

## The threefold rule of prayer

Friday, March 9, 2018 at 1:29PM

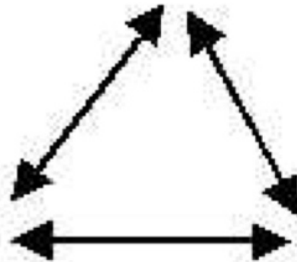
### The Threefold Rule of Prayer

#### **Holy Eucharist**

*The Gifts of God for the people of God, BCP p. 364*

#### **Daily Office**

*Day by day we bless you; We praise your name forever, BCP p. 98*



#### **Reflection/Personal Devotions**

*That in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember, BCP p.100*

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 Pattern. The three elements, Eucharist, Daily Office, and Reflection/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.

Our times, really all times, have need of responsible citizens, workers, family and friends. People who will give themselves to the formation of their conscience in prayer and reflection, and then, to acting upon their conscience. We each have a spiritual life. We are each responsible for our spiritual life. How might we accept that responsibility so that we live as Christ's light in the world?

The threefold pattern is an approach to spiritual life that is within our tradition and that assumes that we each have responsibility for our spiritual life as we live within the Body of Christ.

Through the Rule the parish joins in the tradition and practice of the larger Church and so avails itself of, and participates in, that grace-filled life. It simply makes good spiritual sense to base the parish discipline on what the Church has developed and lived through the ages.

The basic shape and particular expressions of the Rule have been handed on to us in the Prayer Book. The Prayer Book is largely concerned with the Eucharist and the Office as the forms of prayer we share in common. It assumes that the individual Christian is engaged in personal forms of devotion as well. The norm of the Prayer Book and of Catholic tradition is the Holy Eucharist as the principal Sunday act of worship and the Divine Office as our daily offering of common praise.

The parish's prayer life needs balance, discipline, and order. It also needs experimentation. The Threefold Rule is designed to meet these needs. It provides a system that people may learn, in which they may come to rest and grow in maturity. The Rule recognizes the

uniqueness of each parish's and person's spiritual life and the paradox that this uniqueness is finally known only from within the Body of Christ. How the essential elements are to be expressed will vary from parish to parish. How they are enriched with additional practices will depend on each parish's particular needs and traditions. Testing and experimentation are necessary in each parish.

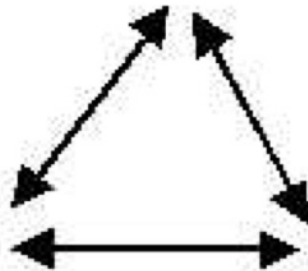
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*Reflection:* Times of consideration; occasions of pondering, musing, and contemplation. Seeking a sense of perspective and direction.

*Self-examination & confession:* Routine times when we can in silence engage in a systematic reflection on our sin and God's mercy.

*Spiritual reading:* The Scriptures or writers on the spiritual life. Slow, reflective reading, possibly a form of Lectio Divina.

*Other:* Centering prayer, meditation, recollection, intercession, petition, stations of the cross, going on retreat, etc. whether done on our own or with others

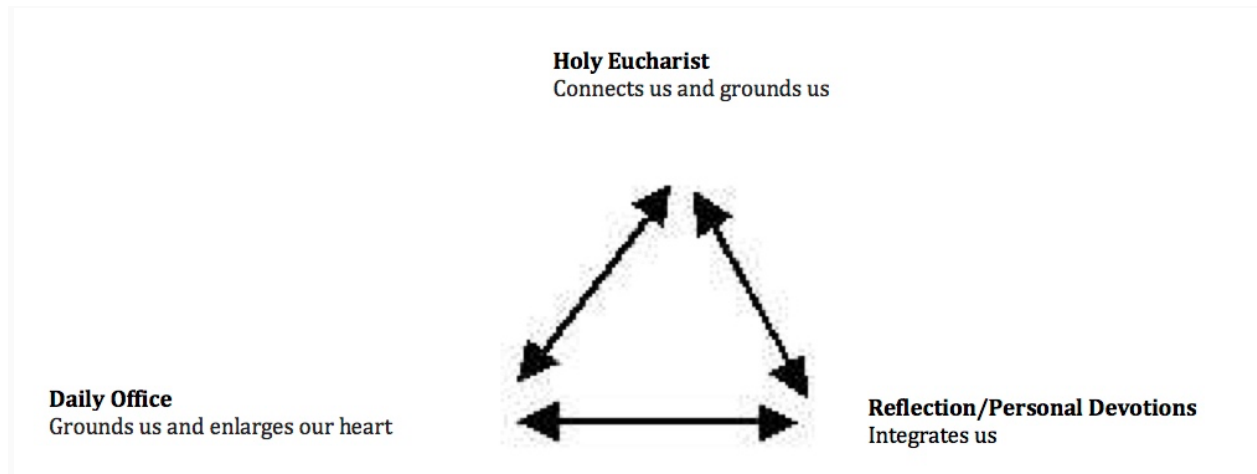
Copyright Robert A. Gallagher, 1982, 2008, 2018. This model is strongly influenced by the work of Martin Thornton.

The image above highlights first the core elements of the Threefold Rule - Eucharist - Office - Reflection/Personal Devotions. And then notes several forms of Reflection/Personal Devotions -- I think the essentials are self-examination/confession and a form of reflection that effectively and efficiently aids a sense of responsibility and perspective; that nurtures holiness of life.

[A PDF of the Threefold Rule](#)

[A chart on the threefold rule](#) (Macquarrie, Thornton, Underhill, Leech)

[Two page PDF](#) - Martin Thornton on the meaning of 'Rule' & Gallagher on the Threefold Rule



### What function does each element play?

Eucharist & Office: Our life in community, our reflection, and our service are nurtured from the soil of Office and Eucharist. The daily connection with Scripture and common prayer and the weekly receiving of Body and Blood orient us to the ways of eternity and feed us for “real life.” We become familiar with the ways of heaven. We chose to place ourselves in the pathways of grace.

Reflection/Personal Devotions: A form of deepening and holy application. I believe that two are essential -- self-examination/confession and reflection. To live responsibly is to live in humility and a longing for holiness; it is to live thoughtfully as we engage the day-by-day issues of our lives. In addition, I do think that spiritual reading is likely to be a help for most of us. Spending time with the writings of -- Underhill and Thornton, Leech and Gatta, Williams and Lewis, deWaal and Heyne -- will aid us in becoming at home in the pathways of grace. All the rest is a matter of temperament, circumstances, gifts and proficiency. Engage a few of them if they are helpful. Engage none if you wish. In any case never attempt to engage all of them – it will make you mad.

[A PDF of the functions](#) served by elements of the threefold rule

### An unintegrated prayer life

It's easy to understand how we can drift into creating a rule of life that is based in what we find familiar and comforting. Less frequently we see some people creating a rule that is heavy and burdensome. Spiritual growth is dependent on a mix of acceptance and challenge, grace and judgement. The Threefold Rule offers that needed balance.

Michelle Heyne had an experience a few years ago that highlighted the issue. She was coaching a woman on the use of the Office. The woman told Michelle that she already had a daily practice - she did silent meditation every morning. She just could see how to fit in something else - the Office - and wasn't all that sure about why bother. Michelle affirmed that it wasn't an either/or matter. The two practices accomplished different things in the inner life. Over time the Office grounded you in the church's common life of Scriptures and praise. Her practice of silent mediation helped her feel centered and helped her see particular situations more clearly.

Example 1 - Do you really think that a parish full of people that only engage the Scriptures and praise and adoration once a week in the Eucharist is a strong enough body to provide the light needed in this world?

Start with the assumption that no parish will ever have a majority of members with the spiritual practices and proficiency of Apostolic Christians (or in Thornton's terms - The Remnant). Pastoral theology needs to begin with reality! However, it is reasonable to think that over time a priest can bring 15 - 20% of the adults to live in the Rule of the Church. And if the priest also knows how to shape a broader culture and climate that is Apostolic, that, together with the 15 - 20%, will result in a parish church that is a strong light in its community.

Example 2 - Members who have a spiritual discipline of Eucharist on Sunday and several times of contemplation or centering prayer during the week. What is the spiritual danger given the missing elements of the Threefold Rule?

Sitting in silence without a routine grounding in the objectivity of the Office may result in a lack of comforting words, as in today's Psalm 91

*1He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, \*  
abides under the shadow of the Almighty.*

and the useful challenge experienced in today's reading from Jeremiah

*Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of an evil will.*

### **The parish development task**

Focus attention on offering the weekly practice of the Sunday Eucharist and the daily practice of the Daily Prayers of the Church (the Office). And provide an adequate amount of training and coaching that would help members become competent at leaving the threefold rule -- a one session 1 1/2 hour Eucharistic Practices program, Daily Office training and coaching offered as two sessions with a week of doing the Office in between, and session on methods for self examination, how to make a private confession, and forms of spiritual reading and Lectio Divina.

If not many people in the parish say the Office on their own you might offer that training three or four times a year for a few years. Accept that there will be times when no one shows. But know that over a few years you'll end up with a number of people who know how to say the Office on their own. If the parish has a number of people who already say the Office offering training and coaching once during the year may be enough.

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From Means of Grace, Hope of Glory