

THE PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Universal Prayer, General Intercessions



The 1966 booklet by the Congregation for Divine Worship, “The Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful” (UP) states that 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. This prayer is the hinge between the two parts of the Mass.

“The General Intercessions 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 the 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. [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)

Great care should be taken in the crafting of the Prayer of the Faithful and the voicing of the needs and concerns of the community and world. These should be written with the Lectionary in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Please, don’t make them too long, and do resist the urge to tell God what to do! There are many resources to assist you in writing prayers of the faithful that are relevant, including the sample prayers in **Appendix I-2** of the **Roman Missal**.

The Intercessions

Professor Paul Ford, in an article called “Let My People Pray: The Theology and Practice of the Universal Prayer (a.k.a. the General Intercessions or the Prayer of the Faithful),” asks if average Catholics only hear

“‘canned’ intentions provided by well-meaning publishers, or laundry-lists of persons who are sick or deceased or petitions for every conceivable need, to which they respond with a rattled off “Lord, hear our prayer.” Do ordinary people look forward to this prayer with the same longing as they have for receiving communion? And do they experience the same sort of satisfaction after this prayer as they do after Communion?” He writes that there is perhaps nothing more contrary to the **universal** and liturgical character of the Prayer of the Faithful than voicing at it the very **particular** and devotional novena petition, “for a special intention.”¹ Special intentions have their place in liturgy and even in the Universal Prayer but they are “worked in” in the silences.” The petitions should be sober and succinct and, according to GIRM 69-71, should include **at least four intentions**:

- for the Church
- for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world
- for those burdened with some kind of difficulty
- for the local community

The questions below are adapted from Dr. Paul Ford’s suggestions for those who compose the Prayer of the Faithful.² “Intentionists” can address these questions to the readings themselves (calling on the Holy Spirit to inspire their prayer). The answers to these questions form the raw material out of which the universal prayer can be made. The words in italics are from UP, §9, a passage which expands upon the four categories above.

First the preliminary questions:

- Where do/does these readings/this liturgy fit in the liturgical year?
- Where do they fit in the world/national/regional/local secular calendar? Then,

Do the readings remind one of **[a] the needs of the Church universal, e.g., for the pope, the bishops and pastors of the Church, missions, Christian unity, vocations to the priesthood and religious life?**

- Does any reading suggest any particular profession/vocation/ job which the lay faithful occupy and for the doing of which they need God’s help?
- About any kinds of ministry in the Church today?
- To the young in our Church (children, adolescents, and young adults) and ministry to them?

Do the readings remind one of **[b] 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 current events around the world?
- To the needs of the youth of the world (children, adolescents, and young adults)?
- To particular groups remembered this day/week/month?

¹ *Liturgical Life*, the publication of the Office for Worship of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, May 1992. ©1992–1997 Paul F. Ford. All Rights Reserved. Used with Permission.

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Do the readings remind one of **[c] 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 or to the young in special need?
- To those who are considered enemies?

Do the readings remind one of **[d] 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.?**

- Are there any activities of the parish (with respect to Word, Sacrament, and/or Community/service illustrated in these readings/this liturgy about which the General Intercessions can pray?
- Is there anything about any reading particularly applicable to persons in this local community of faith?

Placement

The Prayer of the Faithful usually follows the Homily and the Creed. In the celebration of Baptism, however, it is said immediately after the homily, preceding the Baptism. The petitions begin by praying for those who are **about to be** baptized, to which may be added more general intercessions. The Blessing of the Water, the Renunciation of Sin, and the Profession of Faith then follow the Prayer of the Faithful.

What should be included in the intentions?³

- Beauty of poetic expression
- Strong ideas in simple language
- Symmetry and consistency of form within each set of intentions; don't introduce some with "For..." and others with "May..." or "That..." They should be written in parallel form, always following the same pattern within one set of prayers
- Clear cues to the people's response
- Inclusivity and diversity regarding who and what is prayed for. The US bishops have suggested that there always be a petition for peace at every Eucharistic celebration.⁴ Be careful not to pray for some groups to the exclusion of others. During wartime, we often pray for certain groups — our soldiers, the military — and forget other groups, e.g. the numerous support civilian support staff, diplomats, etc. How about remembering in prayer those who lose loved ones on both sides of the fighting? And should we not pray for our enemies?
- Theological correctness; beware of fuzzy or inaccurate expressions of God's nature, attributes, or activity.

³ Inspired by Michael Kwatera's book, *Preparing the General Intercessions*. Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

⁴ USCCB, *The Challenge of Peace*. 1983. p.295

What should not be included in the intentions?

- Jargon or theological abstraction (e.g. That the pearly gates will open wide to accept our loved ones)
- Didacticism or “teachiness”, or lecturing the absent and presumed guilty (e.g. That the Holy Father and bishops will be faithful to the true teaching of Jesus Christ)
- Telling God what to do and how to do it!
- An examination of conscience
- Thanksgiving: this prayer is to ask God for what we and others need, not to express personal or even communal thanks. That’s what the Eucharistic Prayer is for.
- Propaganda and political positions; concerns must be expressed with great sensitivity to the complexities of human situations

Response

In the common litany form of the general intercessions, the assembly makes a response to each of the intentions, for example: “Lord, hear our prayer,” or “Lord, have mercy.” The response may change according to the season, led by the presider who cues the assembly, for example: “Let us pray for the Church and the world with the words: Lord, show us your love.”

The response may be spoken or sung, or it may be a silent prayer after each of the intentions. If the intentions are in multiple languages, a Latin or Greek response may be suitable, for example: “*Deus, exaudi nos*” or “*Kyrie elison*.” There are musical settings that incorporate several of these responses for multilingual celebrations. Whatever you do, make sure that the assembly can easily enter fully into the prayer.

Writing and presenting intercessions in the name of the assembly has traditionally been a diaconal role because it is the deacon, serving among the people in a ministry of charity, who ought to know well the needs of the community. He can give voice to those needs and has done so since the end of the fourth century. (GIRM 177) The intentions are announced by the deacon preferably from the ambo. If no deacon is present, then a cantor, a lector or one of the lay faithful may do this.

Beginning and End

The Invitation to Pray, always prayed by the presider, is addressed to the assembly. It is not addressed to God nor does it take the form of a prayer. It may be fittingly based on the day’s readings. The Concluding Prayer, on the other hand, is properly addressed to “God” or “Lord,” not to Jesus Christ or to the Holy Spirit. It should have a familiar ending that easily evokes the assembly’s “Amen”: for example, “through Christ our Lord.”

As a conclusion to the Prayer of the Faithful, the priest may use whichever Opening Prayer was not used at the beginning of the Mass. This is a fine way of using the images and spirit of the season contained in the prayers of the Roman Missal.

“Work, as if everything depended on you; pray as if everything depended upon God.” St. Augustine