



OFFICE FOR WORSHIP

HOW TO WRITE GENERAL INTERCESSIONS

Dear Friends in Liturgy,

My favorite thing to do when preparing liturgy is writing the General Intercessions. It's the one time in the liturgy when we, the Faithful, get to exercise our priestly office of baptism by praying for the needs of the Church and of the world. It is also the one time in the liturgy that the composition of these texts is completely free! With a very heavily scripted liturgy already, this prayer is designed to be freely composed church by church.

Because it's my favorite thing to do, I tend to be very critical when I hear poorly, or sloppily, written intercessions proclaimed at Mass. So, when writing intercessions for Mass, here are 10 principles to keep in mind.

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1. These are “general” intercessions.

“General” does not mean “generic” in the sense that they are “pre-packaged” petitions you find in intercession books, homily resource services, or liturgical calendars. “General” in this case means that the prayers must be capable of being owned and assented to by the whole assembly. That is, the assembly must be able to fully, consciously, and actively *want* to pray for the petition being voiced. If they cannot honestly do this, it cannot genuinely be their petition. It might be a portion of the assembly's petition, or it might be one person's petition, but it cannot be claimed by everyone, thus it cannot be the “Prayer of the Faithful.” To use an extreme example, the following is not a general intercession:

“For our nation: for (name of your favorite candidate) to win the presidential elections, we pray...”

Not everyone in the assembly will agree to this prayer; however, praying for the elections is a good thing. Simply word it in such a way that all can honestly take part in and assent to the prayer. For example:

“For our nation and the upcoming elections: for integrity and honesty among all the candidates; for the spirit of wisdom upon all who vote, we pray...”

Or:

“For our nation and the upcoming election: that the Spirit will guide us in voting and give us insight into the candidates and issues on the ballot, we pray...”

More subtle forms of intercessions that are not general:

“For those who kill unborn babies: that they will know the evil of their sin, we pray...”

“For Joe Smith who undergoes surgery on Tuesday, we pray...”

Praying for an end to abortion and for those who are sick are certainly worthy prayers that our community should make; however, the first example communicates a negative and almost hateful attitude toward the subject of prayer. Our prayer must never be used to incite hatred for other people. Instead word it as such: *“For those in difficult and unexpected pregnancies: that they may have strength and courage to choose the path toward life, we pray...”* In the second example, it is good to pray for the sick, but at the parish’s Sunday Mass, we cannot single out one person alone and let that be the whole prayer. To make this a general intercession, instead pray: *“For the sick, those undergoing surgery this week, and those waiting for a cure: that they may sense God’s compassion in the loving hands of their caregivers, we pray...”*

2. These are petitions.

As nice as it might be, this is not the time to list the things for which we are thankful. For example, at the anniversary Mass of a parish, you might hear, *“In thanksgiving for the pastor and staff of this parish and for the good work they do, we pray...”* The form of the general intercessions need to be petitionary—asking God, not thanking God. This example can easily become petitionary by rewording it: *“For the pastor and staff of this parish: that the Spirit will guide them in their continued good work and faithful leadership, we pray...”*

3. Be poetic.

All the prayers of the liturgy are meant to be poetic. That is, the words need to stir our hearts, engage our imagination, and cause us to desire the very thing we think is impossible and unimaginable—the reign of God on earth. Jesus used poetry to describe this reign. He never said, “Heaven is the concrete proleptic manifestation of the salvific action of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, enabled by the Holy Spirit, made real for believers in Christ.” Instead, Jesus used poetry: “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field...” (Matthew 13:24), or “The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...” (Matthew 13:21). Jesus used these metaphors and images to move people’s hearts (because moving a person’s heart is the first step toward conversion). Use the images, phrases, and moods from the scriptures of the day (or from the liturgical season) to inspire the wording of your intercessions.

4. Be concise. Don’t be preachy.

Crafting good prayer is a bit like writing good music. It needs rhythm and meter, flow and gracefulness. Longer sentences can sometimes lose rhythm or have a stilted feel. Shorter sentences and phrases, similar to a litany, have a movement and pace that makes the prayer almost like breathing, impelling us to reply: “Lord, hear our prayer.” Longer sentences may have a tendency to be “preachy,” narrowing the “generalness” of the intercession and the ability of the assembly to assent to it. Stick with shorter phrases, and speak the words out loud, listening for a smooth rhythm to the words and a fluid transition between sentences.

5. Be consistent.

The structure of the intercessions should be consistent among all the petitions. Petitions usually take one of three forms:

1. “*For _____, we pray...*”
2. “*That _____, we pray...*”
3. “*For _____: that _____, we pray...*”

All three forms are acceptable. The first tends to flow better and be less preachy. The last allows for the use of more images. Whichever form you use, use it for all the petitions. Don't change it up part way through the intercessions. Also, don't change the assembly's response every week as it confuses people. Using a different response for the various liturgical seasons is an idea, but keep that response for the whole season and make sure it makes sense and is a true response. “Come, Lord Jesus,” as much as it fits well in the Advent Season, doesn't really fit a petition.

6. Consider being musical.

Singing prayer well adds solemnity to the prayer. Many parishes use a seasonal sung response for the intercession. Consider having a cantor chant the petitions.

7. Do your role and only your role.

The liturgy is like a living body. In a healthy body, each part has a particular function, and only that body part does that function. If the body is healthy, the foot never takes over the hand's job. It could try, but it wouldn't be as good as the hand, nor would the body be as efficient or effective. In a similar way, each member of the liturgical assembly has a particular function and should do only that function. **The presider, though he may be capable of reading the intercessions, should do only his job of presiding.** His job is to call the assembly to pray at the beginning of the Prayer of the Faithful and to collect all the petitions into a final concluding prayer. **If there is a deacon present for the Mass, he is the primary reader of the petitions.** If there is no deacon, the second lector takes that function. If the prayers are sung, the cantor takes this role.

8. These are prayers of the “faithful.”

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 69 says, **“In the Universal prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in some sense to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all.”** Only the baptized can genuinely pray the Prayer of the Faithful, and it is their right and responsibility to offer these prayers. Thus, during the period of the catechumenate, catechumens are dismissed from the assembly before the Creed and the Prayer of the Faithful. Because they are baptized and have a right and duty to pray the Prayer of the Faithful, candidates remain in the assembly. They should never be dismissed from Mass. There should be an intercession for the catechumens.

9. Follow the sequence.

There are four basic things we pray for, and these are outlined in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 70. **They are:**

- a.) for the needs of the Church;
- b.) for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world;
- c.) for those burdened by any kind of difficulty;
- d.) for the local community.

There should be at least one intercession for each of these topics. Feel free to compose more than one intercession for each topic so that you don't try to cram everything that needs to be prayed for into one petition. For example, have one petition for the nation and another petition for local authorities.

10. Know the world around you.

Like preaching, writing good intercessions requires that you read the newspaper, watch the news, and know what's going on in your local and global communities. It's amazing to hear how many parishes simply use the "canned" intercessions from books that were published at least a year ago without incorporating anything that is on the hearts and minds of real people in their parish, city, nation, and world today. No "pre-written" intercession resource could have prepared for September 11, Hurricane Katrina, the San Francisco earthquake in 1989, the Newtown, Connecticut tragedy, Columbine, the Boston Bombing or the mass shooting in Las Vegas. It is our *responsibility and duty* as baptized people to pray for these very needs and concerns.

SITTING DOWN TO WRITE THE GENERAL INTERCESSIONS

1. **Read** the 10 principles for writing the Prayer of the Faithful (above).
2. **Pray** for wisdom, creativity, and guidance.
3. **Read** the Gospel, the first reading, the responsorial psalm, and the second reading for the Mass for which you are writing. Underline or list key phrases that stand out for you. Things to look for are: a.) actions that God has done, is doing, or will do; b.) metaphors and poetic phrases; c.) commands.
4. **List a few images** from the liturgical season for which you are writing, or images of the celebration for which you are preparing (e.g. funeral, wedding, baptism). For example, Easter would have images of new life, resurrection, mission. A wedding evokes images of promise, bond, family.
5. **If possible, find out what music is being planned** for the celebration. Look for strong phrases and images from the text.



6. List the concerns that are on people's minds right now. Include: a.) what is going on in your parish community; b.) what is going on in your surrounding community (e.g. city, county, state); c.) what is going on in the nation; d.) what is going on in the world.

7. Pick one form which you will use for all the intercessions: a.) "For _____," b.) "That _____," c.) "For _____: that _____."

8. Begin writing, playing with the images and scriptural phrases using the four basic topics as your starting point and connecting them to the current concerns of your assembly. Stick with your chosen form. For this initial writing, just try to *evoke* the sense of the prayer, getting a feel for the need and the mood of the intention and the mood of the assembly based on the liturgical season and the scripture.

9. Speak out loud what you have initially written. Check for "preachy" attitudes or narrow wording. Imagine your assembly. Can they all assent to this prayer? Can they all participate fully in this intention? If there's any doubt, rewrite it.

10. Speak out loud your second draft. Listen for the rhythm of the words and the way each line flows into the next. Cross out and rewrite weak images, phrases, or clichés, such as "May they know the love of God." A stronger more evocative phrase would be, "May they be embraced by the tender love of God." Avoid "church-speak" or code language, such as, "For those in the RCIA." You might know what "RCIA" stands for and means, but not everyone will. Instead say, "For those preparing to be baptized/for full communion and for those who walk with them."

11. Speak out loud your third draft. Get other's opinions and test it with fellow-parishioners before Mass. Be ready to change it Saturday afternoon or even 5 minutes before Mass if a critical event takes places between the writing of your last draft and Mass.