

A Reflection on the Arrangement for Communal Daily Prayer in the Benedictine Tradition and according to the Work of Said Nursi

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i. Introduction

The aim of this reflection is to compare and contrast the spirituality of the common prayer of Christian and Muslim, specifically as interpreted, first from the Rule of Benedict and later commentators on the Rule and, secondly, as interpreted by Said Nursi. The aim is to show how the daily cycle of prayer in Benedictine monastic life echoes that of Said Nursi's interpretation of the daily cycle of prayer as presented in the Holy Qur'an.

Clearly they are different as their respective Inspired Scriptures are different but there are similarities. This opens up a particular avenue for dialogue relating to the sanctification of the day through regular moments of formal prayer.

It might seem odd to many followers of the Benedictine Rule (written by Benedict of Nursia for his community on Monte Cassino, Italy, in 500ce) that their daily framework of prayer should be mirrored in Islam. A commentary by Said Nursi, dubbed by one commentator the St

Benedict of Islam,¹¹ offers the challenge for this reflection.

The original framework of Benedictine prayer was based on ‘remembering’ sacred texts and through in that silence the story of God’s infinite Love for every human being becomes ever more clearly expressed. It is, after all, forgiveness, mercy and compassion to which believers, Christian and Muslim are so deeply attracted. So this dialogue of spirituality centred on our similar traditions of formal prayer at prescribed points during the day, provides an shared insight which allows each to honour the divine command articulate for Christians by St Paul’s phrase ‘pray always’ and the Holy Qur’an’s words ‘always be mindful of God’. Together these form the foundation for the journey to the mystical Oneness in the God Who is Love is tracked by Christian and Muslims called to that ‘union’ in language which echoes one with the other.

Both Benedict and the Prophet lived in pre-literary times, both depended on an oral tradition, and both used the memory as the means by which vocal prayer grows ever deeper through constant repetition, enabling each to penetrate the divine mystery of the God Who Loves Without Limit, Whose Eye Never Blinks.

Said Nursi writes “Each prayer time is the opening of a significant turning point, a mirror to the Divine disposal of power as well as the universal Divine bounties therein”,¹² which compares well with the Rule of Benedict, “God is present everywhere – present to the good and to the evil as well, so that nothing anyone does escapes his notice; that is the

¹¹ Ian S Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a Model of Interfaith Dialogue*, Farnham UK, 2009, 22.

¹² Bedi’uzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words, The Risale-I Nur Collection*. New Jersey, The Light Inc, 20005, 57.

firm conviction of our faith. Let us be very sure, however, without a moment's doubt that his presence to us is never so strong as while we are celebrating the Word of God in the oratory."¹³ These quotations describe the same experience: moments of formal prayer exist both to ensure God is remembered at moments during the day, but also to strengthen our faith in the presence of God throughout the day. For both, 'forgetfulness' is the state of mind so distracted by 'worldly' affairs that God is denied any role. The aim of this paper is to show how Benedictine and Muslim stand at the same point: facing a God Who Sees, remembering a God Who Reveals and seeking to get ever closer to the God Who Rewards.

a. 'Sanctifying the Day'

The first aim of these formal daily prayers is to sanctify the day. Said Nursi writes, "we are told to pray at those specific times to give more adoration and glory to the All-Powerful One of Majesty and to give more thanks for the bounties accumulated between any two periods".¹⁴ This is echoed by the Catholic Church, in these words, "In praying it [The Liturgy of the Hours] worthily, attentively and with devotion, they must attune their minds to their voices. If the grace of God is not to be fruitless in them, they must wholeheartedly co-operate with it."¹⁵ Said

¹³ Tr Patrick Barry OSB *Saint Benedict's Rule*, York, Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1997, 28, Chapter 19.

¹⁴ Bedi'üzzam Said Nursi, *Belief and Worship*, (from the Risale-i Nur Collection, Humanity's Encounter with the Divine Series), New Jersey, The Light Inc. 2006(2002),65.

¹⁵ General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours, para 19, in *The Divine Office Volume 1*, London, Collins 1991(1974), xxxi para 19.

Nursi concludes, “that the heart of prayer consists of glorification, exaltation, praise and thanksgiving. Thus, these three phases are present in all words and actions of those who pray”.¹⁶

These formal prayers show that a primary aim is to encourage people to recognise the presence of God in their lives and to seek the healing that alone comes as grace from God. In this way the Muslim enacts a fundamental duty to God. “Holiness requires us to see our defects and seek His pardon”.¹⁷ The Rule of Benedict expresses it differently: “the celebration of Lauds and Vespers should never be concluded without the recitation by the superior of the whole of the Lord’s prayer so that all may hear and attend to it. This is because of the harm that is often done in a community by the thorns of conflict which can arise. Bound by the very words of that prayer, ‘forgive us as we also forgive’ they will be cleansed from the stain of such evil”¹⁸ Cyprian Smith affirms that regular prayer helps Christians to remember God, highlighting the central role played by that relationship. He continues, “a great many, perhaps all, of our spiritual problems are due to our innate tendency to forget God, to simply allow him to be crowded out of our lives.”¹⁹ The solution is to have regular reminders.

Patrick Barry’s translation of the Rule, states, “We really must be quite clear that our prayer will be heard, not because of the eloquence and length of all we have to say, but because of the heartfelt repentance and openness of our hearts to the Lord whom we approach”,²⁰ echoed by

¹⁶ Belief and Worship, 66

¹⁷ Belief and Worship, 66.

¹⁸ Tr Patrick Barry, *Rule of Benedict*, ch 13.

¹⁹ The Path of Life, 124.

²⁰ Tr Patrick Barry, *Saint Benedict’s Rule*, 29, ch 20.

Said Nursi's comment, "prayer times remind us of the Divine Power's miracles and the Divine Mercy's gifts regardless of time or place".²¹

But many believers live in dire poverty, material and/or spiritual, which makes daily prayer particularly difficult, but Nursi continues, "our mentality and sense inspire us towards glorious objective and eternal gains but we are unable, impatient, powerless, and have only a short lifetime".²² Accepting one's situation in faith and prayer is one way of finding peace, assured by the promises God gives to the powerless and exploited.

One commentator on the Rule of Saint Benedict writes, "Prayer is never taken out of the natural flow of life itself. It is firmly inserted within the rhythm of the changing seasons, of winter and summer, of day and night and not least the rhythm of my own body. In a world in which the techniques of prayer are widely discussed and so many varying techniques seem to be offered, it is rather startling to have the subjects of sleep, digestion, and making time to go to the lavatory introduced into this short chapter".²³ But Nursi reminds us, "We are God's servants. Aware of our defects, weakness and poverty in the Divine presence, we prostrate in love and awe before His Lordship's perfection, His Divine Might on which every creature relies and His Divine Compassion realizing our weakness and the helplessness of all creatures, we proclaim: 'God is the Greatest'".²⁴

²¹ Belief and Worship, 69.

²² Belief and Worship, 70.

²³ Ed Scott Rains, *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*. CD-ROM quoting Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Commenting particularly on Chs 8, 10 and 22.

²⁴ *The Words*, *The Ninth Word*, 58.

As an obligatory reminder to faithful Muslims not to forget God, all are encouraged to observe each time of prayer throughout the day and night. Nursi writes “we are created weak, yet everything involves, affects and saddens us. We have no power, yet are afflicted by calamities and enemies. We are extremely poor, yet have many needs. We are indolent and incapable, yet the burden of life is very heavy. Being human, we are connected with the rest of the world, yet what we love and are familiar with disappears, and the resulting grief causes us pain. Our mentality and sense inspire us towards glorious objective and eternal gains but we are unable, impatient, powerless, and have only a short lifetime”.²⁵

Jesus advised his followers to pray always, which led the earliest monks, hermits, to exercise the habit of continuous prayer. This was both a skill and an act of determined commitment. Marcel Driot²⁶ quotes St Basil, “While our hands are at work we can praise God with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, either on our lips, when that is possible and edifying, or at least in our hearts... Prayer was not ‘programmed’. God is everywhere, so must prayer be. God is always there, so with prayer. There were ‘intense moments’ of prayer, the liturgical offices, for instance, but they were like the arches of a bridge: they sustained a continuous prayer”.²⁷

Said Nursi develops the same theme, “bowing humbly, we are to seek refuge in Him and place our trust in Him. His Compassion’s boundless

²⁵ Belief and Worship, 70.+

²⁶ Marcel Driot, *Fathers of the Desert, Life and Spirituality*, Slough UK, St Paul Publications 1992.

²⁷ Fathers of the Desert, p.64.

treasury demands that we declare our need and those of all creatures by praying and asking for His help”.²⁸

We affirm that both Benedictine and Muslim see prayer as essential to daily living just like food and air; no life without them. It is precisely the continual habit of remembering God which builds a faith so strong that it is simply not possible to ‘forget’ God; every distraction is immediately challenged by the repeated Word of God. In this way Muslims and Benedictines find themselves closely allied, even to the extent that they could almost hear the ‘other’ in their own prayer. Both see prayer as an essential support in times of pain, loneliness, and helplessness, feelings that afflict members of a community at any time.

For this reason both Benedictines and Muslims divide the day and night into moments for intense prayer, moments which bring back those who have strayed through distraction, and remind all of the need to bring their hearts and minds to these ‘intense’ moments of prayer.

b. The Muslim Prayer at Sunrise and the Benedictine Prayer of Lauds

Both agree the moment when the sky lights or the sun rises is a moment of prayer. But the different interpretations can be seen as each enriching the other.

For Nursi, the Muslim prayer at sunrise may be “likened to spring’s birth, the moment when sperm takes refuge in the protective womb, or to the first of the six consecutive days during which Earth and the sky

²⁸ *The Words*, The Ninth Word, 58.

were created”.²⁹ This insight encourages all open their hearts to the Lord in petition, for “we must present a petition before the day’s activities begin. Through prayer and supplication, we must beseech the Court of an All-Powerful One of Majesty, an All-Compassionate One of Grace for success and help. Such support is necessary to bear and endure the troubles and burdens waiting for us.”³⁰ Each dawn encourages believers to be aware of the first gift: to be alive, inspiring a prayer of thanksgiving for this renewal of life.

For Benedictines the prayer at daybreak, Lauds, “is designed to sanctify the morning, as is clear from many of its parts. Saint Basil the Great excellently described its character...[it] consecrates to the first movements of our minds and hearts; no other care should engage us before we have been moved with the thought of God, as it is written ‘I thought of God and sighed’ (Ps 76:4), nor should the body undertake any work before we have done what is said, “I say this prayer to you, Lord, for at daybreak you listen for my voice; and at dawn I hold myself in readiness for you, I watch for you’.”³¹ (Ps 5:4-5) Cyprian adds “we should pray in the morning to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord with prayer”.³² One comment to enhance the importance of this hour, “It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to dawn. It is

²⁹ Bediüzzam Said Nursi, *The Words*, New Jersey, Light, 2005, 58, The Ninth Word.

³⁰ *The Words*, The Ninth Word p61.

³¹ Vatican, Apostolic Constitution promulgating the Divine Office, Vatican City, 1971, printed in *The Divine Office*, Vol 1, London, Collins, 1974 page xl, para 38, quoting Basil the Great, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, resp 37,3; PG 31, 1014..

³² Vatican, Apostolic Constitution promulgating the Divine Office, Vatican City, 1971, printed in *The Divine Office*, Vol 1, London, Collins, 1974 page xl, para 38, quoting Cyprian, *De oratione dominica*, 55, PL 5:561..

necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of Day, in blank silence when the sun appears. In this completely neutral instant I receive from the eastern woods, the tall oaks, the one word 'Day' which is never the same. It is never spoken in any known language..... Lauds is the hour that symbolizes the Easter light of Christ when this spiritual longing reaches its fulfillment. This first prayers start with 'Lord, open my lips' repeated three times, thus proclaiming that "this is the work of God, that prayer is God at work in our mouth, our heart, our life. I pray not only because I am seeking God, but because God is also seeking me, [as the words of this psalm indicate] 'I lie down to rest and I sleep, I wake for the Lord upholds me."³³

There is difference and similarity here: Nursi welcoming the renewal of life with the coming of light and warmth, the environment for growth, a new day, a new opportunity to praise the Creator God, and a new chance to see that Creating God alive in the hearts and minds of believers.. The Christian emphasizes the longer term future; focused less on Creation and more on the Re-Creation or Resurrection, whose coming is at a time known only to God. The Christian during this prayer is reminded to focus on a future which gives added meaning to daily life.

Taken together they provide a balance: renewing faith already lived within the divine creation and at the same time looking forward to a promised future, eagerly awaited as renewal of life.

c. Prayers in the Middle of the Day: Benedictine and Muslim.

³³ Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1998, in Scott Rains: *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*, CD-ROM.

Two models are offered. Muslims pray twice: at Midday and at the conclusion of the work, while Benedictines pray three times, mid-morning, Midday, and mid-afternoon.

Nursi likens this prayer in the middle of the day “to the completion of adolescence, the middle of summer, or the period of humanity’s creation in the world’s lifetime. It points to God’s compassionate manifestations and abundant blessings in those events and time”.³⁴

He goes on to suggest that this ‘*zubr*’ prayer is essential as a reminder that all work is done with God and for God; “the spirit needs a pause from the heedlessness and insensibility caused by hard work and Divine bounties are fully manifest. Praying at this time is good, necessary, agreeable and proper. ... We stand humbly in the presence of the Real Bestower of blessings, express gratitude and pray for His help. We bow to demonstrate helplessness before His Glory and Might and prostrate to proclaim our wonder, love and humility before His everlasting perfection and matchless Grace.”³⁵

For Benedictines the ‘Little Hours’, known individually as, ‘Terce’, ‘Sext’ and ‘None’, are celebrated at the third,(0900), sixth, (1200), and ninth (1500) hours respectively, reminding Christians that “from the earliest times, Christian in their private devotions have, even in the midst of their work, dedicated various moments to prayer through the course of the day”.³⁶ Later these chosen moments acted as a reminder of three

³⁴ The Words, the Ninth Word, 58-59.

³⁵ The Words p.60.

³⁶ Vatican, Apostolic Constitution promulgating the Divine Office, Vatican City, 1971, printed in The Divine Office, Vol 1, London, Collins, 1974, p xlvii, No 74.

moments of Jesus' passion, condemnation to death, nailing to the cross, and the moment of his death.

For Nursi the times for 'asr' [afternoon] prayer resembles autumn, old age, and the time of the Last Prophet (the Era of Happiness). It calls to mind the Divine acts and the All-Compassionate's favour in them".³⁷ Nursi continues: it "resembles and recalls the sad season of autumn, the mournful state of old age, and the distressing period at the end of time. The day's tasks are brought toward completion and the Divine bounties received that day (e.g. health, safety and good service in His way) have accumulated to form a great total. It is also time when the sun fades away, proving that everything is impermanent. We, who long for eternity, are created for it and show reverence for favours received, also are saddened by separations. So we stand up, perform *wudu'* (ablution) and pray".³⁸ This prayer he describes as "an exalted duty, an appropriate service, a reasonable way of paying a debt of gratitude and an agreeable pleasure. We acquire peace of mind and find true consolation and ease of spirit by supplicating at the Eternal Court of the Everlasting, the Eternally Self-Subsistent One and seeking refuge in His infinite Mercy, offering thanks and praise for His endless bounties",³⁹

The Rule of Benedict provides a more practical view: "those whose work takes them some distance from the monastery so that they cannot manage to get to the oratory at the right times for prayer must kneel with profound reverence for the Lord and perform the work of God at their place of work".⁴⁰ At such moments the Benedictine reflects as Esther de

³⁷ The Words, 58-59.

³⁸ The Words, 60.

³⁹ The Words, 60.

⁴⁰ Rule of Benedict, Tr Patrick Barry, ch 50.

Waal expresses it: “The psalter was regarded as a prophetic book (which explains why Benedict, when quoting from the psalms, will often say ‘the Prophet says’) and was read through from beginning to end. There were various ways in which the psalms might be said in choir, but then, as the monks knew them by heart, they would also rise naturally from their lips while they were at work so that ‘pray always’, which is the essence of monastic prayer, was a reality. As Henri Nouwen became more at home with the life of the abbey of the Genesee he grew to love the psalms, and he found that they began to weave themselves into his life. I like what Nouwen says, for it is something that I too have often felt: ‘How happy are those who no longer need books but carry the psalms in their heart wherever they are and wherever they go. Maybe I should start learning the psalms by heart so that nobody can take them away from me.’ He goes on to say, ‘Many times I have thought: If I am ever sent to prison, if I am ever subjected to hunger, pain, torture, or humiliation, I hope and pray that they let me keep the psalms. The psalms will keep my spirit alive....’⁴¹ a reminder that the Word of God is best ‘digested’ when known by heart, engraved in the memory, a resource available at all times.

These prayers during the day show significant difference. For the Christian there is almost military precision in choosing three hours at precisely 9.00am, 12.00 Midday and 3.00pm, which apart from breaking up the working day into three equal sections, calls to mind the saving death of Jesus, while at the same time safeguarding the memory of God. The Muslim focus on the ‘mature’ years of human life, offer a link to the process of growing old and dying, with all its particular difficulties and

⁴¹ Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1998, in Scott Rains: *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*, CD-ROM.

challenges, retirement, illness, pain, incapacity, and death of friends and loved ones. These thoughts give focus and allow the lonely and aged to be aware of the prayerful support of others at this time.

d. Muslim Prayer in the evening and Benedictine Vespers.

Nursi writes “The time for *maghib* (sunset) remind us of many creatures’ decline at the end of autumn and also of our own death. It thus forewarns us of the world’s destruction at the Resurrection’s beginning, teaches us how to understand the manifestation of God’s Majesty, and wakes us from a deep sleep of neglect”⁴² Here repetition enables this moment to challenge and reassure. The security that light brings has enabled life to flourish: darkness recalls death, the moment of judgment and change for both Christian or Muslim. Hope takes on a new form, trust in God’s gift of resurrection. By contrast, the natural world works in cycles which repeat enabling the winter of death to be succeeded by the spring of life. Nursi proposes that evening prayer “reminds us of winter’s beginning, the sad farewells of summer and autumn creatures, and our sorrowful separation from loved ones through death. The sun’s lamp is extinguished, and Earth’s inhabitants will emigrate to the other world following this one’s destruction. It is also a severe warning for those who adore transient, ephemeral beloveds, each of whom will die.” This proposes a moment of reflection, confessing the ‘ephemerals’ and encouraging the desire for what Nursi calls the ‘Eternal Beauty Who creates and frames everything Who commands huge heavenly bodies.’⁴³ From this perspective we cannot rely on anything created for death and annihilation are inevitable. God alone is the focus, all are aware in faith

⁴² The Words, 59.

⁴³ The Words, 60-61.

of “His faultless perfection, matchless Beauty and Grace, and infinite Mercy.”⁴⁴ Evening prayer represents, “an agreeable duty, a valuable and pleasurable service, a fine and beautiful worship, a serious matter, a significant conversation with the Creator and source of permanent happiness in this transient guest-house.”⁴⁵

Benedictine Vespers or evening prayer is celebrated as the sun sets and dusk gives way to darkness. It is the moment to give thanks for the gifts of the day and recall the redemption achieved by Jesus, through which all offer their lives to God, praying “let my prayer be counted as incense before you and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice”.⁴⁶ It also recalls both the evening sacrifice of the Old Covenant and the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, which inaugurated the New Covenant. Benedictines pray not only that the sun will rise again but also after death there is a new identity in the Risen Jesus. This is the most popular prayer for the laity, either attending vespers with a local religious community or celebrating it at home. Columba Cary-Elwes comments, just reciting “could be a special experience of sharing in the ‘*Opus Dei*’ (Work of God) of the monks. By joining in the prayer of the monks... they are sharing in the Prayer of the whole Church everywhere, something that has gone on for centuries.”⁴⁷

Another presentation of the priority of these offices is offered by lay Benedictine Oblates based in Santiago Chile, men and women, married and celibate, young and old. Their ‘Little Rule’ states, “the manner of

⁴⁴ The Words, 61.

⁴⁵ The Words, 61.

⁴⁶ Bible Ps 141:2 NRSV

⁴⁷ Columba Cary Elwes, *Work and Prayer, The Rule of St Benedict for Lay People*, Tunbridge Wells, Burns and Oates, 1992, p 75.

celebration should be attentive and dignified and should include in a fitting way those liturgical signs which enable us to enter into the mysteries expressed by the liturgy. Paramount among these signs are these three: the choir, the singing and the observance of the appropriate time for each Hour. The choir is important because it develops the oblates' sense of belonging to the community, making them more conscious of being part of a group with its own distinct character as the People of God and also because Jesus said: 'where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20). Then again, singing is important because it 'accords better with the nature of this prayer. It expresses its solemnity in a fuller way and expresses a deeper union of hearts in performing the praises of God' (The General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours 268). Finally, the appropriate time of day is important because it accords exactly with the actual purpose of this prayer. In praying the Liturgy of the Hours, the oblates should always be concerned to make sure that their minds are in harmony with their voices (Rule of Benedict 19:7) so that the grace of God may not come to nothing in their hearts".⁴⁸ The Benedictine understanding of this evening prayer is less 'colourful' than that of Nursi, but it has spread beyond the walls of the cloister to lay men and women.

In summary, the Nursi interpretation of Muslim prayer at dusk and the Benedictine interpretation of the Church's Vespers/Evening Prayer are similar in their focus on thanksgiving for the gift of the day just ending. 'One' offers this thanks always remembering the divine initiative expressed particularly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the 'Other' reflects on the cyclical way of the Created world, from which the human life breaks out in death, a moment of evaluation and

⁴⁸ The Manquehue Apostolic Movement, *The Little Rule for Oblates*, private publication, ch 10 The Liturgy of the Hours. 2004.

judgment, leading, hopefully, to resurrection. In this way each complements the other.

e. Muslim prayer after dark and Benedictine Compline.

The prayer celebrated when day gives way to darkness provides a reminder of death, encouraging all to prepare well for the moment of manifestation before God.

Of this time Nursi writes, “calls to mind the world of darkness, veiling all daytime objects with its black shroud, and winter covering the dead Earth’s surface with its white shroud”.⁴⁹

The darkness of the night proclaims the power of God. Speaking of God’s Lordship as the Changer of Night and Day, Nursi writes “it calls to our mind the Divine activities of the All-Wise One of Perfection as the Subduer of the sun and the moon, observed in His turning the white page of day into the black page of night, and in His changing summer’s beautifully coloured script into winter’s frigid white page. It recalls His acts as the Creator of Life and Death in sending the dead entity’s remaining works to another world. It reminds us of God’s majestic control and graceful manifestations as the Creator of the Heavens and Earth, and that this narrow, mortal and lowly world will be destroyed”.⁵⁰ The drama of this description is a reminder of the power of the Creator and of the promised future.

Benedictine Compline offers a different approach: starting with an act of repentance for sins committed that day, particularly important for those

⁴⁹ The Words, 59.

⁵⁰ The Words 61-62.

living in community. Celebrated before the community go to bed, it takes the form of prayers of thanksgiving for the day completed and for protection during the coming night. Traditionally it is celebrated with the same three psalms every day, ending with a hymn to Mary.⁵¹ Esther de Waal comments, “the three psalms set never changed but are repeated nightly. It was usual simply to say Compline wherever the monks might be gathered together, and since these psalms were known by heart, no light was needed. For all of us too they bring the day to an end on this note of certainty”. We rely on the protecting hand of God during the night hours, just as we do during the day”⁵². She continues by quoting the experience of Henri Nouwen, who, after he had lived for two months with the Trappist monks of Genese wrote in his diary, “I start realizing that the psalms of Compline slowly become flesh in me; they become part of my night and lead me to a peaceful sleep. Trust is written through the evening prayer: He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and abides in the shade of the Almighty says to the Lord: ‘My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!’ Slowly these words enter into the center of my heart. They are more than ideas, images, comparisons: they become a real presence. After a day with much work or with many tensions, you feel that you can let go in safety and realize how good it is to dwell in the shelter of the Most High”.⁵³

⁵¹ Psalms 4, 90 and 133.

⁵² Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1998, in Scott Rains: *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*, CD-ROM.

⁵³ Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1998, in Scott Rains: *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*, CD-ROM.

Both traditions celebrate the same theme with different words. The ultimate aim is the same: for all to hand over their lives to the God Who Created us, the God Who Will Revivify us at a moment the Divine Will has decided.

f. Muslim prayer during the Night and Benedictine Vigils or Matins

Nursi reflects “At nightfall our spirits, which are infinitely helpless and weak, infinitely poor and needy, tossed to and fro by circumstances and whirling onward into a dark and unknown future, perform the *‘isha* prayer. We say, like Abraham: *I love not those that set* (6:76). We seek refuge at the Court of the Ever-Living, the Ever-Worshipped, the Eternal Beloved One. From our transient life in this dark, fleeting world and dark future, we beseech the Enduring, Everlasting One. For a moment of unending conversation, a few seconds of immortal life, we seek the All-Merciful and Compassionate’s favours. We ask for the light of His guidance that will illuminate our world and our future, and bind up the pain from the decline of all creatures and friends.”⁵⁴ This moving account of how dispiriting and disorientating darkness can be, (something less obvious in the world of electricity), illustrates a problem. Later he writes of darkness as being reminiscent of winter, the time when it is cold and plants and animals hibernate, birds fly to warmer climates, human activity is restricted, a time of silence. This “brings to mind the remaining works of the dead being forgotten, and points to this testing arena’s inevitable, complete decline”,⁵⁵ a moment for silent reflection on

⁵⁴ The Words 62.

⁵⁵ The Words, 59.

human vulnerability, while those with independent living are invited to give reverent praise.

This late-night '*tabajjud*' prayer reminds and warns us of how necessary this prayer's light will be in the grave's darkness".⁵⁶ The grave may become an exile in which only faith in resurrection will bring hope, especially when prayer is weak and incomplete. Nursi continues, "We forget the world, which has left us for the night, and pour out our heart's grief at the Court of Mercy. Before death-like sleep comes aft which anything can happen, we perform our 'last' duty of worship. To close our day's activities on a favourable note, we pray and the Eternal Beloved and Worshipped One's presence, rather than the moral ones we loved all day.... Saying God is the Greatest, we bow down and contemplate the Grandeur of the Majestic One, Who orders hidden suns and waking stars, that are like individual soldiers subject to His command just like the plants and animals that have now gone to sleep, and are His lamps and servants in this world".⁵⁷ This creative vision of the importance of prayer during the night is shared by Christians, especially Benedictines.

A long tradition in Christianity gives special emphasis to prayer at night: "The Fathers and spiritual writers have very often exhorted the faithful, especially those who lead a contemplative life to pray at night. By this they seek to encourage them to look forward to the Lord's coming: 'At midnight there was a cry, 'The bridegroom is here! Go out to meet him' (Matthew 25:6). 'So stay awake, because you do not know when the master of the house is coming, evening, midnight, cockcrow, dawn; if he comes unexpectedly, he must not find you asleep' (Mark 13:35-36). It is

⁵⁶ The Words, 59.

⁵⁷ The Words 62.

therefore praiseworthy to retain the nocturnal Office of Readings.”⁵⁸ St Benedict advises “It seems reasonable that during wintertime, that is from the first of November until Easter all should arise at the eighth hour of the night, By that time, having rested until a little after midnight, they may raise with their food well digested. Any time which is left after Vigils should be devoted to study of the psalter.”⁵⁹

For Benedictines, this prayer ‘during the night’, called Vigils, if celebrated before midnight and Matins when celebrated after midnight, is a service of praying psalms and pondering Biblical readings with appropriate commentaries taken from the Fathers of the Church and more modern papal or Church documents. This more meditative liturgy is celebrated more slowly, lasts longer and allows time for silence; on Sundays and feast days it concludes with a prayer of thanksgiving.

A comment of Esther de Waal is relevant to this night office, “the psalms are the songs of a journeying people, and I can identify in them many of my feelings on my own journey to God. They express hope, fear, anger, delight. They are wonderfully honest. Sometimes they seem like incantations lulling me into the certainty of the goodness of God. Sometimes they are battle hymns that will not let me forget the tremendous battle against the forces of evil that surround me. Sometimes God is close, sometimes God is distant. Sometimes they speak of fullness and riches, at other times they come out of poverty and emptiness”.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Vatican, *Apostolic Constitution promulgating the Divine Office*, Vatican City, 1971, printed in *The Divine Office, Vol 1*, London, Collins, 1974, p xlvi-xlvii, No 72.

⁵⁹ Rule of Benedict, Tr Patrick Barry, ch 8

⁶⁰ Esther de Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St Benedict*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press 1998, in Scott Rains: *The Rule of St Benedict Library, Primary and Secondary Sources*, CD-ROM.

It is of some importance that the Muslim and Benedictine traditions of prayer are at one in emphasizing the importance of praying during the night, before dawn. Commitment to this in whatever condition of life, Muslim or Christian, male or female, married or single is a sign of a gift appreciated and a faith willing to be purified by this discipline.

In these moment the prayers of Benedictine and Muslim coincide, focused on the prayer made ever more effective through silence, and directed to the One God Who invites praise and petition, repentance and thanksgiving, a gift surely appreciated by the Divine Recipient.

g. An Overall View

Nursi locates the Muslim cycle of daily prayer within the annual cycle of nature, seasons and the lifespan of plants. By extension he includes the lifespan of animals and humans, from birth to death and extending that of human to the risen life with God. Every human is in some way a 'participant' in this cycle, affirmed by commitment to the daily round of prayer. Significantly he ends with a comment about the beginning: "We start the prayer with *Surat al-Fatiba*, which extols praising the Lord of the worlds, Perfect and Self-Sufficient, Compassionate and All-Generous. We move on to *You alone do We worship (1:5)*. That is, despite our insignificance and being alone, our connection with the Owner of the Day of Judgment, the Eternal Sovereign, causes us to be treated like an indulged guest and important officer. Through *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help (1:5)*, we offer Him he worship of all creatures and seek His assistance for them. Saying *Guide us to the Straight*

Path (1:6), we ask to be guided to eternal happiness and the radiant way”⁶¹.

The Benedictine, echoing the Christian understanding of ‘*Opus Dei*’, ‘Work of God’ recognises that its primary function is to give praise and thanks to God first, for the created world in which human life exists, second for inviting all to sanctify every moment of the day and, third, to remind them, that every moment of each day is lived within the presence and inspired by the guidance of God. In addition, this cycle of prayer has an intercessory function; it is celebrated on behalf of those in greatest need, believer or not, especially those have no one else to pray for them.

Within Benedictine communities Benedict expresses the overriding intention in guiding these communities is “to impose nothing harsh or burdensome. If, however, you find in it anything which seems rather strict, but which is demanded reasonably for the correction of vice or the preservation of love, do not let that frighten you into fleeing from the way of salvation; it is a way which is bound to seem narrow to start with. But, as we progress in this monastic way of life and in faith, our hearts will warm to its vision and with eager love and delight that defies expression we shall go forward on the way of God’s commandments. Then we shall never think of deserting his guidance; we shall persevere in fidelity to his teaching in the monastery until death so that through our patience we may be granted some part in Christ’s own passion and thus in the end receive a share in his kingdom.”⁶²

⁶¹ The Words 62.

⁶² Rule of Benedict, Tr Patrick Barry Prologue, pp4-5.

The approaches to prayer during the day of Benedict and Nursi share a common commitment, to honour God appropriately throughout the day. There is similarity and difference, but the similarity of intention enables the differences to enlarge the position of each, building a stronger understanding of the One God from whom both take inspiration and to Whom both journey to fulfilment, all the time united in the desire to offer praise and worship to the One God out of Whose Love the human world exists.

Through this prayer Benedictine and Muslim recognise the importance of identifying sin, learning to repent and through prayer enjoy the sweet taste of divine forgiveness from the God Who is Merciful and Compassionate.

Each tradition has its own integrity and each approaches God in different ways. But mutual appreciation of one by the other enables each to see in the faith of the 'other' an image of the One God revealed through their own Inspired Scriptures. It is through the regular repetition of these prayers that heart of each opens to an ever clearer understanding of the Revealing God Whose Mercy and Compassion has no boundaries.