



THE MASS OUR SCHOOL OF PRAYER

“Lord, teach us to pray.” That request made of Jesus by his first disciples, is still made by his followers today. As Christians, we realize that prayer is essential in our spiritual life. Yet many Christians are not really sure how, or when, or for what they should pray. And most who do pray, would like to be better at prayer, better at resting in the heart of God.

We can learn about prayer by reading books on the subject, by participating in spiritual retreats and conferences, by learning from the example of men and women versed in prayer, and by following the guidance and advice of spiritual directors and guides. Yet there is another way we can learn to be better at prayer, and that is by “enrolling” in the school of prayer called the Mass. In the Mass we find various types and modes of prayer. In this article I would like to consider what the Mass can teach us about prayer. How the Mass can help us to learn how to be better at prayer. How the Mass can be our school of prayer.”

Kinds of Prayer

First of all consider the kinds of prayer present in the Mass. Generally, there are four recognized types of prayer, namely, adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. Each is present at various times during the celebration of Mass. In fact, we are continually moving among these types of prayer all the way from the Opening Song to the Concluding Rites.

Adoration, giving glory and praise to the Holy One, the creator and sustainer of all that exists, can be found throughout the Mass. The Gloria is an example of such a prayer of adoration, as is the *Sanctus*, the Credo that concludes the Eucharistic Prayer, and the acclamation of praise that follows the Lord’s Prayer.

Contrition, admitting our sinfulness and recognizing our need for the mercy of God, is present in the Act of Penitence, in the petition for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer, in the plea for mercy found in the *Agnus Dei*, and in our response to the Invitation to Communion, namely, “Lord, I am not worthy...”

Thanksgiving, proclaiming our gratitude to God for all His gifts, can be seen above all in the Eucharistic Prayer, in which we give “thanks to the Lord, our God” for the gift of salvation and new life that is ours through the passion, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ.

Supplication, bringing our needs before the heart of God, can be discovered in the Collect or Opening Prayer, in the General Intercessions, in the supplications for the living and the dead and for all the Church in the Eucharistic Prayer, and in many other places throughout the liturgy.

These various types of prayer found in the Mass teach us that prayer should be varied in nature. We should not simply come before God, as we most often do, telling God of our needs and desires, our worries and concerns. Prayer should also lead to praise the God who is Love and Beauty, Light and Life. Prayer should bring us to recognize that before the Holy One we are sinners in need of mercy and compassion. Prayer should lead us to conclude that

all we have, even our very desire to pray, is a gift. In response, all we can do is proclaim our praise and thanks to The Source of all good gifts.

The Paschal Mystery

“Our school of prayer” also brings before us the Paschal Mystery. This central mystery of our faith proclaims that by his passion and cross Christ conquered sin and death and became the source of resurrection and new life. Each time we pray the Mass we are taught that we have to empty ourselves, we have to let go, we have to give ourselves in service to those in need, we have to die so that we might be filled with new life. We have to live the Paschal Mystery.

This is brought before us at many times in the liturgy, particularly as our gifts of bread and wine are presented. Those gifts represent our self offering to God. As those gifts are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ during the liturgy, so what we give to God is transformed and made new.

The Paschal Mystery should also be part of our private prayer. That happens each time we take time to pray in the first place. We give of our time so that we may learn to give more freely of other aspects of our life. We lose time in prayer so that we might gain a deeper relationship with God. We die to constant work and busyness so that we might live more conscious of the God who fills the space we have opened in our day. By our daily giving of time and attention to God through prayer, we learn to give more fully of ourselves to the God who transforms what we give and returns it transformed and raised to new life.

Words and Models for Prayer

The Mass, “our school of prayer” teaches us words and models that we can use when we pray outside of the liturgy.

- For example, the *Gloria* can be our words of praise during a time of private prayer.
- The Prayer of the Faithful provides a simple structure that can be used to lead a group of people in prayer. It can also remind us that our prayers of supplication should not just be for our needs, but for the needs of the wider world around us.
- When we gather for a meal, the prayers said by the priest at the preparation of the gifts can serve as a model for our words of blessing. For example, *Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation, through your goodness we have this food that graces our table, food that earth has given and human hands have made, it will be nourishment for our body.* All can then respond *Blessed be God for ever,* as they do at Mass.
- The Preface of the Mass can be a beautiful prayer for a special feast day, especially when praying with a group of people. For example, on the Feast of Saint Joseph, the leader can begin with the preface dialogue and then continue with the words of the preface for Joseph, the Husband of Mary, and all can conclude with the *Sanctus*.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer alone or with a group, we can continue with the embolism (*Deliver us, Lord, from every evil and grant us peace in day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from every anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ*) and then conclude with the doxology *For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.* The words of the embolism, which embellishes the last petition, are especially appropriate in this age of terrorism and violence.

Part 2: Waysto Pray: embodied prayer—listening, singing, silence, service

