

# INTERCESSIONS OF THE COMMUNITY

The role of the new Petitionary Prayers in the liturgy

By EDWARD MATTHEWS

THE LITURGY is a mirror of the Church. It reflects the mood, the attitudes, the life and the belief of the community at particular moments in time. It is generally true to say that if an enquirer wishes to ascertain the state of the Church at some definite point in history, then he need only look at the liturgy of that time and he will receive an impression of the Church's understanding of itself in that age. The simplicity and relative spontaneity of the first three centuries after Christ give us an impression of a tightly-knit yet buoyant community, enlivened by a certain freshness and wonderment at the great mystery of salvation. Gradually this gave way, in a period of expansion, to a kind of 'establishment', to a society in which the Church played an increasingly important part in secular government and administration. In this period (roughly from Constantine onwards) the liturgy betrays a more formal style, and both the dress and ceremonial of the court made their mark upon worship. Much later, the isolation of the priest from his congregation, by reason of language (latin) and distance (in a sanctuary often screened from the people and with an altar placed against the far east end), is a fair picture of a Church in which divisions between priest and people are far stronger than at any other time in history. And in the Renaissance we see an immovable and immutable liturgy which owed much to the need for retrenchment and authority within the Church at large.

Looked at from this point of view, today's revised liturgy has much to say to us. It is the product of the Church as it actually is and of the society in which it finds itself. Perhaps at times we find this difficult to believe, since we have such detailed knowledge of the activities and personalities of the leaders of the liturgical movement and of the members of the various working parties responsible for the new rites. But if we take a couple of paces backwards we see a liturgy which fits well enough into the overall context of the Church and society in the twentieth century. Industrialization, the

consequent break-up of the social structure, the increasing desire for instant communication and the failure of many long-cherished assumptions about the physical world and its people: all these are factors which have had their considerable impact upon the Church and its worship.

The rapid break-down of the structures of authority in western society have to some extent been reflected in the Church. The liturgy, in its turn, reflects the Church. The Prayers of the Faithful at Mass and the Prayers of Intercession in the Divine Office would have been unthinkable a century ago, for they underline the fact that the liturgy is the worship of the community and not simply of a small number of specially deputed persons on behalf of a largely silent congregation.

Until quite recently the Church's liturgy was frequently viewed in terms of authority and officially approved forms. The Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1917, defines the liturgy in this way:

If worship is offered in the name of the Church by persons lawfully deputed for this function and through acts which, by institution of the Church, are to be offered only to God and to the saints and blessed, the worship is public; otherwise, it is private (Canon 1256).

Perhaps not so surprising a definition in the context of the Code. Yet even such a one as Louis Bouyer could write in 1954: 'The liturgy, to our way of thinking, is that system of prayers and rites traditionally canonized by the Church as her own prayer and worship'.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis is still upon official approval; though in fairness to Fr Bouyer, it should be said that the remainder of his book in which this definition is found is at great pains to dispel any purely juridical approach.

Vatican II, in its Constitution on the Liturgy, marks an important shift of emphasis:

The liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible to the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In it, full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members.<sup>2</sup>

Not that this statement of 1963 was exactly new. It is made up, to a large extent, of Pius XII's definition contained in his encyclical

<sup>1</sup> L. Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy* (London, 1954), p 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

letter of 1947 '*Mediator Dei*'. In its turn, '*Mediator Dei*' appears to be the natural outcome of a previous encyclical letter, *Mystici Corporis*, promulgated in 1943, which represented the pope's reflection upon the revived pauline teaching of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. So, in general terms, one can trace a pattern: with the upheavals in modern society, the Church experiences a reawakening of its consciousness as the Mystical Body of Christ, and this has led quite naturally to its more emphatic expression on the liturgy.

Paul had written to Timothy:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way (1 Tim 2, 1-3).

The practice of the early Church appears to have been a practical application of Paul's teaching. However it was seen as the exclusive prerogative of the Church, that is, of the baptized, to utter such prayers, and no one else was permitted to join in them until such time as he was baptized.

Justin Martyr, in about the year 160, after describing a baptism, writes:

After we have thus washed him that is persuaded and declares his assent, we lead him to those who are called brethren, where they are assembled, and make common prayer fervently for ourselves, for him that he be enlightened, and for all men everywhere, that, embracing the truth, we may be found in our lives good and obedient citizens, and also attain to everlasting salvation.<sup>3</sup>

About a hundred years later, Hippolytus, a priest of Rome, concludes his description of baptism and anointing in this way:

So let (the bishop) do with each one. And then they shall pray together with all the people: they do pray with the faithful until they have carried out all these things.<sup>4</sup>

Both Justin and Hippolytus describe baptism celebrated immediately before the Eucharist. This was no accidental feature. Throughout the period of preparation, which might have lasted years, the catechumen would have had no doubt about his status. At the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word he was required to

<sup>3</sup> E. C. Whitaker (ed), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London, 1970), p 2.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey J. Cuming, *The Apostolic Tradition from Hippolytus* (London, 1976).

leave the community: only the baptized were allowed to remain. Consequently the newly-baptized's first participation in the Prayer of the Faithful was a moment of great significance, for he was now judged worthy to pray with the christian community, to be one with them in their approach to God.

The Prayer of the Faithful was not a special baptismal rite: it was normal component of the Mass. Nor was it confined to Rome, to western communities; it was as common among eastern. What evidence we have suggests that these prayers were invariably prayers of petition, though their form differs from East to West. In the East they appear to have been in the form of litanies, to each invocation of which the people answered, *Kyrie eleison*. In the West, a text from Prosper of Aquitaine gives a different system, whereby the faithful are invited to pray for a series of intentions without any prayer formula being read aloud. For example:

... that infidels might be given faith;  
 that idolators might be freed from their impious errors; ...  
 that Jews might have the veil taken from their hearts, and receive the light of truth.<sup>5</sup>

The prayer intention for the Jews immediately recalls to mind the prayer for the 'perfidious Jews', formerly contained in the Good Friday rite and mercifully hidden from the bulk of the faithful by a screen of Latin. The texts of the bidding, or intention, of Prosper and the tridentine missal are almost identical, Prosper being the more charitable of the two.

Until the restoration of the Prayers of the Faithful by the Constitution on the Liturgy,<sup>6</sup> the *Orationes Solemnnes* of Good Friday were the only survivors of these prayers in the roman liturgy. How the prayers disappeared from the normal celebration of the Mass is not altogether clear. Responsibility is usually placed upon either Pope St Gelasius (492-496), or Pope St Gregory the Great (590-604), or upon a combination of both. It seems almost certain that Gelasius composed a litany along eastern lines, each invocation of which concluded with the cry, *Kyrie eleison*. The entire set of eighteen petitions, known as the *Deprecatio Galasii*, was to replace the Prayers of the Faithful. At some time, whether under Gelasius or under Gregory, the *Deprecatio* was transferred from the traditional place of the Prayers of the Faithful (after the Readings) to a point before

<sup>5</sup> *Capitula Auctoritatum*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 53.

the Mass actually began. The purpose of this was probably to shorten the Mass. By the death of Gregory, even the petitions of the litany had been eliminated, leaving the *Kyrie eleison* on its own. To this the West added *Christe eleison*, and thus we have the origin of these phrases in the Mass of today.

*Prayers of Intercession in the Divine Office*

Just as the Prayers of the Faithful act as a grand conclusion to the Liturgy of the Word at Mass, so the Prayers of Intercession play a similar role in the restored liturgy of Morning and Evening Prayer. From the incomplete references available, it would appear that some form of litany or *preces* formed an important part of the early Church's prayer, which eventually became the Liturgy of the Hours.

About the year 385, a lady by the name of Egeria was on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, and sent back to her friends (a religious community?) descriptions of all that she saw. This is what she had to say of the prayer which we call Evening Prayer, or Vespers:

At four o'clock they have *Lynchicon*, as they call it, or in our language, *Lucernare*. All the people congregate once more in the *Anastasis*, and the lamps and candles are all lit, which makes it very bright . . . For some time they have the *Lucernare* psalms and antiphons; then they send for the bishop, who enters and sits on the chief seat . . . One of the deacons makes the normal commemoration of individuals, and each time he mentions a name, a large group of boys responds, *Kyrie eleison* (in our language, 'Lord, have mercy'). Their voices are very loud. As soon as the deacon has done his part, the bishop says a prayer and prays the Prayer for All.<sup>7</sup>

Mention of the eastern *Kyrie* immediately reminds us of a relic of this practice present in our breviaries until quite recently, the *preces feriales*. Latterly these were recited only on certain days in Advent, Lent and on Ember Days, and they had acquired for themselves an exclusively penitential meaning. This almost certainly was the result of the gallican practice of praying for forgiveness whenever possible.

*The prayers and the people*

Such are the origins of the Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession. What is their meaning?

<sup>7</sup> John Williamson, *Egeria's Travels* (London, 1971), pp 123-24.

*Petition*

'Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you' (Lk 11,9). A clear enough injunction from Christ himself; yet for some reason petitionary prayer has fallen on hard times recently. Indeed there have been occasions when one has almost been embarrassed to ask anything of God at all, at least in public. This is perhaps because of the undue emphasis which such prayer received in the past; undue, not in the sense of praying too much, but in the sense that at times it has appeared that an almost magical effect has been expected of prayer.

Petition should be at the very heart of public worship. Prayer without it is incomplete. For when we worship (at Mass or in the Divine Office) we are making a statement about God and ourselves: his all-powerfulness and our nothingness, his total self-reliance and our complete dependence. The structure of the Mass underscored this point by first providing the community with time and words to acknowledge the fact that, both communally and individually, it has tried to do without God: to make, as it were, graven images of men and things.

The contrast provided by the prayer of petition with other forms of prayer is like the various tensions which enable a large bridge to remain upright. Sorrow for sin emphasizes one's weakness; praise of God and the calling to mind of his great works show forth his almighty power. These factors are very much present in the Liturgy of the Word, in the psalmody and the reading of the Divine Office. The worshipper, then, is drawn to throw himself on God's mercy, to put himself at the disposal of God's goodness and power. Man exists not simply to praise God but to conform himself to the Divine Master's will. It is precisely this which the Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession seek to bring about. The tension of praise is balanced by the tension of petition.

A. M. Roguet puts this in another way when he says that liturgy has a double function. On the one hand it is directed to God, and on the other to man: it is at the same time theocentric and anthropocentric.<sup>8</sup> Another pertinent point is that we cannot make God 'change his mind' by means of our prayers.<sup>9</sup> What we pray for in the Mass and the Divine Office is the grace to be conformed to

<sup>8</sup> Cf A. M. Roguet O.P., *The Liturgy of the Hours: The General Instruction*, (London, 1971); p 90.

<sup>9</sup> Cf J. D. Crichton, *Christian Celebration: The Prayer of the Church* (London, 1976), p 109.

God's will; 'nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done' (Lk 22,42). This approach is most certainly a useful path along which to travel to a solution of the problem of unanswered prayer. There are many who find this difficult enough in the realm of private prayer. Some may well feel that there is a form of guarantee attached to the intercessions contained in the Church's official liturgies. Far from it. What the Church is virtually saying when it presents petitions for public prayer is, 'We pray that we may discover God's will in this matter and have the strength to carry it out'.

*Call-response*

God speaks: his people reply. That is a thread which runs through the Old Testament liturgy, notably in the great meeting of God and the newly delivered Israelites at Sinai (cf Exodus 19). The same is true of the new dispensation where God, respecting man's free will, calls to him in the Word made Flesh. The Church's liturgy, because it is the work of our redemption, also reflects this dual movement. The Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession represent an aspect of the response.

This is clear first of all in the Mass. The Readings and the homily are the voice of God: 'Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel'. With the Prayers of the Faithful, the community receives its first opportunity to reply to the particular message in the day's Mass. True, the Eucharistic Prayer is a reply of a higher order, but the Prayers of the Faithful are far more immediate and specific. If, as they should be, the prayers are composed in order to 'match' some theme or themes contained in the Liturgy of the Word, then they will lay claim to being the community's prayerful reflection on what has just been proclaimed.

This, incidentally, is why one disagrees with those who would omit prayers for the pope and others on the grounds that they are prayed for in the Eucharistic Prayer. The Prayers of the Faithful are what their title says they are; the Eucharistic Prayer, on the other hand, is a presidential prayer. In any case, it is surely no great harm to pray twice for the pope.

The Prayers of Intercession at the Divine Office serve much the same purpose as the Prayers of the Faithful. Though there is no lengthy reading as at Mass, nevertheless God's voice is heard in the short reading as well as in the psalms: the Prayers are therefore the community's response in a more general sort of way. More specifically, they are the community's response to God's Word as it

is perceived in the time of the day (references to light and dawning at Morning Prayer), the day of the week (for example, references to the Resurrection on Sunday), and the season of the year, especially the major seasons such as Advent and Easter.

Within that structure there is a further factor which marks off the prayers of the morning from those of the evening. In the morning, especially on ordinary days of the year, the prayers have a more specific reference to the day just beginning, whereas those of the evening embrace a wider range of subjects sometimes with no particular reference to the end of the day.

### *Prayer of Christ*

Underlying all prayer of petition in the Church's liturgy is one all-important fact: it is the prayer of Christ himself. This truth has, as we saw at the beginning of this article, received much attention from Pius XII and Vatican II. Jesus is the one mediator between God and man; this mediatorship is exercised above all in the Church's liturgy. He is present: it is his action. We are assured of the worth of our response to God's call because the liturgy is Christ's action; and he makes our petitions his petitions. One can go so far as to say that whatever we pray about as a community will infallibly be heard by the Father. 'Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt 18, 19-21).

A most important corollary of the community's prayer becoming Christ's is one that at first sight might appear an exercise in semantics. What do we mean when we say that Christ's prayer becomes the community's prayer and hence of the individual members of the community? Each individual is limited in his prayer of petition by his own cultural and educational background. The Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession are limited by no such considerations. They represent the hopes, the joys, the fears, the desires of the entire community. The individual then is lifted on to a different plane. He is taken out of the narrow world of his own self-interest, and inserted into one which will make him aware of the needs and aspirations of countless others: the aspirations of Christ in his mystical Body.

Of course, because many of these prayers are composed by members of the local congregation, there is a danger that they will bear the imprint of some sectional interest. This need not happen

if the basic pattern of the Prayers – for Church, civil government, local community etc – is followed. It will surely happen too, and perhaps many of us have already noticed it in ourselves, that continued exposure to the Church's own petitions will have its effect upon private prayer. It seems impossible that one who has prayed in and with Christ during the liturgy will not retain, in his private prayer, some vestige of that experience, and so gradually build his prayer into a likeness of Christ's.

### *Conclusion*

The Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession have one or two dissimilarities which give them their own characteristics. Ideally (though rarely in practice) the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass should be in the form of a series of stated intentions with time for personal prayer between each intention. It is this form which is included in an Appendix of the new Roman Missal and is similar to what we have already quoted from Prosper of Aquitaine. Conversely, the Prayer of Intercession is never a simple invitation to pray; each intention is a prayer in itself and very often contains an element of 'confession', or public proclamation of God's manifold gifts. Thus the Prayers of the Faithful, in their purer form, are addressed to the community. They are an invitation to pray in one's heart. (Would that priest or reader would pause for silent prayer at each invitation). The Prayers of Intercession are invariably addressed to a specific Divine Person.

Let us conclude where we began. The prayers of petition, newly introduced into the Mass and the Divine Office, are the fruit of the life of the Church today. We live in a Church ever more conscious of its unity in Christ, ever more conscious that, by God's will, salvation comes to all through the Mystical Body. Collegiality, consultation and the like are small signs of this. The great sign is the renewed liturgy. 'The full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered above all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true christian spirit'.<sup>10</sup> Yet while the Church is more aware of its inner unity, we live in a world in which the individual is in danger of becoming more isolated, more cut off from his fellows. The Prayers of the Faithful and of Intercession both express the Church's unity and draw the individual into the community's petitions, which are those of Christ himself.

<sup>10</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14.

## Tenth-century Bidding Prayers in English

As indicated in the preceding pages, there is a significant difference between the prayer *of the faithful* (*Orationes Fidelium*) in the reformed Eucharistic Liturgy and that in the morning and evening prayer of the new Prayer of the Church. At Mass on Sundays and Holidays, after the homily and from the same place, the President of the Assembly calls upon all present to address prayers to God for various intentions, all ecclesial by nature. This ceremony is not a form of prayer as such; it is a 'bidding of the bedes' (prayers) of the people: that is, a calling aloud on them to pray, and a directing of them towards what to pray for. This is the traditional structure: we find it in England in the tenth-century book of the Gospels which belongs to York Minster. If, as seems very probable, the intention of the liturgical commission was to restore this form and structure, this is the primary reason why desires for spontaneity, more modern devotional formulations or predominance of local and more specific petition are irrelevant. In the title 'Bidding Prayers' which is now in common use in our Churches in England, 'bidding' is not the equivalent of 'petitionary', but a gerundival adjective: 'bidding the prayers' or 'the bidding of the prayers'.

*Wutan we gebiddan god ealmitigne . . .*

Let us pray almighty God, high King of heaven, and holy Mary and all God's saints, that we might work the will of God almighty the while we live in this passing life: that they might sustain us and shield us against the temptations of enemies, seeable and unseeable.

*Wutan we gebiddan for urne papan on rome . . .*

Let us pray for our Pope in Rome, and for our King, and for the Archbishop, and for the Alderman (*ealdorman*)<sup>1</sup>, and for all those on the four sides of this holy place who have peace and friendship with us, and for all those, inside or outside the english nation, who pray for us.

*Wutan we gebiddan for ure godsybbas . . .*

Let us pray for our godmothers and for our godfathers and for our spiritual brothers and our spiritual sisters, and for the prayer of all those folk who seek out this holy place with alms, with light and with tithings, and for all those whose alms we were receiving during their life and in their after-life . . .

[The rest of this line and the two following are ruled and left blank in the Ms.]

Let us pray a *Pater noster* for the soul of Thorferth, and for many more souls and for all the souls that received baptism, and believe in Christ from Adam's time to this day . . . *Pater noster*.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars tell us that Alderman here most probably refers to the Superior of York Minister.