

Leading Intercessions in the Eucharist

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Introduction

Intercession was included in the Eucharist from the earliest times. Justin Martyr speaks in the *Apology* of offering up 'sincere prayers in common for ourselves, for the baptized person, and for all other persons wherever they may be' ([First Apology, 65](#)). Ambrose refers to prayer as 'human utterance' ([Jungmann, Mass of the Roman Rite, 53](#)), such as the people would be invited to make after the canon of the Mass. After Pope Gregory the Great (590–604), prayers for the living and departed were found within the Eucharistic Prayer, and as these prayers came to be inaccessible to the people, the medieval development of the office of Prone introduced intercessions in the vernacular. With the Reformers Calvin, Bucer and Hermann, these prayers were included between the sermon and the Eucharistic Prayer.

During the liturgical revisions in the Church of England in the twentieth century, a radical turn was made in Series 2 (authorised in 1967), prior to the completion of the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980. This was a return to the principle of the old Roman *Orationes Solemnnes*. Intercession was made for 'the whole Church of God', divided into four sections: the Church, the nations of the world, the sick and afflicted, and the departed. Bidding could be freely made on these subjects, together with a silence, a versicle and response, and a short prayer. These short prayers could be joined together into a continuous whole. The versicle and response was, in fact, a restoration of the Kyrie in its use as a response to intercession. (We borrowed the Intercession of Series 2 straight into the *Scottish Liturgy 1970*.)

Further revisions in the Church of England expanded the subjects from four to six with intercession now being 'for the Church and for the world.' These categories, used with considerable flexibility, were:

- For the universal Church (and the local bishop)
- For the state and nations of the world
- For the local community and families
- For the suffering
- For the departed
- A commendation of all worshippers and Christians to God.

This remains essentially the pattern of intercession in the *Alternative Service Book* and in *Common Worship* in England. In the *Scottish Liturgy 1982*, the intercessions, between the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic Prayer remain essentially the same, with, as in England, three more detailed forms of intercession as alternatives. In their simplest form (section 14) intercessions are defined by the words,

*Prayer is offered
for the world and its people
for those who suffer and those in need
for the Church and its members.*

The alternative forms of intercession, given in an Appendix, have a responsorial pattern, the first form with the response, 'Father your kingdom come,' and the second, 'Lord, graciously hear us.' The third form acknowledges (a little employed

option in practice) the place of silence in intercession. Each option ends with a short concluding prayer.

It might be noted that in the alternative forms of intercession provided for in the *Alternative Service Book* (Section 81), a shortened form of intercession draws upon the much-loved 1662 prayer 'for all sorts and conditions of Men.' In the BCP this prayer was placed among the occasional 'Prayers and Thanksgivings' 'to be used at such times as the Litany is not appointed to be said,' indicative of a clear linear descent from the first great vernacular liturgical prayer of Thomas Cranmer, the Litany of 1543, produced at the behest of Henry VIII while at war with Scotland and France, and described by F. E. Brightman as 'one of the magnificencies of Christendom.' In the ASB it is interspersed with versicles and responses and it differs from the intercession in the main by placing the petitions for the world before those for the Church. It might further be noted that there are three modern forms of Litany in the Scottish Ordinal (1984), which in effect form the intercession of the Eucharist.

The point of mentioning these examples here is to indicate the availability of a long and fine repository of intercessory prayer within the traditions of Anglican liturgy that careful preparation should not ignore.

Principles to be observed

1. Whatever form is chosen for intercession, whether entirely as free prayer, or within the printed alternative forms, or a mixture of the two (and all are perfectly acceptable), the concept of a single prayer addressed to God should be strictly sustained throughout. Prayers should begin simply either with a direct address to God ('Father, we pray for . . .'), or else an invitation to the faithful to Prayer ('Let us pray for . . .'). No other words of introduction or explanation are necessary.
2. The allocation of specific subjects should be carefully related to the appropriate sections of the prayer, understood as a unity. It is, perhaps, a pity that 1982 at Section 14 gives such minimal categories. The Church of England practice (which began with the successive revisions up to the ASB and later *Common Worship*) of providing clearer categories would be helpful and give clearer direction to those preparing intercessions within the Eucharist. It is helpful if the structure and order of categories is followed precisely. This makes for clarity and keeps the prayers focused. The following pattern is recommended:

The world and its peoples
 Those in sickness or in need
 The Church and its members
 The dead
 Ourselves and one another.

3. Each section should have three parts: a brief bidding, a time of silence, and a response. The importance of silence in prayer should be emphasized, allowing people actually to pray and call to mind the names of those in need. Responses can vary in different churches, but they should be simple and clear. It is important to remember that this is the prayer of the whole church and not just the person leading the intercessions. (The often heard question, 'Who is doing the intercessions this

week?’ should be avoided! *Everyone* ‘does’ the intercessions, led each week by one person.)

4. The purpose of intercessory prayer and its place within the narrative of our 1982 liturgy should be carefully borne in mind as we make our preparation. The intercessions generally follow the Creed, and can precede the Confession and Absolution and then the Peace, as the final great act before the Eucharistic Prayer. (In passing, I should mention that it makes far better sense, and is stronger aesthetically, to have the Confession here rather than at the beginning of the service.) They probably originate in the *diptychs* – the reading by the deacon of the names of those who have brought an offering of bread for the Eucharist, and given that such offerings were vicarious, made on behalf of the departed, these names were added to those of the living. Later were added those of godparents of catechumens, the names of saints and martyrs for whom we should give thanks, and so on. Thus intercession is a gathering of all before God, and a placing them in his hands before the Eucharist is celebrated. It naturally follows, in our preparations, from the statement of common faith, the gathering of all to God, the confession and absolution and finally the act of peace. Then – and only then – are we truly ready as a people, both present and physically elsewhere (because confined to hospital, or departed this life perhaps) to offer, as one people, the liturgy of the sacrament.

5. Thus it is of supreme importance that intercessions should be as brief as is necessarily possible. Length and verbosity is generally pleasing neither to the congregation (or, one may dare to say, God). Silence allows everyone to add their own private prayers as part of the congregational intercession. Nor should the intercessions in any way suffer from two frequent faults: first, that of becoming a news bulletin as a sort of reminder of what God might have forgotten, and second, as a nudge for God to get on and heal Mrs W or relieves the pain of Mr Y. Rather, intercession is a placing of them all in God’s hands inasmuch as they too are members of the Body of Christ or part of God’s created world that he is saving by his Son. It is better to start with, ‘We pray *for...*’, rather than, ‘We pray *that...*’

6. A simple reminder. We pray to God the Father, through God the Son, and by or in God the Holy Spirit.

7. The preparation of intercessions is a heavy responsibility for anyone, lay or ordained. It should not be done at the last minute or without proper prayer and seeking for God’s guidance. The names of those in the congregation who are sick or in need should be gathered, through prayer lists and so on, and as far as possible not forgotten. We should remember that intercession is not simply petitionary, but should include the giving of thanks to God, and should never be an attempt to organize the world for our convenience. It is always good to take some time before the service begins for quiet reflection and prayer before leading others in prayer.

8. Intercession should be tactful and thoughtful towards others. At times things sometimes are best said in silence to avoid embarrassment or worse. This does not mean that they are not included – but be aware of the privacy of others even as we are bringing them to God.

9. Finally. It is almost always good practice to write out intercessions in full rather than risk stumbling into sentences that become incoherent or worse. Intercession can suffer catastrophically from ‘ums and ers’ as we lose our way, or else, even worse, the intrusion of words of apology to the congregation as we lose grammatical coherence. Write them out, do your homework, keep them short, remember the importance of silence.

Examples of prayers of intercession

– to be used as guidance only

We pray for all who suffer; for all caught up in violence, for refugees and the homeless, for those who grieve the loss of a loved one, and for children who are abused by those they should be able to trust.

We bring before you now those for whom our prayers have been asked ... , that they may be touched by your healing love.

Silence

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

We pray for your Church throughout the world, especially where Christians live in fear.

We pray for the leaders of the Church, especially *N.*, our bishop, and for ...

We pray for those to be baptized, those preparing for marriage ...

Silence

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Reflect on what is good about these examples and the principles which they suggest to you as you prepare to lead the intercessions in your own congregation.

Suggested reading

Still perhaps the best essays are those by W. Jardine Grisbrooke, ‘Intercession at the Eucharist’, *Studia Liturgica*, 4 (1965), 129–155; 5 (1966), 20–44, 87–103.

See also Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, Paul Bradshaw (eds), *The Study of Liturgy* (Revised edn, Oxford, 1992), *passim*.

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