

Let My People Pray: The Theology and Practice of the Universal Prayer (a.k.a. the General Intercessions or the Prayer of the Faithful)

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Yesterday's revolution can become today's commonplace. In the political arena, who now remembers the struggle for women's suffrage or for the abolition of slavery? In transportation, who thinks of the horse and buggy (or who wants to be reminded of smoking on airplanes)? In communications, who recalls adjusting the crystal on the early radio or life without TV or FAX or CD or VCR? Monumental changes can be taken for granted; and great reforms can be weakened or even reversed through inattention.

The same forgetfulness and indifference can afflict Catholics with respect to the great modernizing and updating the Church has been through in the past twenty-five years. In liturgy, who still recognizes the restoration of the general intercessions as one of the great changes of Vatican II? And yet it is. In the prayer of the faithful or universal prayer, the priestly people of God recover their proper and irreplaceable role of interceding for the needs of the church and the world.

The Theology of the Universal Prayer

In an address that deserves quoting, Pope John Paul II said to a group of U.S. Bishops: "When our people realize . . . that they are called to be ' . . . a royal priesthood . . . ' and . . . that all their prayers of petition are united to an infinite act of the praying Christ, then there is fresh hope and new encouragement for the Christian people."¹

In fact the 1966 Roman booklet, "The Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful" makes two bold analogies: (1) Just as communion is the climax of the liturgy of the eucharist, so the prayer of the faithful is the climax of the entire liturgy of the word; and (2) this prayer is the hinge [the Latin word is *cardo*] between the two parts of the Mass.² As the theologian Robert Cabié summarizes,

The General Intercessions can be seen to mark the end of the entire Liturgy of the Word and at the same time to be, as it were, the threshold of the Eucharist proper. Coming as they do after the dismissal of the catechumens, they are the privilege of the faithful, and the underscore the latter's priestly character. To present to God the appeals and hopes of the entire human race is to share in the care and concern of the Priest of the New Covenant who gave his life for the salvation of the world; it is to share in his mission. We may say that the intercessions represent the other side of evangelization, since speaking of human beings to God is inseparable from speaking of God to human beings.³

Cabié here is reflecting the vision of the church for this prayer:

[Its] place . . . is at the end of every celebration of the word of God . . .

The reason is that this prayer is . . . the fruit of the working of the word of God in the hearts of the faithful: instructed, stirred, and renewed by the word, all stand together to offer prayer for the needs of the whole

Church and the whole world. (UP §4)

But is this the experience of average Catholics? Or do they hear ‘canned’ intentions provided by well-meaning publishers, or laundry-lists of persons who are sick or deceased or petitions for every conceivable need, to which they respond with a rattled off “Lord, hear our prayer.” Do ordinary people look forward to this prayer with the same longing as they have for receiving communion? And do they experience the same sort of satisfaction after this prayer as they do after communion?

Seven years after it issued its booklet of principles, rules, and samples of the universal prayer, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship has to remind conferences of bishops throughout the world, “*Much* is to be made of the general intercessions which . . . is the community’s response response to the word of God proclaimed and received.”⁴ But do we make much of this prayer? Do people feel that the Church is *only* “John Paul, our Pope, Roger, our bishop, and all the clergy” or that they are the “gathered Church . . . , the great entreater and advocate appointed for all humanity” (UP §3)?

American Catholics come by their misunderstanding and/or misuse of the universal prayer honestly. One of the most effective and life-giving substitutes for liturgical spirituality before the Second Vatican Council was the weekly novena devotion. Whether to Our Lady of Perpetual Help or St. Jude or whomever, people avidly filled out slips of paper with their intentions printed out, including the all-covering and ever-intriguing “Special Intention.” But there is perhaps nothing more contrary to the *universal* and liturgical character of the prayer of the faithful than voicing at it the very *particular* and devotional novena petition, “for a special intention.” Special intentions have their place in liturgy, and even in the universal

prayer but, as we shall see, they are “worked in” in the silences.

So, in order for people to experience their “liturgical dignity” (another phrase of Pope John Paul II) the General Intercessions or Universal Prayer⁵ needs to become what it was designed to be:

Enlightened by God’s word and in a sense responding to it, the assembly of the faithful prays in the general intercessions as a rule for the needs of the universal church and the local community, for the salvation of the world and those oppressed by any burden, and for special categories of people. . . . In these petitions, “the people, exercising their priestly function, make intercession for all with the result that, as the liturgy of the word has its full effects in them, they are better prepared to proceed to the liturgy of the eucharist.”⁶

Thus, the readings for Mass contain many matters about which intercessions might be made. But how do we make this ideal real in our parishes and communities?

The Universal Prayer in Practice

The task of composing the prayer of the faithful belongs to the deacon, cantor, or ‘intentionist’ working together with the liturgy planners. There is a series of questions they can address to the readings themselves (and to the Holy Spirit who wrote them and who wants to inspire our prayer). The answers to these questions form the raw material out of which the universal prayer can be made. (In the following list, anything in plain type is mine, anything in italic is from UP, §9, a passage which expands upon the four categories to be included, according to the General Instruction on the Roman Missal.)

First the preliminary questions: Where do/does these readings/this liturgy fit in the liturgical year? In the world/national/regional/local

Do the readings remind one of [a] *the needs of the Church universal, e.g., for the pope, the bishops and pastors of the Church, missions, Christian unity, vocations to the priesthood and religious life?* Does any reading suggest any particular profession/vocation/ job which the lay faithful occupy and for the doing of which they need God's help? About any kinds of ministry in the Church today? Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in the Church? To the young in our Church (children, adolescents, and young adults) and ministry to them?

Do the readings remind one of [b] *national or world affairs, e.g., peace, leaders of government, good weather, the safety of crops, elections, economic crises, etc.?* Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to the needs of women around the world? To the needs of the youth of the world (children, adolescents, and young adults)?

Do the readings remind one of [c] *those beset by poverty or tribulation, e.g., for those absent, the persecuted, the unemployed, the sick and infirm, the dying, prisoners, exiles, etc.?* Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in crisis? To the young in special need?

Do the readings remind one of [d] *the congregation and members of the local community, e.g., those in the parish preparing for baptism, confirmation, orders, marriage, for pastors, for a coming parish mission, for first communicants, etc.?* Are there any activities of the parish (with respect to Word, Sacrament, and/or Community/service illustrated in these readings/this liturgy about which the General Intercessions can pray? Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in this local community of faith? To the young of this community?

(I especially emphasize women's concerns because most of the

human authors of sacred scripture focus on men's issues and write out of male experience. I also direct attention at the concerns of young people whose issues never seem to be mentioned or prayed about at 'adult liturgy.')

To see how the universal prayer is structured, it is instructive to look at the eleven sample formulas for the general intercessions found in the first appendix to every sacramentary.⁷ Each sample follows the four-fold structure: (1) the invitation to pray, (2) the intentions with (3) the prayer of the people, and (4) the concluding prayer. Every universal prayer begins with the presider's invitation to pray and concludes with a short prayer. UP instructs the presider that, in his invitation (which is not addressed to God but to the people), his responsibility is to motivate (the Latin says *excitare*) them to pray; his concluding prayer is "limited to asking God to hear the petitions poured forth."⁸ (And the presider should remember that he is one of the faithful whose prayer this is; his whole demeanor should encourage prayer.)

UP §12 directs that the intentions are composed in one of three forms:

- a. the full form ("Let us pray for . . . that"), which states those to be prayed for and what is to be prayed for. E.g., "For all of our brothers and sisters in need: that the Lord assist them, we pray to the Lord." Response: "Lord, hear our prayer."⁹
- b. a first partial form ("Let us pray that . . ."), which immediately mentions the favor to be requested. E.g., "That the Lord Jesus may be with his Church and guide it always, we pray to the Lord." Response: "Lord, have mercy."¹⁰
- c. a second partial form ("Let us pray for . . ."), which states only those being prayed for. E.g., "For those who do not yet believe, we

hear us.”¹¹

And the prayer of the people may be either: (1) a short acclamation like “Lord, hear our prayer” or “Kyrie eleison,” (2) silent prayer, (3) a long formula which the people recite (this is how the universal prayer is done at morning and evening prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours), and (4) a combination of the first two: silence prayer followed by a short acclamation in answer to the deacon’s invitation.

We are most familiar with the short acclamation but this familiarity has bred confusion. Many think that the intention is the prayer and the acclamation is a mere response, like a mere Amen. In order to re-educate ourselves, we need to use silence alone or silence followed by an acclamation. Silence set aside for the faithful’s prayer is the key to recovery of the prayer of the faithful.

Don’ts and Do’s in the Universal Prayer

In the composition of the content of the texts, especially the petitions, the following are to be avoided:

- intentions which are too particular (and thus neglecting the universal altogether)
- intentions which are didactic (instruction belongs in the homily and there sparingly)
- intentions which are partisan
- intentions which are tendentious (“marked by a tendency in favor of a particular point of view: biased”¹²)
- too frequent prayers for the pope and bishops, as well as for civil authorities, as if these exhausted the categories of “Church” and “the salvation of the world” (of the fifty-four samples in UP, only four pray for the pope—that’s a little more than 7%; the eucharistic prayer always mentions the pope and local bishop).¹³

This prayer is a *petitionary* prayer: do not use prayers of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, or penitence. Avoid excess or disproportion in the number or length of the petitions (GI reminds us the “five or six intentions suffice; more rarely there might be seven or eight”¹⁴). There is no prescribed order but at least one intention should come from each of the four categories mentioned above.¹⁵ Do leave some silent time at the end for people to continue to pray before the concluding prayer; but avoid inflecting the last summons to pray, e.g., “and now for *your* own intentions,” as if the foregoing wasn’t our own prayer (and may not have been). Don’t change the short response all the time but do vary it some of the time, perhaps seasonally. The presider may propose the intentions but the deacon, cantor, or a person designated as ‘intentionist’ are the proper proposers of the intentions (and in that order); the reader(s) are not to propose the intentions.

Do sing this prayer some of the time. There are excellent settings of refrains such as “Hear our prayer, answer in our need, let our cry come unto you” by Ernest Sands,¹⁶ which provide choral humming in support of the voiced petitions of the assembly.

Epilogue

In his fine article on the prayer of the faithful, Nicholas Paxton cites the moral theologian Bernard Häring to great effect:

Bernard Häring . . . raises two important points about the Prayer of the Faithful which places it firmly in the wider context of Christian life as well as in that of worship. The first is that the Prayer of the Faithful must reflect three things if it is to respond to the Gospel worthily. These are:

and discerning present needs;

ii. “our openness to the present opportunities” — i.e. our own willingness to take advantage of new ways of spreading the Christian message by word and example;

iii. “the courage . . . to face the challenges and responsibilities in regard to the needs of others, which our role as Christians entails.”

Häring’s second pint is particularly concerned with the relationship between praying for peace and justice and attaining them:

“We rightly pray for our daily bread, for our heavenly Father cares for our needs; and if we pray in the right spirit, we realize that our bread comes from the one God and Father, and that we can rejoice in it only if we are willing to share it with the needy.”¹⁷

But the context is even wider than either Paxton or Häring sees.

Now restored to our worship, the general intercessions should be composed with care and earnestly prayed. For the Church’s power of prayer is great. The whole Church, the baptized praying with united voices and hearts, interceding for the needs, not only of its own, but especially for all humanity, is moving the world ever nearer to the kingdom of God’s reign over the earth.¹⁸

These reflections by U. S. Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy underscore the final reason why we should pray well the universal prayer. As Jews believe that, with every Passover and every Sabbath well celebrated, the coming of the Messiah is hastened, so ancient Christians believed that every eucharist shortens the time until the Second Coming. The Bride has only to join her voice to the Spirit’s to be able to say, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!”

Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come!

¹ BCL Newsletter, XIX (August/September 1983).

² In *The Documents of the Liturgy 1965–1979* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1982), DOL 239 (pp. 594–603), hereafter abbreviated as “UP”; the reference here is to principal paragraph number 1894. Explaining the second analogy UP says: “[The prayer] terminates the liturgy of the word in which God’s wonderful works and the Christian calling are brought to mind; it ushers in the liturgy of the eucharist by stating some of those general and particular intentions for which the sacrifice is to be offered.”

The two essential readings about the General Intercessions are UP and the 1979 U.S. statement, “General Intercessions” [hereafter abbreviated GI] the second is in the USCC/BCL publication, *Thirty Years of Liturgical Renewal* (Publication No. 154–7), edited by Frederick P. McManus. See also Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), pp. 402–404, Robert Cabié, *The Eucharist*, in *The Church at Prayer*, Volume II, A. G. Martimort, ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), pp. 69–75 and 203, and Nicholas Paxton, “The Prayer of the Faithful,” *Church Music*, 17:2 (April 1991), pp. 36–44.

³ Cabié, p. 75.

⁴ Circular Letter *Eucharistiae Participationem*, April 27, 1973 (DOL 248: 1990 [p. 628]), emphasis added.

⁵ What we have come to call “The Prayer of the Faithful” is a title which should be reserved for the Lord’s Prayer (UP, DOL 239: 1911 [p. 598]).

⁶ The Lectionary of the Mass [1981]: Introduction, 30; the most helpful edition of this document is found in *The Liturgy Documents* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).

⁷ These formulas are drawn from fifty-four samples in the 1966 collection, *De Oratione Communi seu Fidelium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), known in this article as UP. The following table lists the number of the English translation first and the Latin and French originals second: 1=1, 2=2, 3=3, 4=5, 5=9, 6=10, 7=11, 8=15, 9=23, 10=24, and 11=53.

⁸ §7 is about the invitation and §14 is about the conclusion.

⁹ General Formula I D.

¹⁰ General Formula III A 1.

¹¹ General Formula II A 2.

¹² Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1991).

¹³ UP formulas 3(B), 23, 34, and 47 are for the pope; the local bishop is added in 3B and 23.

¹⁴ GI, p. 207, ¶9.

¹⁵ GI, p. 205, ¶2.

¹⁶ Available in the collection, “With Heart and Voice,” from OCP Publications.

¹⁷ Paxton, pp. 37–38, quoting Häring, “The Eucharist and Our Everyday Life,” pp. 48–49.

¹⁸ GI, p. 210, last ¶.