

*This explanation of Regula, the foundation and framework of Benedictine and thus Anglican spirituality, was written by St Paul's seminarian Matthew C. Dallman. He received a M.A. in Liturgy from Chicago's Catholic Theological Union last year and this year will receive a M.T.S. in Anglican Studies from Nashotah House, the Episcopal seminary near Delafield, Wisconsin.*

## What does *Regula* mean?

In a most useful definition, the 1979 Book of Common Prayer defines *prayer* as “responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words” (p. 856). That definition in fact clarifies a great deal. First and foremost, it reminds us that *God acts first*. Despite our inclination to think otherwise, we ourselves do not initiate. Rather we respond: God’s actions—His presence, His grace—always comes before. He always *invites* our prayer.

I do not think I am the only person who, when hearing that definition, asks, “Is that how my prayer works?” The answer would have to be, yes: it does mean my prayer, your prayer, and any person’s prayer. But it also means “our” prayer, and in fact it means that before it means mine or yours.

So, then, how do “we” pray? In other words, how is it that we as a whole—whether all Catholic Christians or, by analogy, us at Saint Paul’s, Riverside—respond to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words? Indeed, the answer may not be self-evident, or seem particularly worth consideration. Thinking of particular people in our parish, we even might be tempted to conclude, “well, ‘we’ do not pray in *any* particular way!” List out how we all pray as individuals, according to our gifts and personalities; and then there is your answer to how “we” pray—a piety list.

There is truth in that. Yet to just end there would not account for important aspects of our relationship with God, which is prayer in its broadest sense of the term.

To wit, consider three aspects of our experience as the People of God:

1. “We” leads directly to “corporate.” So the first and perhaps most obvious dimension of our corporate prayer—how “we” pray—is that we attend Mass. The Mass, the summit of which is the holy Eucharist, is the primary gathering of parish members ranging from the most committed to the occasional visitor. We are gathered by the Holy Spirit around the Altar, and then we are invited to come still closer to receive, if prepared, the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood—Jesus Himself, the full and definitive revelation of the Father. “Do this in remembrance [that is, for the *anamnesis*, the ‘making actually present again’] of me” (Lk 22:19). And then in the Dismissal, we are sent “in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.” Mass is both summit and source, because of Jesus incarnate.

2. “Loving and serving,” seen again as an aspect of prayer or total relationship with God, points toward how we try to recognize Christ in other people, and in creatures and creation generally, with or without words. We do this, to be sure, quite imperfectly; we often forget that creatures, all of them both great and small, find their true fulfillment in Christ. We forget all is made, and all is kept, and all is loved, by God. Clearly, the Calvinistic culture in which we live *wants* us to forget. Nonetheless we Catholic folk try as best we can to live a life consonant with Scripture, not contrary to core doctrines of the Church, open to God’s grace both grand and mundane; and we know (or have been taught) that meditating with the Bible can help here, along of course with formation. Despite the immense variety from one person’s life to the next, all of this the Church broadly calls “Devotion.” And Who beckons our Devotion but the Holy Spirit, “whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). Devotion is prayer guided by the Holy Spirit, immanent and intimate with us, personally.

3. Our Lord Jesus Christ, for all His inexhaustible abundance, in fact taught us one prayer directly: the Our Father (Mt 6:9-13 and Lk 11:2-4). Both words “Our” and “Father” are crucial. First, “Our”—is there a more corporate prayer than this one, one that more unifies Christians everywhere in the threefold Church, including the Angels? And, “Father”—through Christ’s words, and hence through Him, we somehow, despite our frailty, can praise the

Creator of you and me, all creatures and the universe itself. In teaching the Our Father—these words in this order—Jesus initiated the tradition of corporate, set-prayer that the Book of Common Prayer came to call “the Daily Office” or the “the Divine Office.” Through dozens of traditions in the Universal Church over nearly 20 centuries, the Divine Office varies. Anglicans, within a predominantly Benedictine spirituality, developed a particular contribution that has endured for almost 500 years. But no matter the tradition or form of the Office, the underlying pattern shaped by the Our Father prayer always holds: the threefold—Militant, Expectant, Triumphant—Church, incorporated into and as Christ’s Body, giving pure praise to the Father. The Office is praise to God transcendent beyond time and space.

So we have corporate prayer that emphasizes, by turns, (1) Jesus incarnate, (2) the immanent Holy Spirit, and (3) the Father transcendent. Yet this is *one* prayer life, a *threefold* prayer life. Office-Mass-Devotion, as a threefold whole, responds to, because it is given order by, our triune God. The ordering of our worship to the stupendously rich reality of God: this is precisely what is meant by *Regula*.

As a term itself, *Regula* relates to “pattern” or “framework,” and is often translated as “rule.” Its use in the Church is very Benedictine, of course, but not exclusively. As a concept of prayer, it is derived directly from the Bible. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Sound familiar? All of us embrace *Regula* every Easter Vigil when we renew our Baptismal Covenant (BCP, p. 293):

*Celebrant*      Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread,  
and in the prayers?

*People*          I will, with God’s help.

Respectively, “apostles’ teaching and fellowship” here means Devotion (or “devotional ministry”). “The breaking of bread” is obviously the Mass. “The prayers” is the Daily or Divine Office. What is important to see is that at the most central liturgy of the Church Year, we affirm not merely the importance but the centrality of *Regula* to our corporate prayer life.

*Regula*, then, is no invention of the theologians. It is the basis for mature Christian prayer in community given by Our Lord and Savior and plainly described in the gospels. It is born of His direct teaching of prayer to His disciples, from His feeding people by His presence and word, and His ministry of healing, preaching, serving, listening amid fellowship with the Twelve, the Seventy, and followers of whatever number. Perpetuating the prayer of Jesus, which is precisely what *Regula* enables, is nothing less than the lifeblood of full participation in His redemptive Body, the Church. It is the primary work of the People of God.

In sum, what does *Regula* mean? It means corporate, threefold prayer life given by Christ to live out the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and render it truly existential and experiential. *Regula* is how “we” respond fully to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.

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“Loyalty to the basic threefold Rule—Mass-Office-Devotion—is always the prior ascetical discipline. It is the foundation of all Christian life, the essential work of the Church, the supreme intercession, the power of evangelism. It is of incalculably greater importance than all fasts, mortifications, and works whatsoever; the only function of which is to support it, without it all is a sham. As spiritual guides we must insist upon it; if we are true to the primitive Church, we must insist upon it; if we are true to our medieval heritage, we must insist upon it. If we think of Anglicanism in a narrower sense, let it be remembered that the seventeenth-century battles between Puritan [Calvinist] and Caroline [Catholic] churchmen were fought over the Prayer Book, especially over ‘set prayers’. They were battles for and against Benedictine principles.”

(Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality*, VI.ii)