

How to Pray the Daily Office from the Book of Common Prayer

By Fr. Matthew Kemp

The current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to unprecedented levels of social isolation, including the suspension of full communal worship. This difficult time, however, also offers opportunities to deepen the roots of our prayer life within the Church's practice. More specifically, this may be a good time to begin praying the Daily Office (Morning and Evening Prayer) from the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Daily Office is by no means a substitute for the Eucharist. It has a different purpose, to read and *pray* through the Scriptures, especially the Psalms. It also is a way of sanctifying the different times of the day, i.e. offering them up to God. What makes the Daily Office special in this regard is that it is not a private devotion, but an entrance into the Church's regular prayer—even the perpetual worship of God in the heavenly realms. In other words, even if you are the only person in the room, you are never really praying the Office alone; the Church is there with you.

Below are some instructions on how to pray Morning and Evening Prayer from the Prayer Book, as it is likely unfamiliar to many of you. I offer this because I think it can be a vital resource for our common liturgical life, not in place of, but alongside of the Holy Eucharist. Indeed, the Daily Office has great value in times of social isolation for sure, but it also does at all times. Perhaps the present crisis can be an opportunity for you to take this on a new spiritual discipline.

Faithfully,
Fr. Kemp+
Eastertide 2020

What you will need: Book of Common Prayer (1979) (or go to: www.bcponline.org)
Bible (or go to: www.biblegateway.com)

Basic Structure

The purpose of the Daily Office is to pray through the Scriptures at certain times each day. Historic catholic practice has included as many as seven or eight offices each day, but our Anglican tradition has wisely distilled this into two major offices, one for the morning and one for the evening. This structure is something that a Christian layperson can easily follow.

In the current (1979) Prayer Book, both Morning and Evening Prayer follow this basic pattern:

Opening sentence(s) [optional]
Confession of sin [optional]
Invitatory psalm or canticle (i.e. call to worship)
Psalm(s)
One or more Scripture readings
Canticle after each reading

Apostles' Creed

Prayers: Lord's Prayer, suffrages, collect(s)

Additional closing prayers [optional]

Walking through Morning Prayer

The following is according to Rite I, pp. 37-60. The same structure with different texts is used in Rite II, pp. 75-102.

The Office can be started at one of two points. The first option is with an opening sentence (or more) of Scripture, found on pp. 37-41. Some of these are marked for certain seasons or feast days, while others can be used at any time.

After the opening sentence(s) may come a Confession of Sin, pp. 41-42. Note that, when led by a layperson, the absolution becomes a prayer for forgiveness, with "us/our" replacing "you/your."

Next comes the versicle/response, "O Lord, open thou our lips, / And our mouth shall show forth thy praise," followed by the "Glory to the Father..." This is the second point at which the Office can begin, with everything up to here being optional.

The Invitatory (which "invites" us to prayer) follows (pp. 44-45). In Morning Prayer, this is either the Venite (part of Psalm 95, plus a few verses from 96) or the Jubilate (Psalm 100). During Easter season, the Canticle "Christ our Passover" (p. 46) is also an option. The Prayer Book also provides *antiphons*, short verses to recite before and after the Invitatory Psalm (pp. 43-44). Feel free to omit the antiphon if it seems too cumbersome.

Then comes the Psalm(s) appointed for the day. The Psalm texts are all included in the Prayer Book (pp. 585-808). Which Psalm is appointed? You actually have two options. The simplest (and shorter!) is what is listed in the Daily Office Lectionary (pp. 936-1001), which provides morning and evening Psalms, as well as Scripture reading for the entire Church year. This usually cycles through all 150 Psalms over a 7-week period. The second option is marked by headings in the Psalter itself. Here the Psalms are divided sequentially for Morning and Evening Prayer over a 30-day period.

After this comes the reading(s), also found in the Daily Office Lectionary. Each day is assigned three readings: Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel. This Lectionary follows a 2-year cycle, with the parallel weeks printed on opposing pages for easy comparison. (We are currently in Year 2.) Major feast days also have their own readings, found in the back pages of the Lectionary. You can select one, two, or all three readings, though I recommend using the same option(s) between Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel each day, as that allows you to read continuously through one or more books. (Note that this Lectionary is not exhaustive; it does skip certain sections of the books it includes, though it gives a decent sampling of the canon of Scripture over the course of 2 years.)

After each reading should come a Canticle (pp. 47-53). Which one(s) can really be your choice, but here are a few suggestions:

- Canticle 4 is the traditional Gospel Canticle for Morning Prayer.
- Canticle 7 is especially appropriate for Sundays, major feasts, and Christmas and Easter seasons. It is not appropriate for Advent and Lent.
- Canticle 1 is especially appropriate for Saturdays (i.e. as the 7th day of creation).
- Additional Canticles (in contemporary language) can be found in Rite II of Morning Prayer, pp. 85-95.
- A table of suggested Canticles can be found on pp. 144-45.
- If you use all three readings, you do not need a third Canticle. The pattern would then go: 1st reading, 1st Canticle, 2nd reading, 2nd Canticle, 3rd reading, Apostles' Creed.

The Apostles' Creed (pp. 53-54) immediately follows the last Canticle (or 3rd reading).

Then come the Prayers, beginning with the Lord's Prayer. Immediately after that comes one of the two sets of Suffrages (A or B, p. 55), and then one or more of the Collects. The first Collect that can be prayed is the Collect of the Day (the same one that would be prayed at Mass before the readings); these are not printed within the rite, but can be found on pp. 159-210. There is generally a Collect assigned to each Sunday and major feast day. On other weekdays, you can use the Collect from the previous Sunday. As for the other Collects printed within Morning Prayer (pp. 56-57), three are intended for specific days (Friday, Saturday, Sunday) while others are more thematic and can be used at any time. After the Collects comes one of the three "Prayers for Mission" (pp. 57-58).

At this point the Office can end with the closing versicle/response and sentence of Scripture (pp. 59-60). However, you are also free to include additional prayers or hymns first, as well as the General Thanksgiving and the Prayer of St. Chrysostom, which are printed on pp. 58-59.

Walking through Evening Prayer

Evening Prayer (pp. 61-73) follows the same general pattern as Morning Prayer. Here are a points worthy of further comment.

The Invitatory given for Evening Prayer is the Canticle "O Gracious Light" (p. 64). Another appropriate hymn can also be used in its place.

The Psalms and readings can also be found in the Daily Office Lectionary. If you are praying both Morning and Evening Prayer, it makes sense to read one reading (or two) in the morning and one (or two) in the evening. If you wish to read two readings at *each* Office, you can add the Old Testament lesson from the alternate year.

The traditional Canticles for Evening Prayer are the Magnificat (Song of Mary) and the Nunc Dimittis (Song of Simeon), printed on pp. 65-66. However, you may also substitute any of the Canticles from Morning Prayer. If you only read one lesson at this Office, you only need one Canticle.

Otherwise, everything said about Morning Prayer applies to Evening Prayer, but with the texts printed for that Office.