

## The Mass – Communal Prayer

Do you remember the first prayer you ever learned? For me it was:

*Now I lay me down to sleep.  
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray Thee Lord, my soul to take.*

Do you notice all the personal pronouns, the “I”, “me” and “my”? We learned this and other childhood prayers at a time when each of us was the center of our own universe.

But at the same time we learned that bedtime prayer, we were being taught to give thanks together at mealtime:

*Bless us O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord.*

Our parents helped us look beyond ourselves and our own needs to see that we have needs as a family. We learned about the “we” beyond the “me”.

Listen carefully to the prayers used at mass. During most of the mass, you will hear no “I” or “me” prayers, only prayers that use the words “we”, “us” and “our”. The Lord’s Prayer is the best example:

*“Our Father,.... Give us this day our daily bread...”*

Every time we pray at mass, we pray together. Mass is not a time for personal prayer. The Church tells us this very clearly in the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy”, the very first document from Vatican II:

*Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the Church, which is the “sacrament of unity” (CSL #26)*

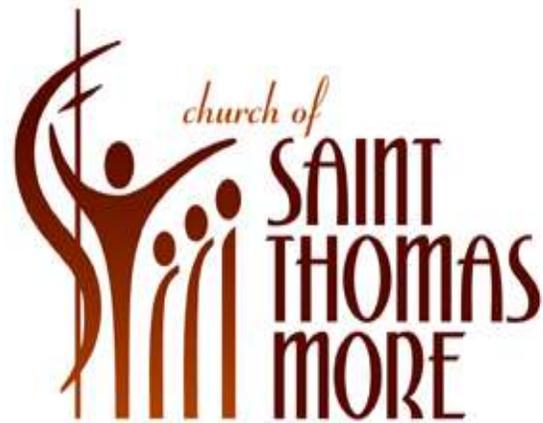
Sacraments bring about or effect what they signify, so the Church praying together at mass is not only a sign of unity, but by praying together we experience a deepening and strengthening of that unity.

So we are not individuals who happen to be in the same place at the same time. We are praying together as members of the Body of Christ, united in the sharing of Christ’s body and blood — a meal that is a gift from God.

*“Bless us O Lord, and these Thy gifts...”*

## Not Personal Prayer

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says “liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed & at the same time it is the fount from which all the Church’s power flows.” “The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious, & active



participation in liturgical celebration called for by the very nature of the liturgy.” (CSL 10, 14)  
These two quotes call the faithful to draw their strength & nourishment from the weekly communal celebration of the Eucharist. The *communal* aspect of the liturgy is the important part. It is not the time, nor place for private devotions. It is the time for our joining together as one in the celebration of the Paschal Mystery: life death & resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council recognized the need for private prayer devotions: “Christians are indeed called to pray in union with each other, but they must also enter into their chamber to pray to the Father in secret.” (CSL 12 )

“Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly endorsed, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church.” The Constitution goes on to say, that devotions, “... harmonize with the liturgical season, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, (liturgy) and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them.” (CSL 13)

Liturgy is “we”, not “me” time. 99% of the pronouns in our liturgies are communal (we, us, our). The pronouns tell us that it is the community who celebrates. The above quotes from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy indicate that our personal prayer and piety are very important, but they are usually not brought into the liturgy, especially if it is not a part of the liturgical season or without preparation, discussion and reflection. There are plenty of other hours during the week for private personal prayer.

It is important to remember that devotions and spirituality are unique and are not a “one size fits all”. The U.S. Bishop’s document on Popular Devotional Practices makes this point firmly. “We must be aware that in our Church today in the United States there are various ethnic groups who are living in different cultural contexts and we must be sensitive to the fact that these groups often find some devotional practices meet their spiritual needs better than others.”

Remember that just because something feeds your spirituality or draws you into a deeper relationship with God, Christ or Mary, doesn’t mean it will for others. The celebration of the Eucharist is the communal work the people of God, not a place for personal devotions.

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