

Praying Without Ceasing

Good Shepherd Island Made Perfect Setting For Prayer

by Andrew Peeples

In this age of speed we are in a big hurry to get somewhere, anywhere, even to the moon, faster than light, before we are caught in the darkness of eternal night.

Our fear of annihilation is not imaginary; it is as real as the world's stockpile of nuclear bombs which, scientists tell us, can, in one blinding flash, wipe the human race from the face of the earth.

Yet, paradoxical as it sounds, we are pausing longer than ever before to look backward 2,000 years to a Galilean hillside and hear the Man from Heaven as He speaks and says: "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

In the comfort of those divine words, we are also pausing as never before to pray. We are praying in secret and in public. We are beginning to learn to pray not only on our knees, but also in our work, our play, and even in our rest as religious men and women have been doing since the first days of the Christian faith.

The practice of praying without ceasing is as old as the church itself. In fact, as one of their initial acts in organizing the church, the Apostles ordained the first deacons to look after the daily ministrations, in order that they might give themselves "continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And religious orders of the church have been dedicating their lives to prayer ever since the first community of religious living under a common roof was established in the year a.d. 340 at Tabenna, an island of the Nile.

It is interesting to note that the first religious community in South Carolina also resided on an island. From 1943 until 1950¹ when it moved to Florida, the Community of the Good Shepherd, a Protestant Episcopal order, was located on Good Shepherd Island two miles from Bluffton on the river route to

Savannah.² There, under the leadership of the Rev. David Nathaniel Peeples,³ a native of Bluffton and a former rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Savannah, a small group of devout men practiced prayer without ceasing and demonstrated that one can offer up to God every act of his life in prayer.

Visitors to the island always came away feeling that they had been spiritually enriched and that the life of Good Shepherd, as one visitor expressed it, "is simple, beautiful and radiant, because it has at its heart the life of our most blessed Lord."

Completely isolated, with deep-channelled May River flowing between it and the mainland, and with no distractions other than the muted whispering of tall pines and distant crying of waterfowl in the marsh flats encompassing it on three sides, the little island afforded an almost perfect environment for the contemplative ideal which the community stressed.

Viewed from across the river, Good Shepherd is one of the most picturesque of all our coastal islands. The northern side, which faces the mainland, has a high bluff and a sand beach. The shoreline is a jungle of vine-covered, moss-draped trees exciting the imagination and impelling a desire to explore its inner depths.

From one end of the island to the other much of the variegated flora which characterize the coastal section may be found. Red-berried holly and cassena (or yaupon holly), sassafras, yellow jessamine, pink and white honeysuckle, sweet bay, magnolia, American tea and Carolina laurel are but a few. And to every wooded area live oaks, pitch pines and cabbage palmettoes add their sylvan charm.

At low tide a sand bar in the middle of May

1 This article was originally published 1/4/1959.

2 Additionally, this island has been called *Voodoo Island*, *Devil's Elbow Island* and *Potato Island*.

3 Andrew Peeples' brother.

River runs parallel to the island and serves as a feeding and resting ground for hundreds sandpipers, sea gulls, kingfishers, po'joes, blue and white herons, and occasionally a pelican or two.

The climate of Good Shepherd is mild and equable. In summer, it is fanned by cool ocean breezes; in winter, the thermometer seldom goes below a comfortable 50 degrees. Cattle, pigs and goats thrive on what is found in pasture and woods. Fish, shrimp, crabs and oysters abound in the river and creeks surrounding the island.

Since the Community of the Good Shepherd was dedicated to the ministry of prayer, the main building on the island was the oratory, or place of prayer. Built of cement and painted white, it was shaped like the letter U, with the bottom line forming a large chapel, while the other lines were divided into cells and a sacristy, with an open cloister between and a bell tower rising in the midst. The cells, in which the members of the community studied as well as slept, were equipped with running water and each was furnished simply with a cot, chair and table or desk.

Not far from the oratory, a smaller building of cement included a library, refectory, community room, kitchen and bath. A barn, poultry run, vegetable garden, and a pasture for milk cows, beef calves, goats and pigs were located on another part of the island. A wharf was built on a navigable creek which wound through the marsh to the river. In the wooded northwest section, the 14 Stations of the Cross, beautiful in design and made of white marble dust, were set up along a circular path.

The habit of the community was a white tunic and scapular with a hood attached. The tunic was bound at the waist with a white cord which had three knots, signifying the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Postulants wore a black cassock.

Following traditional custom, four hours each day were allotted to manual labor. The remainder of the time was taken up with the offering of the church's liturgy and other spiritual duties. Mass was offered daily and also

the entire Divine Office, that is, the seven Day Hours and Night Office of Matins. In addition, each religious spent one half hour daily in meditation and a least another half hour in spiritual reading.

The day began on Good Shepherd Island every morning at 5:30 o'clock, with the ringing of the bell—33 times in memory of the number of years Jesus lived in Palestine. During the day, it was rung to announce each of the eight offices, the beginning and ending of manual work, studies, and other duties. The day ended at 8:30 p.m., and the bell tolled while prayers were offered for the dead.

About five hours daily were devoted to worship in the oratory. At other times there were prayers for the sins, neglect, and blasphemies of people; for the general and particular need of the church and her members; or for the conversion of unbelievers.

But prayer was not restricted to the oratory, nor yet to words. The members of the community learned to pray through the medium of manual work. They learned to offer the chore of washing dishes or weeding the garden to the glory of God. They learned to milk the cows and feed the chickens and plow the fields to the glory of God. They learned to scrub the floors and dust the library to the glory of God. Thus, through their daily experience in offering up to God every act of their lives, they demonstrated the true way to pray without ceasing.

As a setting for the serenity and quiet beauty of the life of the community, Good Shepherd Island had an incomparable charm and enchantment. To enter its cloistered bounds was to enter another world, a sacred world where one, regardless of his religious belief, could not but feel the inspiration of a sanctuary consecrated to the holy ministry of prayer.

Nor could one come away from the island without knowing that prayer without ceasing means offering up to God all of our work, our play, our rest, and even our last agony on earth, and that this is possible for all in our frightened world who pause and listen as the Man from heaven still speaks and says: "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."