

Praying the Psalms as They Were Meant to Be Prayed:

A Review of The Brotherhood Prayer Book

By Burnell F. Eckardt Jr.

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If the saints of old had any say in the way we offer our daily personal prayers, that is, if from their heavenly repose they could interject their choice for which kinds of prayers we offer, I dare say they'd probably have us all looking pretty silly just by contrast to what they preferred. Most of us no doubt generally try to be as reverent as we know how, folding our hands and trying to come up with prayerful thoughts. Perhaps we like to think we can be a bit more sophisticated in the framing of our words than we were as children, but then again, what could be more sublime than a child kneeling in faith at his bedside, saying, "Bless Mommy and Daddy, and Grandma and Grandpa" and whoever else comes to mind? Most of us grownups probably end up with something far worse, losing the simplicity of the prayer while retaining the haphazard nature of it. Our incompetence when it comes to the way we pray is likely bred largely in part by our culture's complete ignorance of such matters and in part by the inaccessibility to most of us of those saints and their way of praying.

They generally prayed the Psalter, as St. Jerome's famous description attests: "wherever you turn, the ploughman with the plough-handle in his hand sings the Alleluia, the perspiring reaper relieves himself with a Psalm, and the vineyardist, cutting the vine with a curved knife, sings something from David." Although we'd be content to have our people praying the Catechism, and in particular the Our Father, on the other hand it's especially unfortunate that so many pastors have not learned how to pray the Psalter, for those who do will likely find that the language they use in preaching will soon undergo a marked transformation for the better. Every preacher, from the greatest to the least, has a reservoir filled with the terms and phrases that he knows best. From this reservoir his mind will bring forth the speech he uses, and this, then, is what marks his preaching style. So why not fill that reservoir with the best of words? A regular diet of the terms and phrases of Holy Scripture, and in particular the Psalter, the prayer book imbedded in the Scriptures, will presently begin to affect the way he thinks and speaks, if only in the sense that he will begin to use the same turns of phrase when he speaks and even thinks. The words that proceed from the pastor's mouth certainly ought to be sacred words, as the Third Commandment says (even to pastors: "hold preaching sacred"), and there are unquestionably no more sacred words than Biblical ones.

To any reader who'd truly like to do better, I'm pleased to announce the appearance of The Brotherhood Prayer Book (Grand Rapids: Our Savior Lutheran Church, 2004). This new breviary—that's a prayer book for liturgical daily prayer—is the result of painstaking research by two young men who actually spent their seminary time doing what the rest of the world thinks seminarians are supposed to spend a goodly amount of their time doing: learning how to pray, and praying.

This book is a clear breakthrough, a great gift to the American Church. Until now, those desiring to pray the hours in English would need to make use of the Roman breviary, whose translations of the Vulgate or the Pius XII Psalter we would expect at times to be lacking in, shall we say, evangelical perspective. A notable exception is The Anglican Breviary (Long Island, New York: Frank Gavin Liturgical Foundation, Inc. of Mount Sinai, 1955), a neatly bound and compact prayer book, though it's a bit pricey, usually retailing for over \$60. What it lacks is the musical notation, and what it retains are some of the kinds of prayers with which Lutherans in particular might have a hard time. But The Brotherhood Prayer Book has now provided something the Anglicans did not, and has bound it to the unsurpassed beauty of the King James Psalter, which doubly makes it music to my ears. (Call me idiosyncratic for insisting that the KJV is still the best, but I strongly suspect that when all the new fads—here you may supply the name of your favorite new translation—have made their splash and gone on their way, Old Faithful will still be around.)

Reverend Father Benjamin Mayes spent part of his seminary training in Oberursel, Germany, where he discovered a German breviary published by the Evangelical Lutheran Prayer Brotherhood, a group under the

leadership of Bishop Emeritus Jobst Schöne of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (SELK). When he returned to the U.S. he began to pray this breviary with fellow seminarian Michael Frese, who, as it turned out, had also spent a year at Oberursel. Father Frese (both men were recently ordained into the Lutheran ministry and today are serving Midwestern parishes) determined that this breviary should be made available in English, so that we Americans could benefit from it as the Germans have. The two men set to work, Father Frese tackling the job of translation from the German, and Father Mayes handling the general editing and musical elements of the book.

The book is a bit bulky for a breviary, but you'll certainly feel justified in having spent only \$40 for it every time you pick it up. Its size is due to the fact that this is a complete breviary (often broken into four smaller books), including the entire Psalter broken into manageable Psalms and segments of Psalms, each with a Gregorian Psalm tone matched to it for chanting.

For my part I only wish this book had been written sixteen years ago, when I first undertook to learn the Psalter, for then I would have known the traditional Psalm tones to match; now it seems I'll have to go back and relearn (oh, well, I do have the rest of my life to work at it).

It does take a bit of time learning how to do this, not least because the music is provided with authentic Gregorian musical staff and notation. But a tutorial chapter provides the needed training. It is a bit complicated to follow, but then so is anything truly worth learning. Languages are not learned overnight, nor is the musical language of the Psalter. Anyone who'd like to learn and use that language, that sung language, will do well to buy this book.

And the saints would doubtless agree, since they actually did pray this way. The Psalter has for millennia been the prayer book of the faithful, and the faithful who prayed it generally sang it. But they didn't strum guitars while singing, and they didn't make up catchy folk tunes to inadequate paraphrases, as too many Christian "boomers" tends to do. (How I wish they'd grow up; they're really getting too old for those outdated "contemporary" styles, and their children know it). The faithful prayed the Psalter, and when they did, they sounded pretty much exactly the way you'll sound if you can learn to use this breviary.

To be sure, no one says we must do everything just like the saints of old did. But why shouldn't they get at least a vote? OK, so their world-view was hampered by the lack of the Copernican revolution, or the Enlightenment, or the great LCMS Ablaze! initiative, but many of them have a feather in their caps that few of us would sport: they actually suffered for their faith, and gladly. They put their lives on the line, and they did so, incidentally, so that we could be beneficiaries of the faith they handed down.

Only somehow in all the upheaval of centuries of confusion, their music was relegated to the back room, where, if Steven Spielberg is right, the Ark of the Covenant is also stored. Well, our guys, to their credit, have found it (the music, that is, not the Ark), dusted it off, and brought it forth for our use.