

# A Prayer of a Priestly People

Paul F. Ford

Yesterdvwolution can become today's commonplace; monumental changes can be taken for granted; and great reforms can be weakened or even reversed through inattention, misunderstanding, and misuse.

Such forgetfulness and indifference can afflict Catholics with respect to the modernizing and updating the Church has been through since 1963. For example, in liturgy, who still recognizes the restoration of the general intercessions as one of the great changes of the Second Vatican Council? And yet it is. In the Universal Prayer, also known as the Prayer of the Faithful, the priestly People of God recover their proper and irreplaceable role of interceding for the needs of the Church and the world.

It is only a slight exaggeration to call the document that detailed the implementation of the Universal Prayer the first fruit of the liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. (Only the *Kyriale simplex* is older, and only by a month.) *Oratio universalis*, or in English, *The Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful* (UP), was released on January 13, 1965. Included in this 141-page document are fifty-four samples of the Universal Prayer in Latin and French (eleven of which have been translated into English in the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, Appendix V: Examples of Formularies for the Universal Prayer.

The Universal Prayer was restored to the liturgy by the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 53:

Especially on Sundays and holy days of obligation there is to be restored, after the gospel and the homily, "the universal 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 people, and for the salvation of the entire world.

## THEOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSAL PRAYER

Pope John Paul II said, "When our people realize . . . that they are called to be ' . . . a royal priesthood . . . ' and . . . that all their prayers of petition are united to an infinite act of the praying Christ, then there is fresh hope and new encouragement for the Christian people" (Newsletter XIX [August/September 1983]).

In fact the *Universal Prayer* makes two bold analogies: (1) just as Communion is the climax of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, so the Prayer of the Faithful is the climax of the entire Liturgy of the Word; and (2) this prayer is the hinge between the two parts of the Mass (UP, 4). As theologian Robert Cabié summarizes:



The assembly should look forward to praying the Universal Prayer with the same longing that they have for Communion.

The Universal Prayer can be seen to mark the end of the entire Liturgy of the Word and at the same time to be, as it were, the threshold of the Eucharist proper. Coming as they do after the dismissal of the catechumens, they are the privilege of the faithful, and they underscore the latter's priestly character. To present to God the appeals and hopes of the entire human race is to share in the care and concern of the Priest of the New Covenant who gave his life for the salvation of the world; it is to share in his mission. We may say that the intercessions represent the other side of evangelization, since speaking of human beings to God is inseparable from speaking of God to human beings.<sup>1</sup>

Cabié is reflecting the Church's vision for this prayer:

[Its] place . . . is at the end of every celebration of the word of God. . . . The reason is that this prayer is . . . the fruit of the working of the word of God in the hearts of the faithful: instructed, stirred, and renewed by the word, all stand together to offer prayer for the needs of the whole Church and the whole world. (UP, 4)

But is this the experience of average Catholics? Or do they hear canned intentions, laundry lists of persons who are sick or deceased, and petitions for every conceivable need to which they respond with a rattled off "Lord, hear our prayer." Does the assembly look forward to this prayer with the same longing as they have for receiving Communion? Do they experience the same satisfaction after this prayer as they do after Communion?

Seven years after issuing UP, Rome reminded conferences of bishops throughout the world, "*Much* is to be made of the general intercessions, which . . . is the community's response to the word of God proclaimed and received."<sup>2</sup> But do we make *much* of this prayer? Do people feel that the Church is only "X, our

Pope, X, our bishop, and all the clergy” or that they are the “gathered Church . . . , the great entreater and advocate appointed for all humanity” (UP, 3)?

Catholics in the United States come by their misunderstanding and/or misuse of the Universal Prayer honestly. One of the most effective and life-giving substitutes for liturgical spirituality before the Second Vatican Council was the weekly novena devotion. People avidly filled out slips of paper with their intentions printed out, including the all-covering and ever-intriguing “special intention.” But there is perhaps nothing more contrary to the universal and liturgical character of the Prayer of the Faithful than the voicing of the very particular and devotional novena petition, “for a special intention.” Special intentions have their place in liturgy: during the silence for prayer at the time of the Collect.

For people to experience their “liturgical dignity,” the Universal Prayer needs to become what it was designed to be:

In the light of God’s word and in a sense in response to it, the congregation of the faithful prays in the universal prayer as a rule for the needs of the universal church and the local community, for the salvation of the world and those oppressed by any burden, and for special categories of people. . . . In these petitions, “the people, exercising its priestly function, makes intercession for all men and women,” with the result that, as the liturgy of the word has its full effects in the faithful, they are better prepared to proceed to the liturgy of the eucharist. (“Introduction” to the *Lectionary for Mass*, 30)



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In the Universal Prayer, prayers of petition from the People of God are united to an infinite act of the praying Christ.

Thus, the readings for Mass contain many matters from which intercessions might be composed. But how do we make this ideal real in our parishes and communities?

## THE UNIVERSAL PRAYER IN PRACTICE

The task of composing the Prayer of the Faithful belongs to the deacon, cantor, or “intentionist” working together with the liturgy preparers. In forming the petitions, a series of questions can be addressed to the readings (and to the Holy Spirit who wrote them and who wants to inspire our prayer). The answers to these questions form the raw material out of which the Universal Prayer can be written. (In the following list, anything in *italic* is from UP, 9, a passage that expands upon the four categories of *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 69–70 [for the need of the Church, for public authorities and the salvation of the world, for those burdened by any kind of difficulty, and for the local community].) Mark passages in a copy of the Lectionary readings with the letters *c*, *w*, *n*, and *l* for the possible intentions.

First, the preliminary questions: Where do these readings and this liturgy fit in the liturgical year? In the world/national/regional/local secular calendar? Then:

- Do the readings remind one of [*c*=Church] *the needs of the Church universal, e.g., for the pope, the bishops, and pastors of the Church, missions, Christian unity, and vocations to the priesthood and religious life?* Does any reading suggest any particular profession/vocation/job that the lay faithful occupy and for the doing of which they need God’s help? Does a reading suggest any kind of ministry in the Church today? Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in the Church? To the young in our Church (children, adolescents, and young adults) and ministry to them?
- Do the readings remind one of [*w*=world] *national or world affairs, e.g., peace, leaders of government, good weather, the safety of crops, elections, economic crises, etc.?* Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to the needs of women around the world? To the needs of the youth of the world (children, adolescents, and young adults)?
- Do the readings remind one of [*n*=those in special need] *those beset by poverty or tribulation, e.g., for those absent, the persecuted, the unemployed, the sick and infirm, the dying, prisoners, exiles, etc.?* Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in crisis? To the young in special need?
- Do the readings remind one of [*l*=local] *the congregation and members of the local community, e.g., those in the parish preparing for baptism, confirmation, orders, marriage, for pastors, for a coming parish mission, for first communicants, etc.?* Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to women in this local community of faith? To the young of this community?

(I especially emphasize women’s concerns because most of the human authors of Sacred Scripture focus on men’s issues and write out of male experience. I also direct attention to the concerns of young people whose issues seldom seem to be mentioned or prayed about at the Sunday liturgy in many parishes.)

To see how the Universal Prayer is structured, it is instructive to look at the eleven sample formulas in *The Roman Missal*, Appendix V. Each Universal Prayer begins with the presider’s invitation to pray and concludes with a short prayer. UP instructs the priest celebrant that, in his invitation, his responsibility is to motivate (the Latin says *excitare*) the people to pray; his concluding prayer is “limited to asking God to hear the petitions poured forth.”<sup>23</sup> (The priest celebrant should remember that he is one of the faithful whose prayer this is.)

UP, 12, directs that the intentions are composed in one of three forms:

- the full form (“Let us pray for . . . that”), which states those to be prayed for and what is to be prayed for; there is a pause for the silent prayer of the people after “for . . .” and before “that . . .”
- a first partial form (“Let us pray that . . .”), which immediately mentions the favor to be requested

- a second partial form (“Let us pray for . . .”), which states only those being prayed for.

The response of the congregation to the petitions may be: (1) a short acclamation, (2) silent prayer, (3) a long formula that the people recite (this is the form for the Universal Prayer at Morning and Evening Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours), and (4) a combination of the first two: silent prayer followed by a short acclamation in answer to the deacon’s invitation.

We are most familiar with the short acclamation but this familiarity has bred confusion. Many think that the intention is the prayer and the acclamation is a mere response. To reeducate ourselves, it may be helpful to use silence alone or silence followed by an acclamation. Silence set aside for the faithful’s prayer may be the key to recovery of the Prayer of the Faithful.



In forming the petitions for the Universal Prayer, a series of questions may be asked of the readings.

## DO’S AND DON’T’S

With experience, writing the Universal Prayer will become more comfortable. Some guidelines are helpful for those gaining facility with composing the prayer. The following are to be avoided:

- intentions that are too particular (thus neglecting the universal)
- intentions that are didactic (instruction belongs in the homily and, there, sparingly)
- intentions that are partisan or tendentious
- announcing the priest’s intention for the Mass
- too frequent prayers for the pope and bishops, as if these exhausted the categories of “Church.” (Of the fifty-four samples in UP, only four pray are for the pope.)

The following should be heeded:

- Remember this is a petitionary prayer. The intercessions should not be of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, or penitence. Avoid excess in the number of petitions. (General Intercession, 207.9, reminds us “five or six intentions suffice.”)
- At least one intention should come from each of the four categories already noted. (There is not a prescribed order.)
- Allow for silence at the end of the petitions for the congregation to continue to pray before the concluding prayer;

do not say “and now for *your* intentions,” as if the foregoing wasn’t their prayer.

- Don’t change the short response often but vary it sometimes, perhaps seasonally.
- Do sing this prayer some of the time. The third edition of *The Roman Missal* offers four tones and five sung responses in Appendix I: Various Chants for the Order of Mass.
- End the concluding prayer with “Through Christ our Lord.”

## CONCLUSION

Now restored to our worship, the Universal Prayer should be composed with care and earnestly prayed, for the Church’s power of prayer is great. The whole Church, the baptized praying with united voices and hearts, interceding for the needs of all humanity, is moving the world ever nearer to the Kingdom of God’s reign over the earth.

These reflections underscore the final reason why we should pray well the Universal Prayer. As Jews believe that, with every Passover and every Sabbath well celebrated, the coming of the Messiah is hastened, so ancient Christians believed that every Eucharist shortens the time until the Second Coming. The Bride has only to join her voice to the Spirit’s to be able to say, “*Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!” ♦

## Notes

1. Robert Cabié, in *The Church at Prayer*, ed. A.G. Martimort (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 2:69–75, 203.
2. *Eucharistiae participationem*, April 27, 1973 (*Documents on the Liturgy* 248: 1990), emphasis added.
3. UP, 7, is about the invitation and UP, 14, concerns the conclusion.

(This article was adapted from “An Overview of *Oratio Universalis*” in *The Liturgy Documents, Volume Four: Supplemental Documents for Parish Worship, Devotions, Formation, and Catechesis* [Chicago: LTP, 2013].)

PAUL F. FORD, PHD, is professor of systematic theology and liturgy at St. John’s Seminary, Camarillo, California. He specializes in ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and liturgical music. He is compiler (with Mary Ellen Hynes and J. Michael Thompson) of *A Sourcebook about Sunday* (Chicago: LTP, 2005) and of *By Flowing Waters: Chant for the Liturgy* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), and convening composer of the Collegeville Composers Group, the authors of the Psallite Project, The Liturgical Press.

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