Prayer: Personal, Intimate and Imaginative

When my mother died, in 1978, I looked at her much thumbed, fairly traditional, devotional book of prayers. Many of the prayers in that book were much too sentimental for my taste. But I noted that the most smudged and used page in the booklet contained the following powerful prayer by Mother Janet Stuart RSCJ. I first learned of that prayer in my mother’s devotional book. I have kept it by me now for many years. Stuart’s prayer reads: “Keep us, O God, from all pettiness. Let us be large in thought, in word, in deed. Let us be done with fault-finding and leave off all self-seeking. May we put away all pretense and meet each other face-to-face, without self-pity and without prejudice. May we never be hasty in judgment, always generous. Let us take time for all things, and make us grow calm, serene and gentle. Teach us to put into action our better impulses, to be straight-forward and unafraid. Grant that we may realize that it is the little things of life that create differences, that in the big things of life we are one. And, Lord God, let us not forget to be kind”. Clearly, that formulaic devotional booklet my mother used allowed for, even invited, a prayer which was personal, intimate and imaginative.
I was reminded of how individuals (who are, often, just as reluctant to talk about something as personal as prayer as they are to converse on that other intimate subject, sex!) can personalize even more traditional prayers of the church, as I read a wonderful book, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers, 1240-1570* by Eamon Duffy (Yale University Press, 2006). Duffy is a very distinguished Catholic historian of Christianity at Cambridge University in England. He has also written a now classic study of popular piety on the eve of the English Reformation, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England* (2nd edition, Yale University Press, 2005). In that earlier book, Duffy drastically overturned a received, if mistaken, opinion among many historians that religion in England, on the eve of the Reformation, was moribund. Instead, as he shows, it was a vital cultural resource.

In a sense, in *Marking the Hours*, Duffy does to *The Book of Hours* what I did to my mother’s prayer book. He looks at multiple copies of it to find out how lay Catholics took a traditional prayer of the church and made it personal, intimate and imaginative. Most of us know *The Book of Hours* as an object of art—illuminated manuscripts we have seen at the Morgan Library in New York or the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Indeed, most studies of *The Book of Hours* have focused on it more as an object of art than as a prayer book which was assiduously used by devout lay Christians. Duffy comments on the surprise of curators when he asked for facsimiles of pages from a *Book of Hours* which were scribbled over or contained written personal petitionary prayers. The curators assumed he mistook the pages he was looking for. But, as his book title suggests, Duffy was mainly interested in the markings that the devout added to their *Book of Hours*. 
The Book of Hours came into use from the early fourteenth through the mid-sixteenth centuries. The earliest Books of Hours were rather expensive and used mainly by aristocrats and the wealthy. These finely illustrated and, frequently, gilt-bound, luxury items were often given as a wedding present or bequeathed within families. Later, cheaper copies came on the market. We know of a court case in 1500 in England where a pauper was accused of theft of a Book of Hours which belonged to a maidservant. Still later, with the invention of printing, The Book of Hours became even more widespread.

The Book of Hours was modeled on the priest’s breviary. Yet it wove together a more simplified version. Typically, it contained the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Seven Penitential Psalms, The Office of the Dead, excerpts from the four gospels and sundry other prayers. Most Books of Hours contained blank spaces and the devout, often, wrote in them personal prayers. Famously, Saint Thomas More composed in his Book of Hours his well-known prayer, as he faced execution: “Give me the grace, good Lord, to set the world at nought”.

Whereas the monks prayed their breviaries, in common, at the choir stall, lay people, generally, prayed The Book of Hours in their private chambers. Some have even suggested that such private prayer set the use of The Book of Hours off from the liturgical prayer of the wider church and paved the way for the more individualistic devotion typical of the Reformation. Yet we should not make too much of this. The church assiduously promoted private devotional prayer among the laity from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 onwards. Moreover, as a famous Hans Hoblein etching of the More family shows, families often prayed the hours together.
The lay devotional revolution of the late middle ages (spearheaded by the writings of Saint Bernard, the work of the friars and the movement known as the Devotio Moderna, mainly supported by the Brothers of the Common Life) often emphasized a point made by Saint Bernard: use a text from the liturgical feast for your prayers in private. Clearly, deeply personal, intimate prayer to our Lord and a close connection with the collective prayer of the church need never be in competition. In point of fact, the Catholic church, in fostering fervently this medieval devotional revolution, strongly urged among the laity personal and intimate prayer to God and Christ.

Nor should we forget that the famous illuminations of The Book of Hours gave to the one praying imaginative helps from the life of Christ and Mary. Ludolph of Saxony whose Life of Christ played such a key role in the conversion of Saint Ignatius, after Loyola shattered his leg at the Battle of Pamplona, proposed another key to private prayer: imagine yourself, Ludolph urged, as part of the scene in the gospel. Ignatius Loyola, famously, took this advise to heart and made it a key foundation of his own method of private prayer in The Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius insisted that we try to imagine ourselves as an integral part of the gospel scene, taking now the part of one of the principals in the scene, now that of another. Clearly, the illuminations helped the pray-er enter that imaginative world. Indeed, since Ludolph’s Life of Christ was, itself, illuminated, one can imagine that Ignatius, himself, used those illuminations to enter the gospel scenes.

My own personal modern-day borrowing of this technique from The Book of Hours is to ‘google’ a request to see famous paintings from a gospel scene. With the help of the painting, often, I can, then, do that imaginative entrance into the world of the
gospels to make it personal. As to intimacy, one typical lovely prayer from English versions of *The Book of Hours, O Bone Jesu*, can help us see an invitation to sweet intimacy: “O good Jesu, o sweet Jesu, son of the Virgin Mary, full of mercy and truth. A sweet Jesu, have mercy upon me, according to thy great mercy. O benign Jesu, I beseech thee by thy most precious blood, which for us sinners thou didst deign to pour out upon the altar of the cross, to cast from thee all mine iniquities. Do not despise me, who humbly petition thee”.

The church continues to invite all Christians to private, personal and imaginative daily prayer. The form may differ from those ancient *Book of Hours* but the general format remains similar—move from any formulaic prayer to personal petition; move toward a closer intimacy with Christ and God; use ways (such as ‘google’ images of famous paintings of the gospel) to help you imagine the scene, as a way of bringing it into your own daily world and your own daily world to the gospel.