A Canadian Prayer Book

Northern Light

Les Miller
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These bonus online materials complement the photographs, prayers and reflections found in the print edition of *Northern Light: A Canadian Prayer Book*, published by Novalis.

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 refers 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 the 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 hope that my most personal examples of the sacred in their Canadian context may resonate with those in others.

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

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Part One

PANORAMAS
Edges

God of the first Light,
bless our edges.
Bless the first sun rays as they sweep over Cape Spear, Placentia, Fogo Island
and Harbour Round.
Bless the space where land and sea and sky converse.
Bless our edges as dawn light warms Louisburg, Sydney and Ingonish.
Bless the space where Mi’gmak meet the French, the Scot and the immigrant English boy.
Bless our edges as morning glows over Quebec City, Granby and Montreal.
Bless the space where saints meet sinners, where promise meets loss.
Bless our edges as sunlight first glints on Ottawa, Welland and Sault Ste. Marie.
Bless the space where hardness is softened with compassion and understanding.
Bless our edges as the low sun slowly brightens the grey dawn over Iqaluit,
Yellowknife and Whitehorse.
Bless the space where human reckoning consults sacred time and hallowed ground.
Bless our last edges as the light of a new day wakens Kamloops, Vancouver and Victoria.
Bless the space where silence dwells like fresh air between truth and truth.
Bless our living edges in this grace-filled time and space.

Many of the places mentioned here are associated with early memories or birthplaces of friends and colleagues. This photo of the Rideau Canal in Ottawa is by Victoria Miller.
Grace in the Land

There is a golden warmth
That spreads over Charlottetown skies.
There is a Thanksgiving light that shines over the Gatineau Hills.
There is a Eucharistic glow over the wheat fields south of Brandon.
There is green gratitude among the Douglas Firs of Stanley Park.
There is grace in the land.

Morning light in the Madawaska Valley in Eastern Ontario.
God among the Wires

There’s a web woven from Signal Hill to Alert, to Craigellachie, to Bell’s Brantford Homestead to the CN Tower to Ottawa’s tech hub to Bombardier in Quebec. A country strung together by steel, copper and signals through the ether. Yet interlaced with another wonder, the search for a deeper meaning: Lonergan’s transcendentals, McLuhan’s media analyses and Doherty’s Poustinia. Let wisdom be leaven for data. Let discernment accompany algorithms. Let prayer permeate protocols. Let your Spirit flow through our networks. Let strategy be secondary to beatitude. Calibrate our communications according to the law of love. Bring sabbath moments into busy schedules. Translate insight into justice. Convert invention into service of the greater good. In our land, let the hum of the wires become an angel choir of joy and peace.

Bernard Lonergan, SJ was one of Canada’s foremost theologians. Marshall McLuhan was a famous academic who explored the intersection of communication, technology and media. Catherine Doherty’s Poustinia explores how God is found in solitude, silence and prayer. All were people of deep faith. The image was taken looking up at a radio tower in Algonquin Highlands, Ontario.
Prayer for a Grander Vision

Loving God,
Please send your Spirit of Wisdom over this land to guide our choices.
Let us practise hospitality and generosity in the face of isolation and fear.
Let us change our focus from today’s wants to the nobler horizon of tomorrow’s needs for this good green Earth.
Let the cardinal points of our moral compasses be love, justice, mercy and hope.
Let deep beauty illumine our decisions, leaving behind the crass and the petty.
Let us turn toward one another in humility and compassion to find strength in vulnerability.
Let us search for peace with listening hearts and courageous steps.
Let us reach back for those left behind and stretch forward along paths of grace.
Create in Canada a many-hued blanket that warms all who shelter under it.
Create in Canada welcoming circles of belonging and harmony.
Create in Canada communities that care for your creation.
Lead us beyond our lesser worries to this grander vision.

Prairie landscape and skies near Wroxtion, Saskatchewan.
An Epiphany Blessing of the Waters

Bless our waters, frozen and flowing.  
May the Holy Spirit come down, up, around and through them, bringing divine power and sacred love.  
May the St. Lawrence, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and Fraser rivers be our Jordan.  
May these waters cleanse us from arrogance and avarice, selfishness and domination, fear and apathy.  
May these waters wash away the author of evil in every province and territory.  
May these waters nourish this land to make it bountiful and beautiful.  
May these waters reflect your divine light to draw us ever closer to you.  
May these waters be springs of blessing, coursing through mountain, forest and field; rising to the heavens; and becoming a holy blessing of snow and rain.  
May these waters course through our lives, sanctifying our homes, worship places and workspaces.  
May these Epiphany waters always be sign and substance of Life.

There is an Epiphany practice of blessing homes with water. This prayer extends the blessing from the home to the country. The photograph shows Peyto Lake, Banff National Park. The shade of blue is caused by glacial flour or particles from glaciers that feed into the lake. The waters of Peyto Lake flow into the Mistaya and North Saskatchewan rivers, eventually making their way across the Prairies to empty into Hudson Bay.
Part Two

CLOSE-UPS
Northern Light
Fundy Mud

Consider mud:
the sucking, slippery mud of the Fundy shores.
The mud that stops us in our tracks:
the mud of vanity,
the mud of unresolved anger,
the mud of fear, the selfish mud, the greedy mud,
the power-hungry mud.
We turn to you, Divine Guide:
Lead us to higher ground.
Lead us along drier paths.
Renew us.
Sprinkle cleansing baptismal waters over us.
Wash away our mud.

The Bay of Fundy lies between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. It produces the highest tides in the world. At low tide, extensive mud flats are exposed.
Northern Light
New Brunswick: Awakenings

Mist swirls off the Saint John River.  
Gulls perch on Shediac lobster traps.  
Sun rises across the Northumberland Strait.  
Praise be to God for the newness of the day.  
Bless our awakenings to pattern and possibilities.  
Bless our awakenings to the flow of the Spirit.  
Bless our awakenings to the joyful works of love.  
In the homes of Moncton,  
in the streets of Saint John,  
in the schools of Fredericton,  
in the workplaces of Edmundston,  
awaken us to follow and bless us into true belonging.

*The 13-kilometre Confederation Bridge crosses the Northumberland Strait between New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.*
Silver Spires, St. Lawrence Valley

Loving God,
let us follow the silver spires upward toward you.
Let our eyes see your beauty written in the skies.
Let our hearts be lifted in divine love for all that is good and true.
Let our hands be raised in thanksgiving and praise.
Let our minds be elevated in contemplation of your grace.
Let our lives be lived upward.
We pray in the name of one who was raised to the heavens.

The settlements of the St. Lawrence River Valley in Quebec often feature silver-spired churches. These were often tin-plated and painted silver. This is Église L'Assomption in Les Éboulements, Quebec.
Purple Loosestrife, South Lancaster, Ontario

The grey road eastward is gilded with purple ditch-rows of loosestrife: settler plants displacing marsh marigold and cardinal flower. Where are you, Creator, in this invasion? I dwell here as another settler species, profligate and gaudy, careless in my colonization. In my arrogance I brought you here like communion in a pyx. Blind to the wisdom and grace of this sacred place. “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.’” Is this confession sufficient? No. My eyes are still as murky as the swamp water in which I stand. Creator God, lead me home.

Purple loosestrife is an invasive plant from Europe and Asia that has spread extensively throughout North America. It outcompetes native species and disrupts wetland ecology. This photo was taken at Cooper’s Marsh, South Lancaster, Ontario. The boardwalk is lined with purple loosestrife. Here you can see faded plants crowding into the boardwalk.
Northern Light
Toronto at Night

Light of the world,
Bless this brightness in the darkness.
Bless this lattice of lights laid over this city.
Bless the brightness that defies the gloom.
Bless the office towers and corner stores,
Bless the Advent wreaths, Hanukkah candles and Diwali lights.
Bless the neon of Dundas Square and the reflection of the Toronto sign at City Hall.
Bless the CN Tower illuminations.
Bless the headlights that pierce the driving snow.
Bless the spotlights, traffic lights and searchlights.
Bless the moonlight rippling over Humber Bay.
Bless all these mirrors, particles, shards and fragments of your original light.
But also:
Bless the light in our minds that reflects your wisdom in our deliberations.
Bless the light in our hearts that reflects your compassion in our treatment of the wounded.
Bless the light in our eyes as we contemplate your creation.
God of light and loveliness,
Shine in our lives, we pray.
Sphagnum Bog near Stouffville, Ontario

God of wisdom and winds,
Were you there when I fell through your creation?
Did your curiosity alive in me take me out into that floating bog?
Did your injunction to choose life make me throw wide my arms to hold my head and shoulders above that mossy mat?
Are you here right now as I enter this layer of pondering?
Is your Holy Spirit teasing me with meaning?
Are you in the very act of rescue or in the ecosystem of insight?
Am I with you in this communion of wondering?
Are you this question mark?

I had walked out into a bog, gingerly exploring for pitcher plants – few existed so close to Toronto. I was careful with my footing because I knew that these sphagnum bogs sometimes float over hidden ponds. But botanical curiosity lured me deeper into the bog until I broke through the sphagnum mat, holding myself up with outflung arms. This is a close-up of the insectivorous pitcher plant, showing the tiny hairs that make escape difficult.
Northern Light
Revelstoke: Snow in May

I drop a morning log on the fire on this cold spring day. I draw back the curtains and gasp at whiteness. This Sunday morning reveals snow coating roofs and trees in white; an altar cloth ready for the quiet liturgy of life; a layer of sanctity upon our lives; a sacred noosphere, that God-horizon that beckons us beyond. Awaken us to the grace life. Consecrate our day with snow, cloud, mist, rain or sun. These snow altar linens signal your divine presence: a sacramental. Our woodsmoke incense makes insufficient offerings until we live our prayers into life. Let us waken to the God-life, the goodness, truth and beauty coating all our days.

Revelstoke is a town in south-central British Columbia that borders on Revelstoke National Park. It is also close to the site of the Last Spike, where the transcontinental railway through Canada was completed in 1889.
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