

Leading Children in the Prayer of the Church

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As catechetical leaders (ministering with adults, youth, or children), we are always aware of the need - and our privilege - to lead others in prayer.

In fulfilling this role, we continually want to provide a holy experience – and a formative one (one that will form, enhance, and deepen each individual’s prayer life as they continue to grow in their faith journey).

We also hope to lead people to become aware of and comfortable with the various prayer forms of the Church, especially our liturgical prayer. Therefore, helping people (of all ages) to compose and pray intercessory prayers, built upon the structure of the General Intercessions of our liturgy, can be a benefit to the individual’s prayer life as well as our life together as a Eucharistic community. (If children and youth become comfortable with the purpose, form, and structure of the General Intercessions, we will have, among other things, well-formed future members of parish Worship Commissions who can take on the role of composing the weekly General Intercessions for their faith communities.)

Suggestion: catechists and parish leaders have a unique and awesome opportunity to form people in the prayer of the Church by educating them in the reasons for and ways to pray the Intercessions – and should include this type of prayer frequently when people gather for catechetical sessions, meetings, and parish

gatherings. In these settings, the General Intercessions can be part of a longer prayer service or may also stand alone as a beginning of concluding prayer.

WHY DO WE HAVE THE GENERAL INTERCESSIONS AT MASS?

Liturgical studies show that intercessions are one of the oldest parts of the Mass. Evidence comes from very early writers: Justin Martyr (c. 100-c.165), Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236), and the Apostolic Constitutions (latter half of the fourth century). Changes did come about, however, and by the fifth century the intercessions were eliminated from their place at the end of the Liturgy of the Word (except on Good Friday), but some vestige of them remained in the Kyrie at the beginning of the Mass. Now the intercessions have been restored to the Eucharist, to the liturgy of the hours, and to other sacramental and liturgical rites.

This was one of Vatican II's major reforms. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy directed that the rites of the Mass be simplified, and that "elements which, with the passage of time, came to be duplicated, or were added with but little advantage, should be discarded. Where opportunity allows or necessity demands, other elements which have suffered injury through accidents of history are now to be restored to the earlier norm of the holy Fathers" (no. 50). The document specifically called for the restoration of "the common prayer" or the "prayer of the faithful:" (no. 53).

In 1979 the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy issued a statement, "General Intercessions." The authors point out that the church is convinced of the timeless value

of intercessory prayer. The document envisions that petitions are not a series of wishes and announcements, but rather a list of real needs that we hope the Lord will act upon.

Sometimes these prayers are called “the prayer of the faithful.” In the early church it was stressed that only the baptized – the faithful – could take part in this prayer. Catechumens and others were to be dismissed before these prayers. Since only the faithful could participate, the name “prayer of the faithful” was used.

But “the prayer of the faithful” was never to be understood as “the prayer for the faithful.” These prayers are never just for ourselves. They are not just for the members of our church. They are for the needs and concerns of the whole church, of the whole world. We may pray privately at times; we certainly pray at times for our own intentions. We invoke divine blessing and protection for ourselves and our needs. But when we gather as a community, we express the needs of the community. We become linked with friend and stranger alike. This is why the preferred title for these prayer - among many liturgists - is “general intercessions.”

WHO WRITES THE GENERAL INTERCESSIONS?

Incredible as it sounds, there is complete freedom in the composing of these prayer texts. We rarely vary the Mass texts, since they precisely articulate our faith. But the church asks us to compose these general intercessions which speak the greatest needs of our communities. Those who preach and preside have the responsibility to write, or at least help to compose, the intercessions and to prepare the introduction and concluding prayer. In many parishes, members of the Worship Commission or

other members of the parish who have studied the Church's guidelines for these prayers assume the responsibility and privilege of composing these prayers.

Children and youth can be educated to compose these prayers – both for liturgy and for their prayer times as a group.

WHAT IS THE FORMAT FOR THE GENERAL INTERCESSIONS?

Various liturgical documents (the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the Sacramentary, General Intercessions) provide the format and structure of the Intercessions.

- Introduction: This is always done by the presider and is not a prayer to God; rather it is always addressed to the community. It might be a call to prayer, a link between the homily and the intercessions, or a simple “Let us pray.” It is a short bridge between the proclamation of the word and the petitionary response of the community.
- The Intentions: These prayers should be announced by a deacon or lector rather than the presider. They are not prayers in themselves, but invitations to the community to pray for a particular purpose or person. The brochure from the Bishops' Committee, “General Intercessions,” elaborates on the General Instruction and stresses that at least one intention be taken from each of these four categories:
 - “The needs of the Church: for example, petitions might be for the Pope, the local bishop, all bishops and

pastors of the Church, the Church's ministers, the missions, the unity of Christians, etc.”

- “Public authorities and the salvation of the world: for example, petitions might be composed for peace and justice, government officials, an end to war, public elections, the solution of socio-economic problems, etc.”
- Those oppressed by an need: For example, intercession might be made for those suffering religious or political persecution, for the unemployed, for the sick and infirm, for prisoners or exiles, for those suffering racial or other injustices, etc.”
- The local community: for example, intercessions might be composed for those absent from the community, for those who are to be baptized or confirmed, ordained or married, for the ministers of the local community, for first communicants, for a mission or week of renewal, etc.” The specific intentions for this liturgy are also mentioned in this section.

The whole assembly responds to each of these petitions. Responding may not seem like anything extraordinary, but it is extremely significant. Ordinarily at

Mass the priest says the prayers on behalf of the assembly. He alone calls God by name. The people usually just say "Amen,." The greatest exception is the Lord's Prayer. But the opening prayer, the prayer over the gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer, and the communion prayer are all entrusted to the priest. The General Intercessions are different. It is the "prayer of the faithful." We all call God by name. In this prayer, the assembly exercise the priestly function given to us at Baptism.

- **Silence:** Before the concluding prayer, a moment of silence should be encouraged. This is a link with the readings of the Liturgy of the Word. Each reading should be followed by silence; the same should be true of the end of the intercessions.
- **Concluding Prayer:** After the intentions, responses, and silence, the presiding priest addresses a prayer to God. It is not addressed to Jesus, Mary, or the saints. This prayer sums up the intercessions and does not include new petitions.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR WRITING INTERCESSIONS (FROM MANY LITURGISTS)

- 1)** The number of intentions should be limited, so as not to weary the assembly and to keep the prayer proportionate to the rest of the Liturgy of the Word. Ordinarily five or six intentions suffice, more rarely there might be seven or eight.
- 2)** These are prayers of petition. It is not appropriate to compose them in a style which reflects other prayers forms, such as thanksgiving or adoration. Thanksgiving belongs during or before the Eucharistic Prayer.

3) Genuine necessities, real needs, should be the subject of the petitions.

'Prepackaged' intercessions often do not realistically meet the universal needs, the needs of the community or the current needs of the day. Current events should help shape the intercessions. Previously prepared intentions can be used as models, but the intercessions prayed at each liturgy should come from the heart and speak with the voice of that assembly.

4) Rather than telling God what to do, these intercessions ask God for guidance in doing God's will. Rather than expecting God to take action, we need to ask God to move and strengthen us to do what God desires. For example, "Send your aid to the hungry of the world" addresses the prayer to God rather than inviting the assembly to pray and may tell God to take care of it which lets us off the hook. It might be better to pray, "Give us the generosity to care for the hungry and needy in our midst."

5) At times, in formulating the prayers, you might draw from the verbs or action words of the Scripture readings. For instance, if the Scripture readings called us to openness, some of the intercessions might be: "Open the hands of our nations to reach out with acceptance to others..." "Open the ears of our Church so that we may hear the cry of those who are afraid..." "Open our hearts so we may be strengthened through your Spirit..."

The General Intercessions are not just another prayer form. They provide the opportunity for us, God's priestly people to respond to our privileged mission: prayer, concern, and action in bringing about God's Kingdom.

Reflection Questions

- 1) Why do I pray prayers of intercessions and petition?
- 2) When I pray prayers of intercession, what are my expectations of God? Of myself?
- 3) Do my prayers focus on the needs of my personal world? Include the needs of people and situations beyond my immediate circle?
- 4) What current events should/could influence my prayer today?
- 5) What needs of my local community should/could be incorporated into my prayer today?
- 6) If Jesus were walking the earth today, for what would he pray?
- 7) When/how can I incorporate "General Intercession type" prayer during my religious education sessions?
- 8) How can I lead children/youth to see the needs of the universal Church, the global situations, and the needs beyond their families, schools, and neighborhoods?
- 9) How can I help children/youth link their prayers of intercession to the Scripture readings of the day?

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