

One New Book for the Preacher

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Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1 volume, 590 pages.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is one of the talented authors of this newly published prayer book for “ordinary radicals.” We had coffee together recently to discuss his work and life in the Walltown neighborhood in Durham, N.C., where he resides and leads the Rutba House community and School for Conversion’s work with youngsters there. He shared with me this volume that has been the object of his collaborative labors for the last two years. I was delighted to read it and attend one of his *Common Prayer* release parties. *Common Prayer* offers preachers, teachers, parents, and ordinary Christians living their faith a great resource to deepen their faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ throughout the liturgical year. His expressed hope for this prayer book is to encourage Christians of every sort to rethink and relearn the art of prayer. It also serves as a primer for those unfamiliar with the rich tradition of liturgical prayer and practice in the church catholic.

But what sets this prayer book apart from the many at our disposal? First, it is thoroughly ecumenical. Despite the many divisions within the Christian family, this volume reminds one and all that Jesus’ call for unity is not a by-product or side effect of his mission to save and redeem, but the object and purpose of His being “Apostle” to us. We may not agree on every conceivable religious issue, we may not experience perfect mutual understanding, but what we can do is pray with and for each other so that we participate in “God’s deepest longing for the Church” (p. 9). The authors remind us, “Our prayer lives connect us to the rest of the body of Christ around the world; at any hour of any day, many of the prayers in this book are being prayed in some corner of the earth” (p. 10).

Secondly, this volume highlights a shared faith. If faith is about a relationship with God in Christ mediated by the communion of God’s people we call Church, then we know that faith is dynamic--either growing or dying. This book of prayers offers an opportunity to grow and nourish our relationship with God in Christ in a way that challenges us to live a shared faith on a deeper and more authentic level.

Thirdly, this collection of prayers attests to the truth that the communities to which we belong are decisive in forming our vision, our values, beliefs, and behaviors. I see this resource as a way to support and renew the family at prayer, congregations and parishes at worship and in small faith communities, Bible study groups, mission and service committees, any gathering of two or more believers who know that common prayer is crucial to feeding their souls (p.11). *Common Prayer* does this by helping faithful disciples know their story, shape their ability to recognize the holy presence, and make themselves comfortable with different kinds of prayer. The heart of any renewal of worship for a Sunday assembly is the practice of prayer by those who are the Church. Liturgy is not private, but public, and calls us to prayer in common and

in communion with one another.

Fourthly, the prayer book “welcomes its participants to a new time zone” (p. 14). *Common Prayer* honors the daily “hours” of evening, morning, and midday prayer and all within the weekly cycle that culminates in the Sunday worship of the Lord’s Day. The authors remind us that the weekly cycle happens in an annual “rhythm” of seasons we call the liturgical year:

But the weekly cycle also happens within an annual rhythm of seasons — Advent to prepare for Christ’s coming, Christmas to celebrate the Prince of Peace, Epiphany to remember the Light,... Lent to confess our resistance to the Light, Holy Week to remember Christ’s suffering, Easter to celebrate Resurrection’s power, the birthday of the Church at Pentecost,... And Ordinary Time to bring us back to the beginning again. These are the seasons of the Church. (p. 16)

To experience time as “sacred” is a formidable challenge in our digital age since we are a “wired” people “and our lives our filled with overlapping calendars and dates” (p. 15). But sacred time is the Lord’s time. This book of prayers will assist us in leaving behind mere chronological time and the many calendars of our lives and open us to God’s grace-filled, sacred experience of time. Inviting the reader to embrace the discipline of daily prayer rooted in the seasons of the Church is a clear objective of this book of common prayer.

Some may wonder why particular prayer selections were not added and others not deleted, why not more than one verse for the hymns, why not this saint chosen and not others. But a “collection” such as this must make choices, and the author’s decisions were on the whole balanced and judicious. I encourage one and all to become familiar with this excellent resource and use it for your own prayer parties!