The Prayer of the Faithful: Mystagogy and Performance

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When in 1964 the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy mandated that the Prayer of the Faithful be restored to the eucharistic liturgy very few, liturgists apart, had any concrete idea, much less experience, what that Prayer would look like. The very general descriptive phrase it used was destined to have a curiously long life:

By this prayer, in which the people are to take part, intercession shall be made for the holy Church, for the civil authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, for all the people, and for the salvation of the entire world.1

By way of justification for this listing it appealed in a footnote to 1 Tim 2:1-2; presumably as providing a mandate for the prayer from either scripture or the practice of the early church.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings (eucharistias) be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity (1 Tim 2:1-2).

This very complex piece of apologetic, demonstrating that despite their rejection of ‘groves and altars’ – to use Menecius Felix’s expression - the Christians were not anti-civic atheists, is pressed into service to justify, apparently, both the notion of specific petitions and also that praying for earthly rulers, most of whom by the 1960s, unlike the kings of yore could not claim any sacral connection, might take place within the liturgy.

That few really knew what was involved, much less the theological justification for the practice as the work of a priestly people, became apparent in that the Consilium issued a document the following year giving far more detail on this prayer and publishing with it a set of specimen prayers.2 This elaborate document, with a detailed historical analysis, more or less disappeared: it has had little impact on later discussion of the Prayer nor upon this practice. The specimen prayers – similar to the specimen prayers found in the 1969 missal – have more or less established the common form of this Prayer since that time. This form is a series of statements according to the formula ‘For … that … Lord hear us.’

When the General Instruction on the Roman Missal appeared in 1969 this Prayer received three short paragraphs that really did little more than repeat the mandate from Sacrosanctum consilium.3 The Consilium document was not mentioned but there was a statement that Prayer was an exercise of the people’s priestly function – an idea given elaborate expression in the Consilium document; the list of petitions from Sacrosanctum concilium was repeated and then given as a sequence of numbered items that were ‘as a rule’ to be included (but it noted that the petitions could be linked more specifically to certain celebrations); and, lastly, it noted that the presider could open and close the prayer, with the intentions being announced by another, and the response could be verbal or silent prayer.4 As is the way with ritual, a pattern soon emerged and has remained more or less unchanged ever since. It is generally perceived to be a fairly simple and uncontroversial part of the liturgy. It is also widely viewed as not that important partly because its content can be locally composed, partly because it is seen as an option (and so an ‘extra’) and partly because a series of ‘Lord graciously hear us’ do not seem much more than part of a formulaic exchange of words.

The quality of the celebration of this Prayer varies from those places where this is a perfunctory rite to far more elaborate ways of drawing the community into the prayer. In most parishes the standard form on Sundays is a sequence of requests, about half a dozen in number, read from a text by one of the readers; and the structure of the prayers – when taken from printed sources - is quite closely modelled on those from the specimen sets of petitions published in 1966.

The celebration has not been immune from problems. These could be placed under three headings.

First, a lack of appreciation of what is taking place in the Prayer. This is evidenced by the names given to it. By far the most common in Britain is ‘Bidding Prayers’ which despite its deep Anglo-Saxon roots from bet- (the Old High German root for asking / praying) is now confusing. At best it is taken to mean just a string of requests, or more generally a shopping list or a wish list. Elsewhere the most common name is ‘the Prayers of the Faithful’ – note the plural – with its sense that it can be either a list of wants or that it can be any set of prayers that the people want to utter.

Second, there are elements that confuse what is intended. The most common expression of this is the recitation of the ‘Hail Mary’ by the whole congregation – now fairly widespread – justified on the basis that this is combining ‘our prayers with Mary’s’ but without noting that what follows is not a petition to God the Father but a prayer of praise to a creature. In some places if there is a novena in progress the prayers of the novena are substituted. In other places the petitions are
framed as requests of the Christ – this is particularly prevalent where there is an opening to the gathering to give voice to their own petitions and prayers to Jesus seem to emerge naturally – or formal prayers to the Christ for mercy as used instead of petitions.

And third, many people have great difficulty in thinking that by saying something similar to ‘Lord graciously hear us’ that they have actually prayed. There is perceived to be a lack of engagement with the prayer. The sequence has the sense of that which is fixed in the script, the same sort of stuff each day, and it tells God what should happen – it is as predictable as ‘the nod to God’ one expects from American politicians.

And while the existential needs of humanity may not change – for peace and security, that the hungry may have food, the sick healing, and those in crisis may have deliverance – the repetition of the same phrases fall into the ritual trap of the quotidian being boring.

One other aspect of community prayer needs also to be kept in mind. There is a truth known to poets that if a poem wants to engage with a universal truth, it must engage closely with a particular. The more particular a poem’s focus, the more it says about the great scheme of things. This insight seems to apply equally to that form of poesis which is intercessory prayer. We pray most intently for the Church, the world, the big problems when we focus on the particular need that we see, experience and feel just before our eyes. Keats engages with the mystery of time in a Grecian urn, Gerard Manley Hopkins has the ‘inscape’ of the creation in the flight of a small bird, and so it is in praying that we find a new person to lead our music that we start to see the need to pray that all Christians will actualise their vocations. The formal list of ‘universal Church’ followed by ‘public authorities’ and ‘the salvation of the world’ followed by ‘those oppressed by any need’ followed by ‘the local community’ runs right against the grain of this poetic truth. Following it does not ensure a universality or a roundedness, but simply a retreat to formal generalisations and cold abstractions. All of which may indeed be true, and merit an assent, but if ‘Lord graciously hear us’ is to be more that such a nod of agreement we have to begin elsewhere.

So the renewal of this prayer called for a greater level of appreciation – by all concerned – of what we are doing in this prayer. This is best considered as an element of mystagogy because there is no simple ‘fact’ to be understood (as if it were a matter of catechesis or liturgical training) but rather everyone needs to grow in their own sense of what makes this special. So it is a deeper awareness of the mystery of the Church, a sense of the vocation of the Church as a priestly people who give voice to the creation’s need to be heard expressing its dependence on God, and an awareness of the priestly nature of our baptism. This growth in awareness cannot be quantified, and one can quantify obliquely catechetical tasks, because our understanding of God’s mercy, that the Father listens to our needs, and our sense of our vocation in the Christ cannot be complete. We shall only be fully aware of the mercifulness of God when we are in the divine presence; as Paul expressed it ‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood’ (1 Cor 13:12). Likewise, no two members of the Church have the same experience of prayer nor pray in the exact same way, and we can grow in our appreciation of the priestly nature of our baptism. This growth in awareness cannot be quantified, and one can quantify obliquely catechetical tasks, because our understanding of God’s mercy, that the Father listens to our needs, and our sense of our vocation in the Christ cannot be complete. We shall only be fully aware of the mercifulness of God when we are in the divine presence; as Paul expressed it ‘For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood’ (1 Cor 13:12). Likewise, no two members of the Church have the same experience of prayer nor pray in the exact same way, and we can grow in our appreciation of the need for prayer and the nature of prayer that is most appropriate and our own. Therefore, participation in the Prayer of the Faithful is not to be imagined as another ritual task, but as a time in each liturgy – for the Prayer is to be part of every liturgy! – when we actualise part of what was begun in baptism and which, whether we ‘understand’ it in that way or not, is part of being on Christian pilgrimage.

However, while a case can be made for addressing the nature of the Prayer from either the standpoint of our absolute creaturely dependence or from the sacerdotal nature of the incarnation which continues within the Church as the Lord’s Body, neither of these are appropriate to what is an activity of the Church. The place to start is with the experience of the performance of the prayer, and especially what we can say about that performance after half-a-century of practice.

The formats produced in 1965 looked back to historical precedents and to specific occasions in the liturgy such as the Good Friday prayers and the Orationes imperatae as found in the Graduale, but these examples were taken from a liturgy that was not in the vernacular nor one which had the level of congregational engagement we take for granted. Moreover, it made other assumptions that in 1965 have been by-passed by developments.

First, they assumed that there was a hierarchically rational structure to the Prayer (universal Church, civil society, the local church, particular needs) which provides a useful taxonomy lest the Prayer become a list of ‘my wants’ – what one liturgist referred to with the wonderful phrase: ‘a letter to Santa’ – but this does not reflect how most people do pray or recall those aspects of their life for which they want to pray.

Second, while they recognised intellectually that this Prayer could not be confined to a written-out textual format, they were so embedded in the fixed-text world of Trent, where every word uttered was formally published, that they created as the usual standard practice that the core of this Prayer is read petitions. However, in those areas where we are most anxious to pray there is little place for such formulae; while such formulae give the impression that this is merely a formulaic event rather than something we would recognise experientially as petitions for our deeply felt needs.
Third, a change has taken place within our liturgical culture, first recognised by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, whereby we have moved beyond ‘the Gutenberg Galaxy’ and in our rituals we evaluate meaning coupled with authenticity as the value. Only that which is felt and seen to come from the heart has any personal value: thoughts remain below. This means that room for ‘private prayer,’ silent prayer, and spontaneous prayer has to be given a priority – this was only glimpsed by the 1965 Consilium document – or the Prayer risks being dismissed as just more words, a bore, or ‘mere ritual.’

What would such a performance of the Prayer look like? It is to sketch one scenario for performance that is the concern of the remainder of this paper. I imagine it as a number of modules – each here listed by a capital letter – some of which are essential (i.e. always present), some of which are usually present, and some of which are only occasionally present. It is the challenge of those who plan and lead liturgy to adapt to the fact that no two gatherings are ever the same – even in a monastic community time is moving on, the situation of the members of that church are changing and the world in which they pray is changing; and this Prayer is a priestly reaction to the moment in which that church finds itself gathering.

A. The presider introduces the Prayer. The primary rationale of this element, obviously essential, is that it makes a boundary for this event from what has taken place whether that is a reading, a homily, a profession of faith, or something else. In terms of content the primary focus must be on who we are as a People such that we can intercede. So phrases such as ‘because we are the priestly people we have a duty to intercede for all humanity and for our sisters and brothers’ or ‘gathered with Jesus our High Priest, let us ask the Father for our needs.’ The second content element is to make clear the One whom we are addressing: the Father. We are in the Christ and with the Christ and we pray through the Christ, but the focus of petition is neither the Son nor the Spirit (and certainly none of the saints) but the All Holy Father. This latter point should not need stating but we have developed so many confused habits in this regard that we need to be vigilant.

The Prayer is not simply an element of the eucharistic liturgy but, ideally, of every liturgy and so we need to think of this as the presider’s function rather than ‘the priest’s task’ – every Christian is, after all, a member of the priestly people whose Prayer this is. This introduction can introduce and lead directly into the first element which is a call to the gathering to pray in silence.

B. A role for silent prayer has always been envisaged as part of this Prayer not only in the modern documents but in the moments spent kneeling between the statement and the collect in the Good Friday intercessions, but when it is included in the Prayer at the Eucharist it is invariably at the end of the sequence and seen as a ‘catch all.’ Therefore, it becomes (when used – and in many places there is no time for any silent prayer) an ‘add on’ which sends the signal: we have just dealt with the big matters, but if there are any private needs, we can now pray for those needs in silence. However, we should place it first.

By beginning with silent prayer by and from all, we focus people on the need to ask the Father for what we all need. We begin with those needs for which we are, out of our own existence, moved to pray. After a moment or two – it has to be long enough to let us settle and get over coughing – a voice other than the presider’s can help us to recall for whom and what we want to pray. So the reflection – the tone is that of a reflection – could take this form:

‘Who have we promised to pray for during the week?’
Pause. ‘Who is in need in our family?’ Pause. ‘Who is sick?’ Pause. ‘Who is going through problems?’
Pause. ‘What about the people we work with?’ Pause. ‘For what else do I need to pray?’ Pause. ‘Did I say to anyone else “I will pray for you!”?’ Pause.

By focusing on our individual actuality we focus our collective attention on this aspect of all liturgy. Our activity of praying for those whom we know and are close to us and whose problems worry us, ‘switches on’ our concern and alerts us to the links that bind us humanly as sisters and brothers as at the Lord’s family.

C. We come to every liturgy with the concerns of the world echoing in our minds, and the liturgy, in virtue of the Logos having pitched his tent among us (Jn 1:14), takes place in the heart of the creation. The liturgy is not an alternative place to the world but where the creation is brought by our priestly consciousness into a relationship with God. This means that just as awareness of what is important to us ‘right now’ – the news – has a place in this Prayer.

In many places this is a standard element of the Prayer with either a special text produced for an event (e.g. ‘for the victims of the recent flooding’) or a text adlibbed by the presider. This is more than a case of ‘keeping it relevant’ it is an expression that we as God’s People keep any and all who are suffering or in need, or in our care – and part of this is our prayer. But where should we locate it in the performance and what form should it take?

If we are serious that liturgy is the summit of the Christian life, rather than a pious track running parallel to life, then our prayer for the urgent events of the day must be at the top, or close to the top of those specifics we mention in the
Prayer. Moreover, we should avoid the ‘for … that God …’ formula in favour of ‘for those …’ and then leave silence for the gathering to recall, sympathise and pray.7

This formula of a mention followed by silence is preferable for several reasons.

- Because it does not seem to tell God what to do.
- Nor tell others what ‘we’ think should be done.
- Sound trite as if there is a simple answer that will ‘make everything OK again.’
- It avoids stock turns of phrase that make the action of praying appear but a formulaic response such as we hear from some politicians such as ‘they are in our thoughts and prayers.’
- Avoids in some situations appearing as if God is on one side of a conflict (invariably the side of the one praying).
- Avoids the need to script a text for someone leading the prayer who would find a more elaborate formula uncomfortable without a written text. So, for example, after a gun-outrage or terrorist incident: ‘For all those caught up in the attack in X on Thursday’ followed by silence or by ‘Let us pray’ and then silence. Then after that pause ‘For the victims of Cyclone X’ and so for the two or three ‘top stories’ of the moment. Thereby we address the desire that we make ‘intercession … for the civil authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, for all the people, and for the salvation of the entire world.’ Once again, the prayer evoked within the Prayer is not simply a token word but the more heartfelt reflection of the assembly’s members such that if one of the group were asked after the liturgy ‘did you pray for those caught up in the disaster?’, that person would say without hesitation: ‘Yes, we prayed for all those people at Mass.’

D. Every liturgy takes place at a specific time (e.g. Lent or Ordinary Time) or for some specific reason (e.g. a funeral or wedding or as part of the initiation process) – and it would be bizarre if that actual occasion were not a cause of our intercession. Indeed, in all the rubrical mentions of this Prayer this fact is mentioned and that ‘the list of intercessions may be more closely concerned with the special occasion.’ These petitions tend to be more closely focussed on the Church and on the local community, and the formats that we have used most commonly are probably best suited to this part of the Prayer. So we have those aspects of the situation where we are, more or less, agreed on what precisely we as a group want, and then all can join in that prayerful wish with a great shout of ‘Lord graciously hear us!’ in response to the announcer’s ‘Lord hear us!’

All of the gathering can be agreed that we wish the newly wed a long and happy life together and that we would ask the Father to grant them this. We can all share in the prayer that God who is the source of all mercy and consolation would take pity on the family of our deceased sister or brother. We can assume that all Christians wish to be renewed in their discipleship this Lent. But we may have to think more clearly – and so have to have it brought to our attention – that the Lord would comfort those who find the prospect of Christmas daunting or frightening. These petitions are, in a sense predictable, but they should be normally be written so that we do not ‘trip off’ hackneyed jargon; and thereby miss the detail of local, thought out, specificity. At a wedding recently I came across a situation that elegantly makes this point: the presider asked one of the guests to read the intercessions and provided a booklet. The reader, anxious to fulfil the task and clearly fearful lest any word be omitted, read the first two petitions without a murmur, but became more hesitant at the third: ‘That God will bless their union with children and help them to be good parents, Lord hear us!’ in response to the announcer’s ‘Lord hear us!’

But should this section of the Prayer (assuming it contains more than one supplication) not come first? After all, if it is a celebration of confirmation, surely prayers for those who have just been confirmed should come before all else? My answer is an emphatic rejection of this for two reasons. Moving from listening (to the readings and the homily) and reflection (the psalm and what has been sparked off within us by the readings and the gospel) or singing (the psalm, other acclamations, possibly the profession of faith) or recitation (the profession of faith) to engaging in prayer needs space and a period for transition: this is supplied in the silent reflective prayer at the beginning. Second, no matter what we are celebrating, we are part of a larger world and it is simply acknowledging reality that we make our prayerful wishes which belong to the season or our particular church secondary to the big issues in the world for which we as a priestly people have been called to make intercession. At a wedding we need to realise that our joyfulness is set in a space and a period for transition: this is supplied in the silent reflective prayer at the beginning.

Not only does every celebration have a specific focus and time, that notion of ‘what we are praying for today’
– the curious nexus of memory, awareness and need can have very precise dimensions for an assembly; and if this is not given expression in this Prayer then it has failed to be a link between us and God, and between our situation and the promise of salvation which the Father has uttered to the creation.

This is obvious when we have specially designated Sundays for a specific need such as ‘Mission Sunday’ – and very often special groups provide a text of this Prayer as a liturgical resource for such days. But it also includes those aspects of time that only hover on the edge of the world of formal liturgy: Mothers’ Day (with some liturgical precedent as Laetare), Fathers’ Day (none save as a balance to Mothers’ Day), significant anniversaries where the community would wish to pray, and birthdays. There is no area of human existence where there is not need of divine help, reconciliation and healing – and therefore drawing those areas within the range of our common prayer is part of our priestly vocation as the People of God.

E. The Prayer is envisaged as always taking place at the conclusion of a Liturgy of the Word, and within the eucharistic liturgy this is its fixed place. Moreover, the Consilium document makes a case that this is the place for it as the summit of the Liturgy of the Word:

- The reason is that this prayer is the fruit, as it were, 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.

This statement can be read as a theological truth that our willingness to turn to God and make expression of our needs fits within the pattern of revelation and the covenant of invitation and response. The creature in discovering its creaturehood and the loving invitation of God calling the human being into relationship – seen to occur in hearing the word of God – now turns towards God and acts out this relationship in making intercession. However, it is also a guide to performance in that it seemed to envisage the content of the particular readings inspiring petitions at each liturgy. The Prayer has certainly developed in this way in that many communities use the readings as their source of inspiration for the petitions and most liturgical resources try to link the readings and the petitions. Indeed, it would be bizarre if having given attention to readings we then were not inspired by them in this Prayer.

That said, making a link from one of the lections to an intercessory need, is far more difficult than is commonly realised. The readings sometimes simply do not contain material that can lead to intercession, and it is often the case that while they might contain such for one group, those same readings might not provoke prayer in another situation. It can also depend on the way that the readings have been taken up in the homily as to whether they inspire petitions or not. There is, of course, the technique of imagining each reading as having a ‘moral lesson’ and then making that the basis of a prayer, but the results are usually predictable, generic, and fostering of the notion that the task of religion and ritual is to promote a moral ordering in society.

It is often only through a careful reflection on what has been heard that we see that for which we should offer intercession. This needs planning and may require a rather detailed introduction if the community are to see why this is something for which they should pray. Assuming that there are such petitions, then they should be ‘down the list’ of intercessions introduced after the community have moved into an attitude of prayer and after they have prayed for those needs that are more obvious.

F. Every local church is a gathering of groups and a community and without those actualisations of the ministry of the Christ which deal with the specific needs of the community it will indeed be a poor one. There are groups who deal with the poor, those who promote justice, prayer groups, those involved in schooling and catechesis, and even the liturgy group who have particular needs which they may want to bring to the whole community for its intercession. These groups need a space to share their need for prayer with the whole church. This is often recognised inchoately in that if a succession of people are to voice the intercessions, those people are often representatives for those groups. But the nature of the church demands something more than this: if a group has a particular need, it should explain that need to the assembly and ask the assembly to then make that need their own in prayer.

G. One group that has a special call on our prayers, and so has a special place in this Prayer, is the sick. This is not only because this is often one of the most pressing matters worrying the members of the community and one of those areas where, even in a secular age, we still express our willingness to pray for one another, but because sickness and recovery is a key paradigm of our relationship in the Christ. Jesus the priest is the salvator – the bringer of healing or the healer – and his reconciliation of the community with the Father is modelled by us as act of healing. Jesus is presented throughout the kerugma as the One bringing healing and deliverance from the agony of sickness (e.g. Mk 5:25-34 or Jn 5:2-9); and our prayer is a continuance of that ministry. Likewise, from the earliest times the
community praying for its sick members was part of its group-work, its leitourgia, as we see incidentally in the letter of James 5:14-5.

But while we may pray generically for ‘all the sick’ we need to give this particular expression because ‘the sick’ is not a reference to an undifferentiated mass but refers to individual brothers or sisters who are sick. So we need to create a silent space where we help people recall those whom they know who are sick, the sick to whom they promised their prayers, and those who have asked their prayers. This overlaps with the intentions in the opening moment of the Prayer (‘B’ above), but this repetition is not a problem because we only move slowly into the mode of praying for those whom we meet. In some communities they have found ways of identifying those sick people whose names are mentioned – e.g., ‘Let’s remember Ann Other whose operation is tomorrow’ – and when this can be done we are not only enriching this Prayer but giving reality to the fictive family10 that is the liturgical community and the Church.

H. For most of Christian history, and part of our inheritance from the Judaism of the Second Temple, praying for the dead has been a central element in common prayer. Indeed, having lists of the names of the dead has a complex history within the development of the Roman Canon, and still today most of our Eucharistic Prayers not only mention the dead but have a provision for inserting names. While allowing that this can be a very sensitive ecumenical issue (though one not nearly so contentious as even a generation ago),11 this is not a problematic area for most Catholics. Moreover, if the petition includes a list of names, the traditional formula ‘may their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed …’ can act not only as the prayer at this point, but it acts as a clear verbal boundary for the end of this prayer and moves the focus back to the presider.

I. The presider brings the Prayer to its conclusion with a collect. This should not only emphasise that we are praying per Christum dominum nostrum, but that this moment is also the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word and so its content should be keyed to it.

In this sequence I have identified seven headings running from silence through to having a list of the dead whose anniversaries we recall. While the whole range might appear to overload a single celebration, if this is an event of prayer – the liturgical space that corresponds to the Church’s need to make intercession – then the importance should be more visible. We are not just making a few petitions as if ‘having a Prayer of the Faithful’ is just another ritual element to be accounted for, but engaging in an exercise of who we are given where we are now.

This leaves one other issue: can we leave the petitions of the Prayer to be supplied spontaneously by the assembly? Clearly, this works very well in many situations and allows the assembly to give voice to its needs in prayer. Some communities have little difficulty with either the idea or speaking spontaneously from within the group. Moreover, the objections to the practice are not such that they dismiss the idea but rather show that it is a matter of pastoral judgment based on local experience. The practice works best when the community is fairly cohesive in make-up and where there is a clear sense that they are taking part in liturgy with a common purpose. It works least well when the general notion of liturgy is one of ‘we are here to get Mass.’ The fears about the practice are obvious. In every assembly there are some who are naturally talkative and those who would never voice an opinion – and so the same people ‘are always chipping in.’ This is not problematic in itself that we always expect those with a given ability to supply that skill to the group. It is only a problem if someone is so engaged that they get on everyone else’s nerves: if there is a vexatious supplicant in the community, then maybe this needs a pastoral remedy. A more common problem with spontaneous contributions is that they tend to become formulaic: the same person used the very same words again and again. In this case we are moving along a spectrum with a person asking for prayer, at one end, to someone simply ‘adding their bit’ at the other – and again this is a matter of pastoral judgement. The most serious problem with the practice is the danger that the petitions become weaponized as part of attack on others in the community or to advance an agenda within the community. But this is not just a problem of opening this Prayer up to ‘contributions from the floor’ but a more fundamental problem. Indeed, the most egregious example of this I have witnessed recently was from a presider who uttered this: ‘we pray that we will all receive the Precious Body of our Lord Jesus Christ on our tongues with the greatest reverence, and may non-Catholics who can only receive a blessing, receive this with the greatest reverence, Lord hear us.’ This presbyter was clearly uncomfortable with the reformed liturgy and an adherent of a particular churchmanship, but while, no doubt, thought this was a suitable vehicle for giving notices to the congregation, this behaviour was, objectively, blasphemous in that a ‘prayer’ was being subverted from its true end, in God, into being a tool in administration.

There are two factors which have a key bearing on whether or not spontaneous contributions will be beneficial rather than destructive. The first is the fact of the size of the group. A group that is so large that there will be a sizable proportion of people who are anonymous, will probably not be a group in which an invitation to contribute will lead to a more reflective experience of prayer. Second, the shape of the space in which the liturgy takes place impacts on whether spontaneous contributions will contribute to, or distract from, prayer. If people are assembled in such a way that everyone is visible to everyone else, then this fosters a sense of togetherness and shows that each has a

https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/pastoral-liturgy/vol50/iss1/3
DOI: 10.59405/2653-7834.1209
Pastoral Liturgy Vol 50, 2020, Iss. 1, Art. 3
contribution to make. If the group is in rows as in an auditorium, then voices ‘off stage’ tend to surprise/distract rather than add to our sense of being a community at prayer.

Is there a perfect form? Prayer is always individual, even when it is the whole ecclesia that prays, and so is endlessly open to variation. Prayer is a learned part of discipleship – see Lk 11:1 – and so it is a skill, a way of doing, that is one of the elements of our didache,12 and as such we need constant practice and revision.

We have had this Prayer as a regular part of our liturgy for just over half a century and during this time we have learned much about how to do it and to do it well, but we must not stop learning so that we can become more skilful in this art form. And the more affectively we pray this Prayer, the more the activity will be a mystagogy of our baptismal identity as a priestly people who give voice to the cries of the creation before the divine Father.

2 The published text of this document appeared in 1966 and is found in DOL, pp. 594-603.
3 GIRM, nn. 45-7.
4 GIRM, n. 47.
5 This is de facto the case in almost every liturgy for which there is now a set ritual, but the 1966 Consilium document saw it as an aspect of every gathering; see DOL, p. 239, n. 1893.
7 On the viability of each formula, see the Consilium document, DOL, n. 1901.
9 DOL, n. 1894.
11 One must mention that this practice was one of the major issues at the time of the Reformation and was a key part of the objections to the notion of Masses as countable quantities of grace (see T. O’Loughlin, ‘Treating the “Private Mass” as Normal: Some Unnoticed Evidence from Adomnán’s De locis sanctis,’ Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft 51(2009)334-44 for a bibliography), it would take me too far from my purpose to discuss this here.