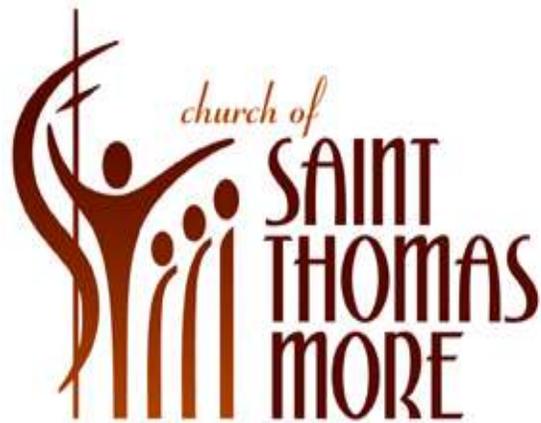


Intercessions – Prayers of the Faithful

In the New Testament, St. Paul urges us to offer "petitions, prayers, and intercessions" (1 Tim 2: 1) for all the people on earth. Every time we gather for mass, we do this in a special way in a series of requests called the "General Intercessions" or "Prayers of the Faithful."

These prayers draw us away from thinking only of our own needs and invite us also to pray for the needs of the Church at large, for public authorities, for the salvation of the world, and for those in need.



History and Origins

The Prayers of the Faithful have been part of the Christian liturgy since the early church. Their origins come from Jewish synagogue prayer, where they followed this pattern: The presider invited all the faithful to pray on a particular topic. The assembly prayed in silence, sometimes the deacon directed all to kneel. After the silence, the deacon directed all to stand. The presider prayed a "collect" prayer that collects the silent prayer of the assembly into a concluding spoken prayer to God. The assembly assents to this prayer by saying "Amen." The process was repeated with the next topic.

We still use this structure on Good Friday. As you know from that liturgy, this form can get pretty long. Pope Gelasius I, at the end of the 5th century, wanted to shorten the liturgy. So he adopted the style of intercessions used in the East; a litany in which the presider invited all to pray for a specific intention and the assembly responded with a short acclamation (usually "Kyrie eleison", which means "Lord have mercy").

In the next century, Pope Gregory the Great shortened the intercessions even more by removing the presider's invitation to pray, leaving only the repeated "Kyrie eleison" response after the deacon sounded the intention. (Sound familiar? This eventually became our penitential rite.)

Somewhere in the 6th century, the Prayers of the Faithful disappeared from the Roman liturgy, with the yearly exception of Good Friday. Fortunately, Vatican II restored the General Intercessions and reclaimed the role of the baptized in the praying for the needs of the world.

It is important to remember that these prayers are intended to draw us away from thinking only of our own needs and invite us to pray for others. This was stressed by the Bishops at Vatican II in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy:

"Especially on Sundays and feasts of obligation there is to be restored, after the Gospel and the homily, "the common prayer" or "the prayer of the faithful." By this prayer, in which the people are to take part, intercession will be made for holy Church, for the civil authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, for all mankind, and for the salvation of the entire world." (CSL #53)

Following a Form

The Prayers of the Faithful follow a set formula, which mirrors the list from that paragraph of the Constitution. Each week, we pray for the Church at large, for public authorities, and for those in need, whether they are sick, jobless, homeless or have other specific needs. We also pray for the dead, and for those who mourn.

Dr. Ralph Keifer, in his commentary on the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, notes that the restoration of the Prayer of the Faithful was intended to be one of the more significant reforms of Vatican II. As the name implies, this is “the prayer through which the laity especially express their ministry of prayer for the needs of the human race. Participation in this prayer was seen as a special privilege of the baptized.” (*from “To Give Thanks and Praise” by Ralph Keifer, published by Pastoral Press, 1980*) That’s why it comes right after the Catechumens are dismissed and we have professed the Creed, our statement of common belief.

It is very appropriate that these prayers are voiced by the deacon. In the early Church, the deacon was the minister with special concern for the poor, the sick, and the aged. The General Instruction notes that if a deacon is not present, a cantor, lector or another member of the faithful voice the prayer, not the priest, whose role is to introduce and conclude the prayer. (GIRM 71)

Our pastor, Fr. Jim Turner, writes the Intercessions we use each week, which means these prayers reflect the needs of our St. Thomas More community, as well as the needs of the Church and the world. We all give ascent to these prayers as we stand together and respond, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

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