



39. What are the Daily Offices?

The term 'Office' comes from a Latin expression meaning simply 'duty': what one is bound to perform. In the Early church, the main public service was the Eucharist. Apart from this, believers might meet in their homes for prayer with greater or less formality.

After the Fourth Century, when Christianity was no longer an illegal religion, new forms of worship emerged. Scholars believe that in the main centres, at least, there was a form of daily prayer consisting of hymns or canticles, prayer and a blessing by the local bishop, in the morning and the evening.

But some Christians felt that the Church had become soft. They retreated to deserts and other lonely places in search of greater austerity. They applied literally Paul's instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5.17 - 'Pray without ceasing'. Their daily round of prayer consisted of recitation and meditation on the psalms.

These hours of prayer were eventually fixed in the West as Mattins or Lauds at first light, Prime at about 7 a.m., Terce at 9.0 a.m., Sext at noon and Nones at 3.0 p.m. There followed Vespers or Evening Prayer, and finally Compline before the monks went to bed. These were the monks' duties or 'offices'. The Monastic or 'Religious' life gained great prestige and, in both West and East, elements of the Monastic style of prayer were incorporated in and eventually swamped the historic Morning and Evening prayers. Eventually, in the West, it was made an obligation for the parochial (or 'secular') clergy.

This was a considerable burden; if one office was missed, it had to be added on to the office due to be said next. Furthermore, additional observances were added. It has been calculated that at one time a priest would need up to ten different books if he was to say the offices properly.

Gradually the services were simplified, and the different texts used were collected in single volumes called 'Breviaries'. In 1535, the Spanish Cardinal Quinones published a completely revised and drastically simplified Breviary intended for use as a manual for private prayer by the individual cleric.

In 1549, Archbishop Cranmer produced the first complete English Prayer Book. For this, he devised

new services of Morning and Evening Prayer, which were taken from elements of the monastic offices grouped together. His hope was that all the people would participate in daily worship, morning and evening, and so become familiar with the entire Bible, which they would hear read and preached to them several times in the course of the year.

On Sundays, they would attend Morning Prayer, the Litany, Holy Communion, and Evensong. This did not happen in practice. In general, the clergy continued to read Morning and Evening Prayer on weekdays, as a private devotion. On Sundays parishioners would attend Morning Prayer, Litany and the first part of the Communion service, (actual Communion services were less frequent), and Evensong later in the day. The Evening prayer service is generally agreed to be Cranmer's masterpiece, with Mary, in the Magnificat, acting as the 'hinge' between the Old and new Testaments.

Cranmer's 1549 service was modified in 1552 by the addition of the penitential section at the beginning. In 1662, the State Prayers were added at the end. Otherwise, the service has remained unaltered, though in 1928 various modifications were proposed.

At St. Mary's, on weekdays, we use a revised form of Office produced by the Anglican Society of St Francis under the title 'Celebrating Common Prayer'. This is widely used in the Church of England and has been made the model for a proposed form of daily prayer to be issued in the 'Common Worship' series.