

LITURGICAL PRAYERS

By CLIFFORD HOWELL

THE CONSTITUTION ON THE liturgy reminds us that 'liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the sacrament of unity – namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops. Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it; but they concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their different rank, office and activity'.¹

Liturgical prayer is therefore communal by nature: it is the prayer of the community which, by assembling under the authority of the bishop (or his representative), makes the Church present and active at some specific time and place. This does not mean that all liturgical prayers are spoken or sung by the community as a whole. That is true indeed of some liturgical prayers such as responses, acclamations and hymns; but others are prayed or sung by individual members, to whom some special rank, office or activity has been committed. Among these individuals, the most important is, of course, the presiding priest. There are prayers which he alone is authorized to say; and though these are personal in the sense that they are uttered by a single person, they remain communal in the sense that he speaks in the name of the community, as their spokesman, expressing sentiments or petitions which are (or ought to be) those of all members. That is why such prayers are in the plural form. The priest says 'we praise, we thank, we ask', and not just, 'I praise, I thank, I ask'. The voice indeed is of one, but the prayer is of many.

The *Institutio Generalis Missalis Romani* makes special mention of some of these prayers:

Among the items allotted to the priest, the eucharistic prayer is pre-eminent as being the climax of the whole celebration. Next in rank are the orations, that is, the collect, the prayer over the gifts, and the postcommunion With good reason these are called 'presidential prayers'.²

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26.

² No. 10.

Just as the 'eucharistic prayer is the climax of the whole celebration', so each of the other presidential prayers is the climax of one of its parts. In the introit, the penitential act and (sometimes) the *Gloria*, it is the community as a whole which is the agent; but then the action passes over to the priest who concludes the entrance rite with his collect. It is this intervention of their president which gives to the people's prayer an official or ecclesial character; he sets the seal upon it as the activity, not of some amorphous crowd, but of the legitimately assembled Church. The same applies to the preparation of the gifts: corporal and missal, chalice and purificator are placed on the altar by the deacon or acolytes; bread and wine are brought up by representatives of the faithful; but it is the priest who finally dedicates these for use in sacrifice by his prayer over the gifts. In the communion rite there is much activity by others, especially by those who partake of the sacred banquet; but this, too, is concluded and, as it were, ratified as the Church's act by the postcommunion of the president.

To avoid irritating repetitions it will be convenient, for the rest of this article, to refer to this trilogy of prayers (collect, prayer over the gifts, postcommunion) as the 'orations'. For they all have certain common characteristics which can be traced back to very early times. Before each one the people are invited to prayer, though the mode of invitation has varied somewhat in the course of history. For the most part it has been the simple proposal: *Oremus*. Let us pray. This is followed by a pause during which the people were to recollect themselves and realize that they stand in God's presence as the Church formally gathered for worship. It is the community as such which is now presenting itself before God; and it implies more than mere physical juxtaposition: it must be a thing of the spirit, the fruit of conscious advertence. (This pause ceased to be observed during the past few centuries, but happily has now been restored.)

After securing the attention of the community, the president says the prayer. Its official name is *oratio*, a title which indicates something of the character and style which the roman mind considered that such a prayer ought to have. It was to be an 'oration', a formal speech made to the divine majesty, audible to all those on whose behalf it was being uttered, just as the words of a spokesman who is addressing some august person are to be heard by the delegation which he represents. In civilised society such a speech, because of its circumstances, is expressed in polished and dignified phrases indicative of the highest respect.

In the latin liturgy this oration acquired its form and style during the period between the third and sixth century, when the art of public speaking was much cultivated in the roman empire. There were schools of rhetoric wherein the art of speaking with clarity, beauty and precision were brought to a high level. Many of the great Fathers of the Church who influenced the development of the roman liturgy had been trained in such schools, and they naturally employed in the service of the Church the techniques which they had learned. The style most admired took the form of an elevated prose with a majestic flow and euphonious rhythm; it used elegant phrases, balanced appositions or contrasts, symmetrical constructions, concise turns of expression: anything that could please the ear and delight the mind.

Typical was the device known as the *cursus*, an arrangement of words such that the concluding syllables of a sentence (or even of a clause) would have a pleasing and recognizable rhythm. A good example is the well-known prayer:

*Gratiam tuam, quaesumus Domine, mentibus nostris infunde (1); ut qui, angelo nuntiante, Christi Filii tui incarnationem cognovimus (2), per passionem ejus et crucem ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur (3).*³

Here (1) marks what is called *cursus planus* (smooth rhythm); (2) gives us a rhythm called *cursus tardus* (slow rhythm); while (3) is an instance of *cursus velox* (swifter rhythm).

In content the prayer exemplifies also a balance and a contrast in ideas. There are two ways in which we are to know of the incarnation: one is of this world and the other of the next. In this world we know of the incarnation mentally – we are told of it by the message of the angel. But in the next world we shall know it experientially – by sharing in the glory of the resurrection. A great many orations show such antitheses: examples are *corpus et anima; temporalia et aeterna; fideliter petimus, efficaciter consequamur; cogitandi . . . agendi; quod promittis . . . quod praecipis* and the like.

More important than the literary form of a roman oration is its thought-content. Because it is spoken in the name of all, the favours which it asks for are in general terms and such as to be the concern of all, rather than intentions which only some of those present could

³ 'Pour forth we beseech thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts; that we, to whom the incarnation of Christ thy Son was made known by the message of the angel, may, by his passion and cross, be brought to the glory of his resurrection'.

really make their own. The petition has a wide perspective, embracing matters eternal and universal, such as man's need for God's help, for forgiveness, for protection, for all things necessary to attain ultimate salvation.

Fr Jungmann has this to say:

The oration holds up for our consideration only that which is the object of public revelation and official teaching. And even the deposit of revelation it cannot portray in all its manifold aspects. It lays stress only on the main aspects, on the central dogmas, without going into detailed exposition. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that its final orientation is always the same. The greatness of the classical oration lies in the fact that it never loses sight of the ultimate goal. Therein, too, lies its great pedagogical value.

For this reason it soon became the practice to follow a definite rule in formulating the opening and closing words of an oration. It was an unwritten law in the primitive Church that the liturgical prayer of the priest must always be addressed to God, to God the Father. Private prayer and community singing might take various directions according to mood and circumstances. But the prayer of the priest is, from the beginning, addressed to God alone. It is like a broad river into which empty all the tributary streams and brooks issuing from the minds and hearts of the faithful. But this river cannot but empty into the ocean; it must seek its final goal. So too the prayer said by the priest seeks its ultimate goal; it rests only in God.⁴

The 'unwritten law' of which Fr Jungmann speaks became a written law during the days of St Augustine. The Council of Hippo, in A.D. 393, issued the following decree: 'When the priest stands at the altar, his prayer should always be addressed to God the Father'. The ruling, of course, covered only liturgical prayer – to be more precise, only the priest's prayer. For, in private prayer, Christians from the earliest times often prayed to Christ, or to his holy Mother or the saints; even in the liturgy the prayer of *the people* could be, and often was, addressed to Christ. We see examples of this in the *Kyrie* and the *Agnus Dei*. But it is the function of the priest, as president of the community, to channel all this devotion towards its ultimate goal, the Father; for the mass was not given to us by Our Lord as a means for worshipping himself. In it he is the principal worshipper, the high priest who leads us in adoring the Father. This rule that orations must be addressed to the Father was carefully observed for

⁴ Jungmann, J. A., S. J.: *Liturgical Worship* p 120.

about a thousand years. Only when gallican influences worked upon the roman liturgy to blur its clear-cut characteristics did some collects addressed to Christ himself find acceptance into the liturgy. Yet these have ever remained the exception rather than the rule. They are something foreign to the genuine roman style.

This style, however, always required that Christ should find some mention in orations, because it is through him that christians have access to the Father. Sometimes this reference is found in the body of the prayer, but always it occurs in the conclusion, which is a constant reminder to us of the christian economy of salvation. It was Christ who saved us; we are one with him through his outpouring upon us of his holy Spirit; even now, when he is in his glory, he is 'ever living to make intercession for us' as our eternal high priest.

Every collect must thus conclude: 'through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever'. Until recently, this 'long conclusion' was used also for the prayer over the gifts and the postcommunion; though now we use for these the 'short conclusion', the simpler form, 'through Christ our Lord'. In both conclusions the main thought is the same: Christ is our mediator, the bearer of our prayer to the Father. His mediatorship is emphasized by the phrases added to his name, 'our Lord', 'your Son'. As 'our Lord', he is united with us because we belong to him; we are his holy people, his brethren in the flesh. As 'your Son', he is united with the Father in the possession of the same divine nature. He himself once said, 'I and the Father are one'. The infinite distance between God and man is thus bridged over: it is indeed a man who presents our prayer to the Father, but he is at the same time God, the God-man. He is the perfect mediator.

The additional phrases of the long conclusion remind us also that our mediator is no mere figure belonging to the past; our Lord, our brother in the flesh, is even now living and reigning in glory; he is in that unity with the Father which is personified in the holy Spirit who eternally proceeds from them both. He is in the unity also which that same Spirit creates in the redeemed, the saints who are with their head in heaven, and the holy people united with him while still on earth. As the Council tells us:

In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem towards which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; we

sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory.⁵

From all this we see that the roman orations are liturgical prayers containing an immense richness of doctrine and devotion enshrined in a form of beauty. They are a precious heritage, bequeathed to us by the great Fathers of the Church who composed so many of them during that creative period which has never been surpassed; they are venerable because of the many centuries during which the Church has employed them in her worship.

But such a judgement does not apply to all the orations we have at present. While those from the classical period are admirable, not a few composed in later times are inferior because of the unskilful and hypertrophic use of 'relative predication'. This is a literary device, often found in roman orations to incorporate praise or motives for hope into a prayer which essentially is one of petition. Some of them begin by addressing God simply by his title, with or without qualifying adjectives (e.g. *Omnipotens sempiterne Deus* – 'almighty eternal God'); others replace the adjectives with a clause of 'relative predication', which can be used for the same purpose (*Deus qui hodierna die corda fidelium Sancti Spiritus illustratione docuisti . . .*).⁶ It is a convenient way also for introducing festal thoughts into the usual confines of the prayer; and, when kept within reasonable bounds, it can be an embellishment. But, especially on saints' days, it has often been overburdened by the intrusion of biographical details or lengthy theological reflections. A flagrant example is the notorious collect for the feast of St Jane Frances Frémiot de Chantal, the amplitude of whose name appears to have overflowed into the prayer composed in her honour:

Almighty and merciful God, who didst inflame blessed Jane Frances with love of thee, giving her grace to keep with admirable constancy, through the whole course of her life, to the way of perfection, and who wast pleased by her means to adorn thy Church with new offspring, grant through her merits and prayers that we who, knowing our own frailty, trust in thy strength alone, may be helped with grace from heaven to overcome all those things that withstand us. Through our Lord

⁵ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 8.

⁶ O God, who on this day hast taught the hearts of the faithful by the light of thy holy Spirit

When the liturgy was all in latin such involved lucubrations were an affliction only to those who understood that language. But now that we have the liturgy in english they have become intolerable. Not even the great competence of Canon O'Connell and Dr Finberg (who produced the above translation) can turn a bad latin collect into a good english one. There are difficulties sometimes in the shorter collects also; their very terseness makes it almost impossible to translate them into english of a kind which would have any impact on those who hear them. Most of the collects for sundays and solemnities are admirable, yet even among these one finds occasionally some word of which the precise meaning is obscure, or a phrase which defies translation into intelligible english, because of the very density of its thought. There are also a few collects written at a time when some particular heresy was raging, which show preoccupation with theological niceties hardly pertinent to our own times.

The new roman missal which the holy See has just published contains those parts of mass propers not already included in the new lectionary. Our hopes that, while retaining the good orations from the past, it would replace the poor ones with liturgical prayers that are satisfactory, have, to a large extent, been realized. Before these come into general use, the various commissions charged with translating liturgical texts into living languages will have to deal with them. The task should not be so difficult as in former times, because the reforming *Consilium* issued last year some new instructions about the translation of liturgical texts; and considerable latitude is now to be permitted. The *Consilium* has made it clear that verbal fidelity to the original is by no means required; the aim is that the ideas or sense expressed originally in a latin way should be faithfully rendered in an english way, a french way, a german way, and so forth. The genius of the modern language is to be fully taken into account. Those characteristics which assign a liturgical text to some particular literary genre are to be studied and identified, 'for example, in roman orations, the structure as a whole, the *cursus*, the respectful mode of address, the concision of expression etc'. But among these features it will be important to distinguish between those which are essential to the genre as such, and those which are merely linguistic. Thus the *cursus* and the device of relative predication are characteristically latin, and so would not have to appear in translations. But the general structure, the mode of address, the progress of the thought through motive to petition and the con-

clusion, belong to the genre rather than to the language and would have to be kept.

The orations of the ancient roman patrimony, so concise and rich in thought, may be translated more freely than certain other texts. Their ideas must be retained but may, if necessary, be given fuller expression to make their content relevant to the celebration and to the circumstances of today. On no account, however, should they contain mere verbal padding or be expressed in an inflated style.⁷

Experts chosen by the *Consilium*, then, are composing some new orations. May anyone else do so? At present there is no provision for this. We may use only the orations provided for us, and in the translations approved by our bishops. Would it be desirable that other people be allowed to compose new orations in living languages (and to use them) instead of translating those composed in latin? Opinions differ. My own, for what it is worth, amounts to this:

It is the masses of sundays, of solemnities and of the great seasons of Lent and Advent which are the most important celebrations of the Church, for they concern every practising catholic in the world. They pertain in a special way to the universal Church, keep us in touch with her feasts and seasons, and are a major influence in forming the 'catholic mind'. Hence these universally celebrated masses ought to be the same in content everywhere, differing only in the language used. *Lex credendi legem statuat supplicandi*.⁸ For such masses there should be no liberty of composition – we should all use what the Church gives us.

But for other masses in which comparatively few people are concerned, for weekday masses and those for particular occasions or specific groups, it would be desirable that local hierarchies be empowered to allow fresh compositions to be used. On these occasions and for such groups there is a pastoral reason for them to ask God, in the orations of the mass, for graces needed in their own circumstances not shared by the universal Church. The local church should be able to express itself. The president (with whatever prior consultation seems indicated) should be allowed to compose orations 'tailored' to the occasion and to the group. In the early days of such liberty (if it be granted) it would be well to require that the orations be composed some time before the event and sent up to the bishop

⁷ *Notitiae* (February, 1969), p 9.

⁸ *Mediator Dei*, 52. 'The law of belief sets the norm of petition'.

for approval. But after a while, if the bishop finds that his priests are becoming expert at this task, he might well give individual permissions to compose and use orations without first sending them in. Certainly I would be against any general permission; this would result in the production of a lot of unseemly rubbish and would lead to chaos. There should indeed be some liberty, but there must also be control. Through such a policy there might emerge from time to time some orations of genuine excellence, worthy of preservation and widespread use. The bishops would be able to adopt these officially into national or regional collections authorized for general use, and thereby provide an enrichment of our liturgy.

The principles governing the compositions of these prayers have already been outlined in this article. They should have the usual invitation and conclusion, be addressed to God the Father, be expressed in the plural, clear in meaning, concerned with petitions in some way connected with the economy of salvation and thus of importance to all present. In style they should be dignified, modern but not colloquial, clear but not prolix; they should have a good speech-rhythm and a certain beauty and sonority when spoken aloud. In this way they would conform to the Council's requirements in the constitution on the liturgy, according to which any innovations should 'grow organically from forms already existing',⁹ and might promote the flowering of that new creative era of which, we hope, Vatican II has planted the seeds by its liturgical reforms.

⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 23.