

## “LET US PRAY FOR THE CHURCH”

We now come to the principle intercessory prayer of the Mass, that which was once called ‘The Prayer of the Faithful,’ but which we know as ‘The Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church.’ It is a long prayer, a many-faceted prayer, and one which, as its name implies, covers a lot of ground. But before we get to the particulars, let us take due notice, first, of the basic fact that *Christians pray*. That may seem rather obvious, but it is a fact of great significance. It means that they do not live as though they were self-sufficient. They recognize that they need God, that it is in him that they live and move and have their being. They know that God is the whence, the wherefore and the whither of their life, and that they live out their lives before him, before his face, *coram Deo*, as Martin Luther would say.

But note, secondly, that Christians not only live their lives from God and toward God, they live for other people and pray earnestly for their well-being. A small child may be taught to say prayers at bedtime for ‘me and mine’—for Mommy, Daddy, Sis and Bro, for Teddy the Bear and Aunt Sue, but the mature Christian prays for the whole state of Christ’s Church, for all the world—for the president of the country and other world leaders, for the CEO’s, so to speak, of the major branches of the Christian Church, for priests and congregations, for those in particular need or enduring special trial . . . and for those Christians who have left this world to go on before us.

Put simply, Christians are a praying people. Without living their lives from and for God, without looking to him for his sustenance, blessings and direction of their lives, and without reflecting in their prayers his concern for all the world, the clergy and laity of the Church, and especially those in need and the least among us, they would not be Christians. Prayer makes them Christian. Other things are necessary as well, of course, the Word of God and the holy Sacrament and deeds of mercy, but without praying they cannot be Christians. Prayer is as necessary to the soul as air to the body. Without it we simply die.

In our liturgy, the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church follows on the heels of the Offertory and indeed can be seen as part of it. At the Offertory we bring our tithes and offerings, which represent the commitment of ourselves, and these are offered with the bread and wine, which represent the body and blood of Christ. This Oblation is then blessed and enveloped in a cloud of incense, which represents the prayers of the saints, that is of us all. The Altar being thus prepared, the priest turns now to the congregation and asks them to pray that his sacrifice and theirs (note the words) may be acceptable to God, and the people respond, asking that the Lord receive the sacrifice at his hands to the praise and glory of his Name and to their benefit as well as that of all his holy Church. At that point it is then most appropriate to pray for all Christ's holy Church. I know that you know the prayer well but you may want to look at it on pages B40 and 41 of the *People's Missal* and follow along as we consider its specific content.

The prayer itself begins with a reminder, not to God but to us, that the apostle has solemnly enjoined us to intercede and give thanks for all men, for all people. This is an allusion to the injunction of St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy (2:1-5):

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men.

For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour;

Who will have all men be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

This exhortation to pray for all men is a reminder of that priestly office which belongs to the whole Church and of our responsibility for the whole world. John Wesley said the world was his parish. Even as we approach this most holy sacrament of the Church, we might say especially as we approach this most holy sacrament of the Church, we do not forget that the sacrifice of Christ re-enacted therein was not for us alone but for the whole world. Each of the four Gospels ends its portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ with a record of the commission of our risen Lord to his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. The grand purpose of God in all his dealings with humankind is, as St. Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, to gather all things together in Christ (1:10). It is by the ministry of Christ through the Church that God's

ancient promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed will come to fulfillment. It is easy for us to forget as we gather week by week that it is not for our sakes alone that we do so, but ultimately for the sake of the entire world God so loved.

The prayer moves then from a focus on “all men” to ask God to mercifully accept our alms and oblations and receive our prayers, which prayers then first ask God to inspire the Church catholic (Cranmer shied away from the word) with the spirit of truth, unity and concord, as we emphasized repeatedly last month during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Here it is helpful to remember that the prayer before us was written by Thomas Cranmer in the midst of the English Reformation and the agony of the divisions that came so painfully to the fore at that time, and it expresses a concern that must always be uppermost in our minds for that unity of Christians for which our Lord prayed and for their agreement on the truth of God’s word. Unity and truth cannot be separated from one another and here they are appropriately joined.

In its second paragraph we pray for Christian rulers. In Cranmer’s mind the ruler would always be Christian for the King was head of the Church of England. In Romans chapter 13 St. Paul reminds Christians of their responsibility to be subject unto the higher powers, for the government is of God and its ministers bear the sword for the sake of maintaining order, promoting good and repressing evil. That whole passage from Romans requires more in terms of commentary than we can give it this morning, but you can see that this second paragraph of the prayer reflects its concern for justice, for the punishment of wickedness and vice and the promotion of order and virtue. It goes without saying that in the United States of America the reference to maintaining the true religion must be understood in a somewhat different way than in England. Here we have no established religion.

Next we pray for all bishops and other ministers (for they need it), and here we insert, as do many Anglican Catholic churches, the names of the Bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople as well as that of our Anglican metropolian. Herein we echo the wonderful prayer of Lancelot Andrewes, that most exemplary 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican divine, who prayed always for the whole Church, for the Eastern, the Western and “our

own.” This is a concern for the whole of Christ’s Church that we seek always to bear in mind and in prayer until that day when we shall be one.

Having prayed for the bishops and priests of the Church we pray next for the people, for all the people of the Church, but especially for the congregation that has gathered. We pray that “with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear and receive” the holy Word of God. This emphasis on the Word was a major focus of the Reformation as it sought to readjust the Church’s compass. It is mentioned that they may “*hear and receive*” the Word. The two are distinct and each is necessary. One is reminded of the Parable of the Sower, just read, and that some seeds were planted and did not take root or were choked out by worldly concerns. This same note is sounded in the wonderful Collect Cranmer wrote for the Second Sunday of Advent:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life.

In this Prayer for the Church there is added a mention of the intended fruition of the Word of God when properly heard and received, namely service to God and holiness and righteousness of life.

The prayer for the people of God is then focused especially on those in particular need, and asks for God’s comfort and succour (a wonderful word that asks God for special reinforcements) for those who, in this transitory life, are (and this is spelled out with richness of detail in the midst of a prayer that otherwise employs great economy of words) for those who are “in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity.” Surely that covers every exigency! Note that the prayer does not ask for deliverance from these various adversities, but for God’s comfort and succour in them. Avery Dulles, the noted Roman Catholic theologian who died in December at the age of ninety, said something in his last formal lecture at Fordham University that is very relevant in this regard.. He suffered greatly and could no longer speak. He sat in silence as his lecture was read by Fordham’s president emeritus. These were among his words:

Suffering and diminishment are not the greatest of evils but are normal ingredients in life, especially in old age. They are to be accepted as elements of a full human existence. Well into my ninetieth year I have been able to work productively. As I become increasingly paralyzed and

unable to speak, I can identify with the many paralytics and mute persons in the Gospels, grateful for the loving and skillful care I receive and for the hope of everlasting life in Christ. If the Lord now calls me to a period of weakness, I know well that his power can be made perfect in infirmity. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

“We most humbly beseech thee, of thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succour all those who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity.

Having prayed for the Church Militant, for those who serve and suffer “in this transitory life” we look in the last paragraph of the prayer to the Church Triumphant. A Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church considers the Church in its fullness and joins those on earth with those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. The latter have escaped the trouble, sorrow, need and sickness of this world but still stand in need of continual growth in the love and service of the infinite and incomprehensible God before whom they stand. This brief reminder of saints in glory causes us to think back on ourselves who yet struggle in this transitory life and to pray that we may be given grace to follow their good examples so that we may endure and persevere and bear the good fruit of holiness and righteousness all the days of our life that we may be partakers with them in the heavenly kingdom.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!  
 We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;  
 Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.  
 Alleluia! Alleluia!

This is the whole state of Christ’s Church for which we pray.