For me, one of the most moving relics of Saint Francis still to be seen in Assisi is his breviary. This small, battered manuscript volume with which he prayed several times a day, was kept after his death by his companion Brother Leo and he passed it on to Saint Clare and it is at her basilica that it is kept to this day.

There are many stories of how seriously Francis took the Office. For example, he forbade the brothers not to stand and instructed them not to lean against a wall when praying it together and there is a moving story how, on a journey, Francis stood in the open air and in the pouring rain to pray it. For those brothers who couldn't read, he ordered them to recite the Lord's Prayer at the time of each office and he himself composed a parallel supplementary form of daily prayer in the Office of the Passion.

The experience of daily prayer
One day I was standing in the chapel at Hilfield friary and a newer brother said to me "Why is the worship in chapel so ..... awful at present?" to which I replied, "I suppose it's because our community life is ..... awful at present and perhaps we have to thank God that each reflects the other and we're not putting on some beautiful liturgical show which doesn't connect with our daily life". As another brother has said, "I can tell how things are in the friary by the way in which we say the psalms: are we being attentive to others; are we holding back; are we prepared to take risks for the sake of everyone?"

The other thing I notice is that when brothers and sisters come together to pray in a new situation or place, they will often do certain things physically: form themselves into a circle or semi-circle, perhaps focussed on a visual sign; they will divide up the responsibilities for different parts of the worship to different people. In these ways the commitment to pray together daily is part of the formation of community and hopefully a tiny sign of that transformation of the world and the church to be a place where God is praised, all have a part to play and the meaning of God's grace and love is constantly renewed.

When Christians pray each day they never do so in isolation. The mere fact of being 'in Christ' means that we pray with the whole communion of saints, living, departed and glorified. We may be fortunate enough to pray, at least some of the time, as part of a group or we may represent the larger group, for example, a local church in the Canterbury area where the 'opener' for the 9 am Eucharist prays Morning Prayer and the 'closer' Evening Prayer at 5 pm.

If we normally pray the office alone we can reinforce our sense of being united with others by having a particular place to do it, with one or more signs of the presence of God to focus on. We may use other physical positions for example standing or bowing; no one else except God and the angels is going to see you!
City and desert
Jesus and his disciples were, of course, familiar with the daily prayer of their own Jewish tradition and at various points in the New Testament we get hints of this being continued in Christian communities and families. Later came two parallel developments: one in the great city churches of the Roman Empire, the other in the monastic communities of the desert. Paul Bradshaw describes these two forms of praying, equally valid and potentially transforming, as the 'breathing in' of the desert form and the 'breathing out' of the city form.

The former is centred on listening and absorbing God's Word through sequential Bible readings and psalms by the group of individuals praying at the same time and place. The second form is strongly corporate, world-orientated and about being a priestly community for others and for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. As individuals we may be drawn more in one direction than the other but both as individuals and as communities we need both kinds of spirituality to grow fully into Christ.

Elements of formation
Common Worship Daily Prayer and The Daily Office SSF have at the heart of each office the Word of God preceded by a Preparation section and followed by the Prayers. The Word of God is expressed primarily by the use of psalms and scripture readings. Individuals and groups need to decide how much of this is desirable to enable us to hear the Word of God. As Christians we live between memory and hope (which is also one of the functions of the celebration of the Church's year) and as Walter Wink says, 'Hope which imagines the future, and then acts as if that future is now'.

But what about the 'difficult' (if not downright nasty) bits of scripture? First, we have to acknowledge the nastiness of a great deal of human life and activity. In the psalms alone we are constantly caught up in lament and praise, violence and peace, vengeance and virtue both individual and corporate. 'The whole of human life is here' as an old masthead of the News of the World had it. Biblical Hebrew has no word for 'history' but uses 'remember' or 'memory' instead. The daily office is the constant renewal of that memory, living out the pattern of God's involvement with the world, humanity and ourselves. 'Until Christ is formed in you'

The daily prayer of the church takes place in time and space but is not limited to them. When we, either as individuals or communities, pray in this way we articulate the on-going praise of all creation for its Creator. In the celebration of each day we enter into the creative and redeeming pattern of God's love.

Beginning with Evening Prayer (a pattern from the Jewish tradition - see Genesis Chapter 1 - which has been taken up by many in the Christian tradition) we celebrate through the image of light the creation and its recreation by the incarnation of Jesus, the light of the world, promised in the Magnificat. As we enter the darkness of night, symbol of pain, suffering and the passion of Christ, we see how often Night Prayer refers to death but also
to God's unceasing care and protection. But "joy comes in the morning" for "you have raised up for us a mighty Saviour" (Benedictus), each new day brings the promise of the new life of resurrection both for ourselves and for "this fragile earth, our island home". At Midday Prayer we pause to remember the gift of life in the Spirit that has been given to each one of us.

In all these ways we are being constantly formed and transformed by God's grace, so that we may play our part in the transformation of the world in order that we may share St Francis' prayer:

Let us bless the Lord God living and true!
Let us always give him praise, glory and honour, blessing and every good.

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