asterisk (BCP p. 583)