

**Homily for Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, c. 540**

**July 11, 2020**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Proverbs 2:1–9, Psalm 1, Luke 14:27–33*

During Lent in 1981, when I was in the second semester of my first year in seminary, a group of us from the diocese of Chicago visited Saint Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan. Saint Gregory's House, later Saint Gregory's Priory, was established by three Americans who went to Nashdom Abbey in England. Upon their return in 1939, they were invited by the bishop of Northern Indiana to take charge of a parish in Gary. In 1946, they moved to a rural area in southwest Michigan. It became an independent abbey in 1969.

We arrived on Friday in time for the simple supper served on a Friday in Lent—eggs on toast, as I recall. Compline followed, and once compline began, silence would be observed by all until after Mass the next morning. Our group sat in the back row. We just listened as the monks sang compline. But, when they got to the Latin antiphon of the Blessed Virgin Mary appointed for Lent, very quietly, we joined in. The other guests turned to look at us—but we were quiet

enough so that we got no look from the monks. All of us were a part of the group of students who sang compline at Nashotah.

My other great memory from the trip was experiencing Matins—which provided for Thomas Cranmer the shape for our Prayer Book service of Morning Prayer. It's 4:00 AM. The chapel is dark. The emergency lights are on. I think two candles were lit. I also recall experiencing the meaning in the Christian West of the first words of the day, "Lord, open our lips," and the response, "And our mouth shall proclaim your praise."

The service lasted less than an hour. We were back at 6:00 AM for the office of lauds. One was on one's own for breakfast. The short office of terce was celebrated with Mass at 8:15 AM. Then we could talk. The bread recipe we used for communion bread before COVID-19 is the recipe from Saint Gregory's.

When we closed our doors to the public on Sunday, March 15, we knew we had to make some alterations in our schedule. We decided to keep the daily Eucharist and daily Evening Prayer in the Lady Chapel. The friars already were praying their

Franciscan office of Morning Prayer. So, we decided that we priests should pray it privately.

Thomas Cranmer and Martin Luther are both credited with having the insight that the monastic office could become a vehicle for daily prayer for everyone.<sup>1</sup> So, among the Articles of Religion of the Church of England were these words, “It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have public Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments, in a tongue not understood of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most important, it became “the vehicle for the recovery of the Holy Scriptures by all the people of God.”<sup>3</sup>

I began praying the Daily Office in the winter of 1980 when the bishop of Chicago accepted me as a postulant for Holy Orders. My rector decided to keep track of my progress with the Daily Office during my monthly confession. My first visit to Nashotah House was also in Lent. I arrived on a Thursday in time for Evensong. I felt at home from that night. I wanted to be shaped by the Prayer Book community of prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 872.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

And I've been blessed by being called to work in congregations where the church's regular daily services matter.

For the record, to help keep me on the track to pray Morning Prayer by myself every day, I've been reading the daily "chapter" of the Rule of St. Benedict. I use a small booklet that I used in seminary and in my first parish job, where we staff priests were discouraged from attending Daily Morning and Evening Prayer unless we were assigned to lead it—I'm not making that up. Since then, I've only served in congregations where the congregation was glad that their clergy pray the Daily Office in the church with the congregation.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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