

# Collecting Connections: Praying, Believing, and Living

by Anne McGowan

In his famous series of meditations before Mass penned in the middle of the last century, Romano Guardini noted that God’s living Word is more likely to receive a fruitful hearing and eager response in the liturgical context if those who participate in the Church’s liturgies are disposed to pay attention. “Through the liturgical word,” Guardini notes, “our inwardness passes over into the realm of sacred openness which the congregation and its mystery create before God.”<sup>1</sup> The liturgy’s many words, some of which we receive *from* God and some of which we speak *to* God, tell us something about who we are in Christ, help us to claim this redeemed identity more and more fully, and call us to live differently as a result. Despite our best intentions, internal and external distractions abound and often keep us from attending fully to the liturgical action and our role in it. Thankfully, the liturgy also incorporates many opportunities to call us back to ourselves and call our attention back to the God who first called us to gather together as this liturgical assembly in this particular place and time.

If what we pray shapes what we believe and forms how we live (*lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*), the words we speak to God in our liturgies are vital to our lived experience of faith. Some brief and often underappreciated invitations to connect liturgy and life (distractions and all) occur in the form of the proper presidential prayers that punctuate the Mass, the other sacramental rites, and the Liturgy of the Hours. These occur at important junctures where something significant is about to happen or has just happened—times when it is good to pause and ensure that *we* are collected and recollected rather than displaced and scattered. These prayers draw on the classic Western prayer form known as the collect and typically feature the following five parts: (1) an address to God, (2) an attribution recalling some of God’s qualities or characteristics, (3) a petition in which the assembly makes a formal request of God, (4) a purpose clause expanding the rationale behind the petition and aligning it with God’s will as revealed in salvation history, and (5) a conclusion (which closes the prayer and cues the assembly to respond, “Amen”).<sup>2</sup>

1 Romano Guardini, *Meditations Before Mass* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1966), 10. Guardini was a priest, theologian, and leading figure of the liturgical movement in Germany.

2 For some brief introductions to the collect form, see Laurence Hull Stookey, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen! A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 15-26, and “What Is a Collect?” Reformed Liturgical Institute, August 05, 2006, accessed August 23, 2016, <https://liturgicalinstitute.wordpress.com/2006/08/05/what-is-a-collect/>. Scholarly treatments include James G. Leachman and Daniel P. McCarthy, eds., *Appreciating the Collect: An Irenic Methodology* (Farnborough, Hampshire: St. Michael’s Abbey Press, 2008) and Lauren Pristas, *The Collects of the Roman Missals: A Comparative Study of the Sundays in Proper Seasons before and after the Second Vatican Council* (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013). The collects in the Liturgy of the Hours are discussed briefly in J. D. Crichton, *Christian Celebration: The Prayer of the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 86-87 and 117.

Anne McGowan is Assistant Professor of Liturgy at Catholic Theological Union.

The Mass features three such prayers. The first, simply designated “Collect” in the Missal, is the liturgy’s formal opening prayer that concludes the introductory rites and highlights some aspects of the feast, season, or liturgical rite now well-begun as the assembly gathered by God prepares to listen to God’s word in the Scriptures. For example, one of the new collects in the second typical edition of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony situates the marriage of a particular couple within the context of God’s plan for all of humanity and offers a concise catechesis on the graces of the sacrament prayed for on this liturgical occasion. The various parts of the collect prayer are designated below in capital letters within square brackets:

O God [ADDRESS], who since the beginning of the world  
have blessed the increase of offspring [ATtribution],  
show favor to our supplications  
and pour forth the help of your blessing  
on these your servants (N. and N.) [PETITION],  
so that in the union of Marriage  
they may be bound together  
in mutual affection,  
in likeness of mind,  
and in shared holiness [PETITION].

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever [CONCLUSION].<sup>3</sup>

The second presidential prayer at Mass, the Prayer over the Offerings, connects the preceding preparation of the gifts and the forthcoming eucharistic prayer—and provides an opportunity to unite the gifts we bring to Christ’s once-for-all offering for us re-presented in the eucharistic sacrifice. Observe, for example, how the Prayer over the Offerings for the Memorial of Saints Andrew Kim Tae-gŏn, Priest, and Paul Chŏng Ha-sang, and Companions, Martyrs (September 20), links the martyrs’ sacrifice, the contemporary celebration of the Eucharist as a sacrifice of praise, and the sacrificial transformation that results from deepening communion with Christ:

Look with favor, almighty God,  
on the offerings of your people  
and, through the intercession of the blessed Martyrs,  
grant that we ourselves may become

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<sup>3</sup> *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, translated by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2<sup>nd</sup> typical ed., no. 193. (This collect also appears in the third typical edition of the Roman Missal among the texts for Ritual Masses.)

a sacrifice acceptable to you

for the salvation of all the world.

Through Christ our Lord.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Prayer after Communion closes the communion rite and prepares for the community's sending forth in the concluding rites. This prayer frequently connects the holy food just received with hope for renewal in this life and/or a share in eternal life. This example from the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord resonates on all these levels:

Nourished with these sacred gifts,

we humbly entreat your mercy, O Lord,

that, faithfully listening to your Only Begotten Son,

we may be your children in name and truth.<sup>5</sup>

Those charged with presiding, preaching, preparing liturgies, or preparing people for liturgies can capitalize on these collect-style prayers in several ways. As new vernacular translations of liturgical texts developed according to the vision of *Liturgiam Authenticam* appear, presiders can help the assembly to attend more fully to the theological connections the collects invite us to make by reviewing these prayers in advance so as to pray them well in the liturgy, rather than tripping over unusual syntax and stumbling through poorly timed pauses. Presiders might also respect more consistently the rubrical guidelines that provide space for *everyone* to pray before voicing the prescribed prayer that "collects" the myriad prayers articulated within a short span of silence. For example, note the rubric in the Missal within the Order of Mass related to the Collect. After the invitation ("Let us pray"), "all pray in silence with the Priest for a while" (no. 9).

Preachers might use these prayers, at least occasionally, as a means to focus their message. The opening collects in particular often feature carefully crafted connections between the theological themes of a particular feast, season, or sacrament and some of *the* key themes of Christian life (e.g., baptismal identity as children of God, communion with Christ in the Eucharist, and life in the Spirit which drives us to apostolic mission in the world).<sup>6</sup> Since the preacher's task involves "explain[ing] the text of the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed in the readings *or some other text of the Liturgy*,"<sup>7</sup> giving collects a second hearing in a homily or reflection would help the assembly pay more attention to these rich liturgical texts.

Liturgy planners and catechists might draw the assembly's ears or eyes to a collect (or a memorable image or phrase contained therein) in the intercessions, a catechetical or mystagogical session, or a paragraph in the parish bulletin. Liturgical catechesis that explores the contribution of collects fulfills the task of "explain[ing] the content of the prayers" and could counter the critique that "Frequently . . . the practice of catechetics testifies to a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy."<sup>8</sup>

4 *The Roman Missal*, translated by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy 3<sup>rd</sup> typical ed., Proper of Saints, September 20.

5 *The Roman Missal*, Proper of Time, The Baptism of the Lord.

6 For an example of this approach, see Daniel McCarthy, *Listen to the Word: Commentaries on Selected Opening Prayers of Sundays and Feasts with Sample Homilies* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company Limited, 2009). This book is based on a series of articles that originally appeared in *The Tablet*. A more extensive index is available at McCarthy's webpage: <http://danielmccarthyosb.com/prayer-commentaries/>.

7 *General Introduction to the Lectionary*, translated by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2<sup>nd</sup> typical ed., no. 24, <http://www.catholicliturgy.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/documentText/Index/2/SubIndex/11/ContentIndex/132/Start/126>; emphasis added.

8 See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, nos. 71 and 30, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_17041998\\_directory-for-catechesis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html).

The Church's liturgies immerse us in the mystery of God's salvation accomplished for us through Christ and sacramentally communicated to us here and now by the Holy Spirit. Its significant short prayers can help the members of Christ's ecclesial body recollect themselves by connecting the memorial of the paschal mystery at the heart of the liturgy to its recapitulation in their own lives. They also propose a pattern, perhaps grasped only subconsciously, by which individuals might shape their personal prayer at other times, helping the liturgy function as the "source and summit" of the Church's life (see *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 10). As we pray to God in silence and speech, let us believe what we pray and live our prayer well!