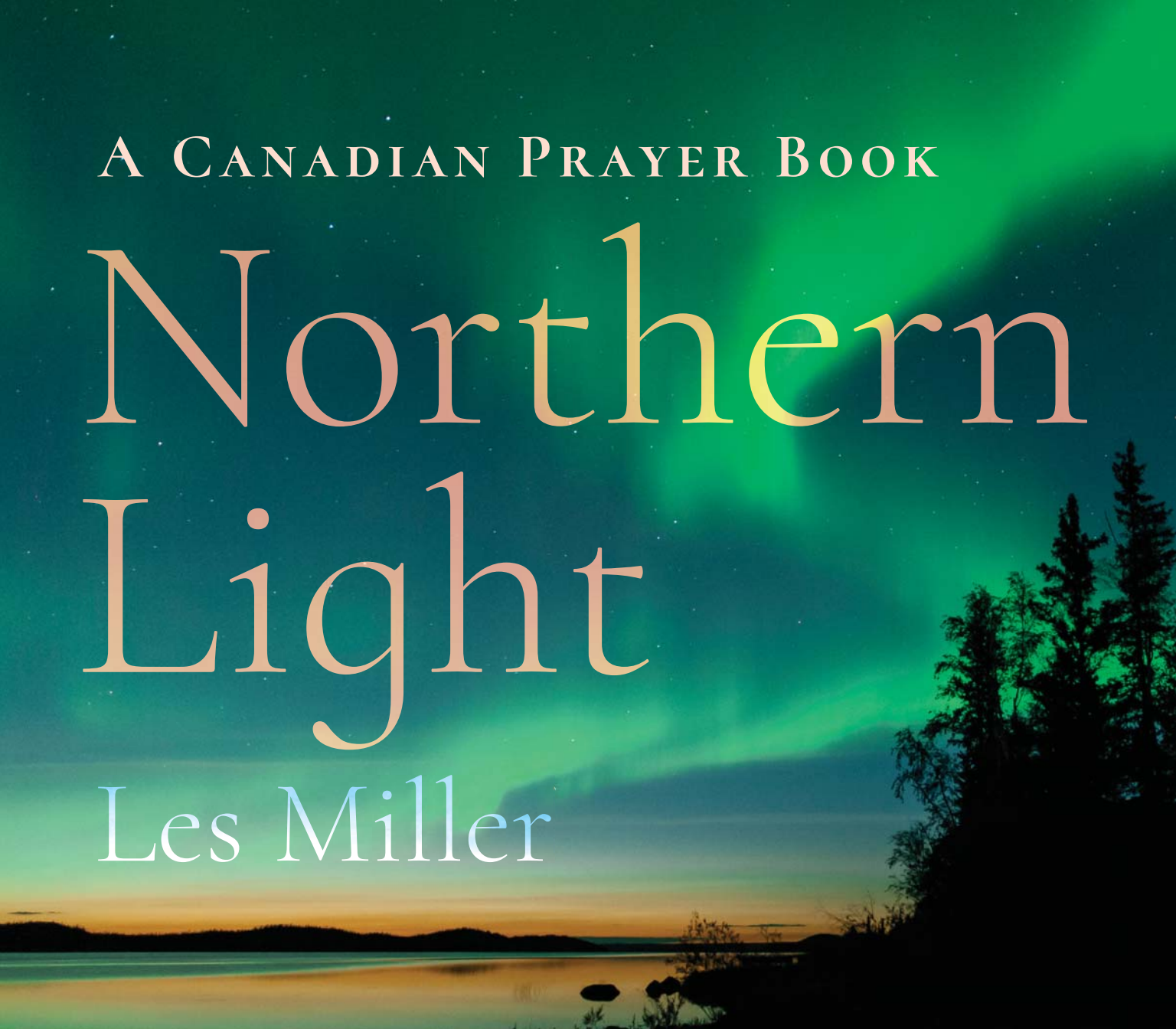


A CANADIAN PRAYER BOOK

# Northern Light

Les Miller



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# Introduction

Is there a distinctive Canadian spirituality? Is there a pattern to the ways in which Canadians encounter the sacred? I'd say there are common threads that join us. Certainly, we have a common geography and history that are interwoven with sacred sensibilities. Our diverse cultural traditions and relationships with nature have given us some characteristic ways of meeting the sacred.

This collection of prayers attempts to articulate words that reach out to God in the context of the Canadian landscape. They are informed by a dawning sense of a Canadian spirituality. Mary Jo Leddy has served us well with her thoughtful and prophetic reflection on Canadian spiritual identity, *Why Are We Here? A Meditation on Canada* (Novalis, 2019). I hope that these prayers will echo the comfort and provocation in Mary Jo's book. Perhaps it will comfort you in knowing that you are not alone in your search for God in our Canadian context. Maybe it will provoke you into teasing out some of the other threads that can be woven into a Canadian spirituality.

The title of this book, *Northern Light*, refers to the geographic inspiration for many of these prayers. It also refers to Christ's light illuminating our world. These prayers try to reflect this light in a Canadian context. "Northern light" also alludes to the heavenly phenomenon that many Canadians see in the northern skies. These beautiful lights in the darkness are a profound metaphor for Christ's message in these troubled times. They are charged particles illuminating God's grandeur amid the darkness.

The prayers and reflections in *Northern Light* make frequent reference to real Canadian places that have helped me to embrace the transcendent. Although this book reaches out to fellow Canadians, it is also very personal in that it evokes parts of Canada familiar to me. As Henri Nouwen wrote, "The most personal is the most universal." I write this in the hope that my most personal examples of the sacred in their Canadian context may resonate with those in others. My most ambitious thought is that some of the prayers or phrases will articulate feelings and intuitions in the reader.

This book includes both prayers and reflections. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish one from the other. Perhaps a prayer will lead you to reflect, or a reflection will turn into prayer. The common ground is the sacred space in which they live. To help the reader understand their context, I have added short explanations of some of the more obscure references.

The prayers are divided into two sections: "Panoramas" and "Close-ups." "Panoramas" encompasses a national theme, whereas "Close-ups" reflects specific Canadian settings. The photography metaphor is apt, seeing that many of these prayers are accompanied by my photographs. The images attempt to capture spiritual aspects of the places featured in the prayers and reflections.

Many of these prayers and reflections were the result of a *Visio Divina* on places in Canada or on Canada as a whole. *Visio Divina* ("Divine seeing") is a spiritual practice that integrates aspects of *Lectio Divina* ("Divine reading") into contemplative viewing of sacred art or other visual scenes. I begin by prayerfully contemplating a Canadian scene. I then ask how God is present in this scene. I meditate on this experience, drawing into my prayer my background as a naturalist, geographer, religious educator and catechist. Finally, I

enter into what Archbishop Sylvain Lavoie calls *operatio*, or bringing prayer to action, by writing down the prayers and reflections. For example, in the prayer "A Commuter Camino," I reflected on the faces I saw during a long subway ride and started to pray for my fellow commuters. I wondered about how each of these people revealed God's Spirit. This was a practice that I had long used in the classroom. During tests or exams, I'd look at my students and pray for each one of them, trying to imagine their spiritual struggles. As I prayed over each person in the subway car, I tapped out a line of prayer on my phone. Later, I reflected on what I had written and refined some of the phrasing.

Another approach imagined scriptural stories taking place in Canada. By putting us in the scene, this method is essentially Ignatian, adding the sacred layer of setting the scene in Canada. This approach echoes the method of artist William Kurelek, who created a cycle of paintings that depicted the first Christmas. These are found in the William Kurelek Collection in the Niagara Falls Art Gallery and in the picture book *A Northern Nativity*.

These prayers are informed by insights of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: On Care for

Our Common Home. He quotes our Canadian bishops, who write, “From panoramic vistas to the tiniest life form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe.” (no. 85) Francis also writes of “A Universal Communion” – not just of people, but also of creation. He writes, “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.” (no. 91) The prayers and reflections of *Northern Light* attempt to articulate this integral ecology in our country. They are small steps on a *via natura*, a path of spirituality that explores how God can be found in creation.

There was too much content to fit into the pages of this book. Additional prayers and photographs are found on web pages accessible through [en.novalis.ca](http://en.novalis.ca) and [lesmiller.ca](http://lesmiller.ca). You will also find guided Visio Divina for some of the pieces. My hope is that further prayers and photographs will also appear there.

Much gratitude in the preparation of this book goes to the wonderful people at Novalis, particularly Simon Appolloni, Joseph Sinasac and Anne Louise Mahoney, and graphic designer Audrey Wells. I am deeply thankful for the presence of my wife, Tina, who accompanied me on many of my

travels across the country and always supported this somewhat quixotic project of sketching the Canadian spiritual landscape. I’m also indebted to my daughters, Victoria and Sarah, as well as my son-in-law, Sam. Victoria contributed a photograph as well as joining me on some photo shoots. Sarah provided wise counsel and editorial suggestions for several pieces. Sam’s wisdom and joie de vivre lifted my spirits when spiritual dryness threatened.

And for you, fellow pilgrim:

May these words and photographs be true teachings

May they speak to you of the sacred blanket  
That God has put over this land

May the rays of insight

And patterns of complexity

Speak to you

Of the beauty and wisdom of Canada

May they be way-markers on your sacred path  
and not lead you astray.



Part One

PANORAMAS

Northern Light



# A Blessed Land

Creator of a blessed land,  
we walk in gratitude and humility  
among your creation.  
We gaze in wonder at your majesty.  
Bless those of us who first dwelt on these lands.  
They heard your voice in the winds and in the raven's cry.  
They saw your beauty in northern lights and Sister Moon.  
They felt your beating heart in the rhythm of the seasons.  
Forgive the trespasses of those who came later: many times clumsy, blind and cruel.  
Teach us to listen to your songs,  
teach us respect for the first dwellers,  
teach us sincerity and integrity.  
May all your peoples' hands extend into a mighty basket to hold  
hope for reconciliation,  
perseverance to reconcile,  
and courage to be reconcilers.

*The Indigenous people living within Canada have suffered greatly at the hands of settlers, including churches. One of the Indigenous peoples of Vancouver, British Columbia, is the Musqueam. Their name translates into*

*“People of the grass.” This photo was taken at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia on the “Pole Walk,” which features totem and memorial poles of West Coast Indigenous communities.*



Northern Light



# The Canadian Cathedral

Let us enter by the western door,  
through the Coastal ranges, between soaring spires.  
Let us genuflect in the Prairie nave  
and proceed up the Trans-Canada aisle  
to pray in the left-hand transept under the Northern lights  
to look south into the stained-glass Toronto towers  
to the altar set between the chapels of St. Lawrence and St. Joseph  
to the Eastern apse of the Cape Breton Highlands and Gros Morne.  
God bless this sacred space  
And consecrate all within to your service.

*This prayer reimagines Canada as a traditional cruciform cathedral.*

*The photo shows the “western door” near Lilloet, British Columbia.*



Part Two

CLOSE-UPS

Northern Light



# Iqaluit in Spring

Loving God,  
in this kingdom of ice,  
your grace shines through the spring sun.  
The first warmth, the eternal warmth, changes ice to the water of life.  
Do the same, dear Lord, with our hearts.  
Melt hardness, coldness and fear within us.  
Transform us to be kind, warm and loving.  
Let the dripping water from melting icicles remind us of our baptismal waters.  
In this Easter season, let your waters nourish and replenish us.  
Splash us with waters of justice.  
Splash us with waters of beauty.  
Splash us with waters of hope.  
Awaken and restore us,  
so that we can bloom like fireweed.

*Iqaluit is the capital of Nunavut, on Baffin Island well north of the Arctic Circle. This “kingdom of ice” reigns from October to May, when the monthly average temperatures are below freezing. In contrast, Arctic fireweed tinges the landscape pink from July to September.*

Northern Light



# Tulita, Northwest Territories

I am remote and isolated as I look down on this river,  
not even sure if I've found the right place:  
home to the Dene, the Felician Sisters, the teachers, the workers.  
I'm strung between continents,  
contemplating this place,  
joined only by ice and air to the outside world.  
But there is love in Tulita.  
There is service, and hope.  
There are listening ears who search for a deeper communion with each other,  
with the land, with the future.  
Yet I, flying over this place in a packed Tokyo-bound plane, feel so disconnected.  
God, our deepest communion, bring me back to my home with you.

*Tulita is a Dene community on the banks of the Mackenzie River. The Felician Sisters have served this community for many years. This photo was taken from a plane while flying over the Mackenzie River (hence the glare). Later I found out that I was upstream of Tulita looking at McGern Island.*