



The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume — 10

The Opening Prayer

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

Now the priest says something odd: “Let us Pray!” Haven’t we already been praying this whole time? Yes, perhaps. But as we shall see, this prayer was (and still is) traditionally called the “Collect.” It was thus named since its purpose was to collect all these opening prayers, (and whatever other personal prayers we brought), into one summary prayer. So, yes we have been praying and praising, but the invitation still stands: “Let us pray!”

Well? Don’t just stand there!...Pray! It is too common that we Catholics often don’t take the words of our liturgy seriously. To many they are just ritual words that don’t really register with us any longer. But listen to what the celebrant said: “Let us pray!” So perhaps we ought to actually bow our heads and pray. The celebrant is supposed to wait for a moment or two of silence, but many go right into the text. This is a shame. The rubrics clearly direct that we actually pause to pray. So pray, actually pray. The text that follows, whether said or sung by the celebrant, serves to summarize, or collect, our individual prayers, as well as to state or summarize a theme either of the season or the liturgy we have begun. Pray along with the celebrant, pray.



History. The basic body of the opening prayers (Collects) of the Western Church developed and appeared for the first time, between the 3rd and 6th Centuries. It was during this time that there was completed the transfer of the Liturgy from Greek to Latin. Prior to this time the formulation of the prayers was left primarily to the celebrant who freely extemporized them, usually following a common format. However, this seems to have caused difficulty in many cases especially as the Church spread far and wide. St. Augustine rather humorously remarks that catechumens who might be well educated should not laugh at, or mock bishops and priests, who might not be so eloquent in the wording of their prayers, and might fall into “barbarisms” and “blunders” in their vocal prayers at Mass. Apparently it was not always so clear to the people what they were saying “Amen” to!





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By the 4th Century there may be found increasing rules that, only texts which have been approved, should be used at divine services. And so gradually, these texts were composed and became increasingly binding upon the celebrant. Feast days, commemorations of the saints, and other celebrations all served as occasions for the composition of new collects. Over the centuries the number of collects within the Mass increased. Sometimes there were three collects to be said. Shortly before the Second Vatican Council the number was once again reduced to only one and this is still the rule today. Thus the opening prayer gains prestige by the fact that there is no second or third round of requests.

The posture of the people during this prayer has changed somewhat over the centuries. Originally they knelt just before the prayer. At the invitation, “Let Us Pray,” the Deacon or another minister would ask the people to kneel and pause for silent prayer. Presumably however, they stood for the prayer itself. Eventually this kneeling posture was carried into the recitation of the prayer itself. However, by the 4th Century, kneeling for the prayer began to decline. In 325 AD the Council of Nicea directed that kneeling was to be replaced by standing during the Easter season, out of respect for the risen Lord. This arrangement gradually spread to other Sundays in general, then to feasts, and finally to ordinary days, and even to days within penitential seasons. Today the posture of standing for the prayer is maintained.

The term “Collect” comes more literally from the Latin word “collecta” which refers to a people gathered or assembled for some purpose, (in this case worship). Historically, in the Roman Church, the term referred especially to groups gathered for penitential processions. However, in time, due especially to Gallican (French) influences, the term came to be understood as referring to the opening prayer, which was a “gathering up” or a “summing up” of all the prayers of the people. The very function of summing up prevents the contents of the prayer from being anything more than general in nature. The important matter here is that the community appears before God, and by virtue of the priest acting as its “mouthpiece,” humbly and reverently directs its petitions toward God.

The character of the opening prayer is one of petition. It can also be an act of adoration and thanksgiving. The prayers of the Roman Church, written in Latin, are rather terse: brief and to the point. This shows a Roman preference for conciseness and clarity. This does not mean that they lack beauty. In fact, they are widely regarded as masterworks of Latin Literature. However, they get right to the point. It is unfortunate that the beauty, clarity and brilliance of the Latin Opening Prayers, (Collects), has not been well represented by the present English translations. Help is on the way however, in the new translation, soon to come out, this November. There are many qualities of the Roman Collect which could be mentioned but especially worth noting is the Latin love of antithesis (two opposite things paired off against each other). For example the following themes are often played against one another:

1. Human struggle and divine help.
2. Passing deeds or realities and eternal truths.
3. Earthly misery and eternal blessedness.

The People assent to the prayer with their “Amen!”

So, when the celebrant says “Let us Pray...” We ought to pray. In the years ahead it is hoped the new translations will unlock the hidden beauty of these beautiful Collects for the average church-goer. Presently, much is lost in the current translation and only available to those who read Latin. Here is an example of a Latin Collect and a rather literal English translation of it:

Deus, qui fidelium mentes unius efficis voluntatis, da nobis id amare, quod praecipis, id desiderare, quod promittis, ut inter mundanas varietates, ibi nostra fixa sint corda, ubi vera sunt gaudia.

O God, who make the minds of the faithful to be of one accord, grant your people to love what you command, and to desire what you promise that, among the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed there, where true joys are.



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