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Praying on the Run

The Rev. Robert Warren Cromey

Worship and prayer have influenced my life from the very beginning. My father was a priest in the slums of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1930s as my brother and I were growing up. He and my mother read us Bible stories, said grace at dinner, and we went to Sunday School and church on Sundays. During my teen and college years I went to church regularly. I even went to church where I worked in the summers of 1951 and 1952 as waterfront director of Camp DeWolfe on Long Island, New York. Prayer life there consisted of Eucharist, Morning and Evening Prayer. I was moved and impressed by these Daily Office services.

At The General Theological Seminary, students and faculty participated in the same pattern of Morning Prayer, Eucharist, and Evensong during the school term. The warmth of the sonorous men's voices struck deeply into my consciousness. The expectation was that we would continue the practice of Daily Offices and Bible readings as a private form of devotion for the rest of our lives. Although I liked the communal practice of the Daily Offices in seminary, I noticed — for the first but definitely not the last time — that doing them (or any other spiritual discipline) in private didn't come easily to me.

In my first job as curate at Christ Church, Bronxville, New York, we had a daily Eucharist, and I took my turn among three priests as celebrant. We also took turns leading Evening Prayer. Again I tried meditating but always found it interrupted by parish calls about new babies or deaths or illnesses.

When I became rector of the Church of the Holy Nativity in the Bronx, New York, I was the lone cleric and therefore very busy. I chatted with a friend about my lack of discipline with private devotions: "I can't do the Daily Office; I have so much stuff on my mind that needs doing with the church and the family." He suggested I do the busy stuff first and do the offices later. I found that did not work well for me. So I read the Bible as sermon prep and said my prayers "on the run" except for grace at dinner and prayers with the children.

When I moved to San Francisco to work for the Diocese of California, I bought an office book with the Psalms, lessons, collects, and offices all in one place. I worked at praying that way, but found I got bored quickly and instead went on about the many tasks I so enjoyed doing.

When I became vicar of St. Aidan's, San Francisco, I tried an intercession notebook. I listed the names of my family and those parishioners and friends who especially needed prayers.

I enjoyed that for a while and then my interest waned. I became rector of Trinity Church, San Francisco. I tried to start fresh with the Daily Offices and intercessory prayer list.

In 1983, AIDS struck San Francisco and other major cities around the country. At least twice a week, young men between 25 and 35 came to my office and told me they were dying. Would I pray for them? Assure them they were not going to hell? Would we do their funeral at the church? We often prayed together. I visited many men in the hospital and did the laying on of hands and recited healing prayer. Often I read the Office for the Dying. The request and need for prayer screamed at all of us involved in ministering to the dying. We prayed at funerals for 75 men over a seven-year period. As my organist-secretary said, "Robert, we have become all too good at doing funerals." During this period I prayed almost constantly but always "on the run" at bedsides or in services. But when it came time to meditate or do the Daily Offices on my own, I still couldn't get the hang of it.

In the late 1980s, many students from Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, applied for fieldwork assignments with me at Trinity. They all talked about spiritual life, meditation, and becoming spiritual directors. Here was a whole new development in prayer that I knew little about. But I still couldn't meditate. I gave my Daily Office books to one of my students. She was delighted to have them.

One day I talked with a Franciscan priest-brother about my prayer life and vague feelings of guilt that I was not doing the traditional thing of meditation and the Daily Offices. He smiled and said, "Robert, pray the way you can, not the way you can't." We had a discussion about what different personalities we all have been given. Not everyone can follow the same discipline. He reminded me that to work is to pray. I had my work as a rector, and I did it as best I could.

Now that I am retired, I pray for my wife, daughters, grandchildren, our parish, the bishop, the poor, the sick, and the hungry. I pray thanksgivings "on the run" when I walk, swim, prepare meals, and shop. I like Anne Lamott's line about prayer: "Help. Help. Help. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." When I remember, I pray when I put in my eye drops, take my naps, and prepare for sleep at night. That is really enough for me.



The Rev. Robert Warren Cromeey graduated from The General Theological Seminary in New York in 1956. After serving parishes in New York, he moved to San Francisco and has lived there since 1962. He was Director of Urban Work for the diocese and was vicar of St. Aidan's, San Francisco. He obtained a license from the state of California and had a private practice as Marriage and Family Therapist for eleven years. He served Trinity, San Francisco, from 1982 until 2002, when he retired. He is married and has three daughters and six grandchildren.

Write to him at: twocromeys@earthlink.net.