

“Christ, Hear Us”: The Assembly’s Prayer for the World

by Bryan M. Cones

This past summer’s deeply poignant, at times shocking, images of encounters between migrants from many southern parts of the Americas and US border enforcement personnel no doubt stirred the spirits and consciences of many in the Sunday assembly. Social media feeds, televisions, and newsprint all carried pictures of people behind fences and barely covered under the lightest of blankets, and of children separated from parents or other trusted adults. A widely published photograph of a two-year-old Honduran child crying as her mother was searched by immigration officers captured well the confluence of sin at work in a broken world.¹ It also calls forth from liturgical assemblies a particular response: prayer, lament, and protest to God through the universal prayer or prayers of the people. Unfortunately, this fundamental pattern of the Sunday assembly’s liturgy—prescribed both by the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM]² and by nearly every liturgical book of the churches of the Reformation—often fails to measure up in intensity to the situations of those “weighed down by various needs” or “burdened by any kind of difficulty” for whom the GIRM commends Roman Catholic assemblies to pray.

The intensity of the burdens faced by those migrating—and the fraught public and political language surrounding them—may be one reason why many assemblies may be content to pray in general “for migrants and those in need” followed by a less-than-resounding “Lord, hear our prayer.” It would also be easy to quickly divide an assembly into political camps with poorly drafted petitions that leave no room for the assembly in its entirety to enter the prayer, such as: “For an end to the government policy of family separation at the US border, we pray.” While this writer (perhaps in a lapse of pastoral judgment) might shout “Christ, hear us!” to such a petition, even a divine intervention (or eventual policy revision) making it so would not touch the deep patterns of injustice driving the movement of people in our day—war, economic upheaval, and climate change all come to mind. Nor does such a directly specific petition evoke the many dangers vulnerable persons face at the hands of those who prey on them. What the late Robert Hovda famously referred to as the worldly “cesspool of injustice”³ needs a much deeper response from assemblies gathered to rehearse the reconciliation and liberation proposed (and sometimes experienced) in its gathering for Eucharist.

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- 1 While the image in question did not, in fact, directly relate to the US family separation policy, it nevertheless captured for many the situation of migrating families caught up in it. To see the image and the photographer’s reflections upon it, visit <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jun/19/image-sobbing-toddler-us-border-it-was-hard-for-me-to-photograph-john-moore> [accessed 23 August 2018].
 - 2 See GIRM, para. 69-71, available from the website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/girm-chapter-2.cfm> [accessed 23 August 2018].
 - 3 See Hovda’s “The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers,” *Worship* 54 (1980): 98-117.

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The texts through which assemblies engage their *lex supplicandi*⁴—the “law of interceding”—are, of course, an important place to start when responding to the needs of the world. The Roman Missal itself provides models for how to pray the universal prayer,⁵ as do the liturgical resources of many churches.⁶ Shared among them is a certain open-endedness that, while not agnostic about God’s own demands for justice, peace, and relief of suffering, is cautious about the exact shape petition for those patterns might take. That said, the models provided in any liturgical book or contemporary published resources will fail if they do not respond both to word of the actual needs of the church and the world and also to the Word proclaimed, reflected upon, and preached in the assembly. No model prayer is going to capture that comprehensive vision; it is for pastoral ministers and those skilled in shepherding an assembly’s prayer to propose an assembly’s *lex supplicandi*—and to make room for the assembly to engage it. As the denominational liturgy resource of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America plainly puts it: “Because the prayers of intercession balance the needs of the whole world with those of a particular community and occasion, the preparation of these prayers is the responsibility of the local assembly.”⁷

Specifically, this might well mean preparing the universal prayer in a manner similar to preparing a good homily: with the newspaper (or newsfeed) in one hand and the biblical texts and prayers of the Sunday assembly in the other. Consider, for example, that Sunday gospel readings for the coming weeks (as of the time of this writing) in both the Roman and Revised Common Lectionaries (23 September and 7 October 2018⁸) feature Jesus presenting children as those who model for the disciples what it means to enter the reign of God. Given the recent appearance of profoundly vulnerable children in public life both at the US southern border and in a grand jury report cataloging child sexual abuse in the dioceses of Pennsylvania,⁹ their absence from the assembly’s prayer would be shocking indeed. Even more, such prayers might also bring to the assembly’s prayerful gaze those vulnerable children whose suffering rarely draws public attention.

Again it falls to liturgical ministers to propose such prayer to the assembly in language that evokes the word of God encountered in the liturgy: “For children in danger, for children harmed, for children far from home, for safety, comfort, and welcome”; “That children in danger may find gospel welcome among those who follow Christ.” The sins and failures of church leaders in this regard, at least in a Christian assembly, may require something more direct: “That justice may roll down for children abused; that grace may turn leaders to repentance; that shared sorrow may make what is wounded whole.” Particular attention might well be paid to the presence or absence in the assembly’s members of the very things being lifted to God: What assembly is without families who have experienced migration or persons who have experienced sexual abuse and assault? The “sense of the meeting” discerned by those with care for the assembly may suggest an assembly’s response: a plaintive call for help, a resounding demand for justice, a lament for what cannot be undone, a resonant and uncomfortable silence—any or all might be appropriate to the assembly’s prayer. Better yet, a sung or chanted response would likely help the assembly inhabit more deeply and bodily its work of interceding before God.

Words alone, however, will always fail, and thus something more is certainly needed if the “prayers of the people” are indeed to be just that, rather than the dictated prayer of even the most skilled wordsmith. If a notable silence is

4 It is worth noting that Prosper of Aquitaine made his foundational claim about the church’s prayer being the “ground” of its faith in reference to the intercessory prayer of the assembly on Good Friday. See Kevin Irwin, *Text and Context: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 4-6.

5 Appendix V: Examples of Formularies for the Universal Prayer in any current edition of the Roman Missal provides examples for the liturgical seasons, some with responses, some without.

6 See, for example, the Episcopal Church’s *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing), 383-95, accessible at <https://www.bcponline.org/> by clicking “The Holy Eucharist,” then “Prayers of the People.”

7 Evangelical Lutheran Worship, “Notes on the Services” (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 21.

8 Mark 9:30-27; Mark 10:2-16. *Lectionary for Mass*, no. 134 and 140; Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Proper 20 and 22.

9 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/catholic-church-sex-abuse-pennsylvania.html> [accessed 23 August 2018]

not to conclude each petition, a significant one should mark its “middle”: The “general” intercessions will remain just that if the assembly is given no time to enter into the pattern proposed by this moment in the liturgy. If, as the GIRM argues, the assembly’s members are “exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood”¹⁰ in the universal prayer, then silence allows each to inhabit the prayer and enrich it with the actual persons and places the petition commends to the hearts and minds of those called to pray. Bolder assemblies may want to try on the *Tongsung Kido* (“praying aloud”) of some Korean churches, through which members name aloud specific needs beneath the umbrella of the assembly’s prayer, often sustained by the chords of the sung response: “For persons driven from home, for communities drained of hope, for those now named . . .”¹¹ Projected images, chosen carefully and used judiciously, may also help an assembly enter more deeply into its prayer, especially given that media images have become primary means of encountering those for whom we pray.¹² Such freedom may be unfamiliar to some assemblies, yet these examples propose pathways toward an assembly’s “full, conscious, and active” part in this moment of the liturgy. There are, no doubt, others that may be discerned by those charged with the care of an assembly’s intercessory prayer.

Holding these dimensions together—text, silence, response, song, perhaps image—can be a challenge, the first of which is to seek to maintain balance among them. More often than not, the greatest danger will be in the length and specificity of the petition, followed by too little silence (or none at all), and a perfunctory response by the assembly. GIRM’s own guidance in this regard is helpful: “The intentions announced should be sober, be composed with a wise liberty and in few words, and they should be expressive of the prayer of the entire community.”¹³ Attention to these marks might produce something more like a litany than a series of collect prayers, rhythmic sung prayer with parts of nearly equal length: petition, silence, song, perhaps borne up and supported by the sustained vibration of instruments or voices. Together they might help the assembly embody its *lex supplicandi* and thus experience itself as that priestly people who stand before God pleading for the fullness of that promised reign. They may discover that such “public service” provokes a change that bears fruit in lives of Christian mission.

It is this last point of mission that may need further exploration in an assembly’s prayer: While liturgical intercession undergirds Christian faith that God answers prayer, how the divine pattern manifests itself in response can be harder to discern. Without doubt, however, that response must appear in the lives of the priestly people who engage that prayer! It stands to reason, then, that the baptismal living of the church will embody concrete responses to the needs of church and world evoked in the universal prayer, both at the level of parish life and in the day-to-day discipleship of individuals and families. Along with the prayerful, pastoral preparation of the assembly’s intercession, pastoral ministers might also propose further possibilities and patterns for God’s priestly people—civic engagement and service toward justice among them—so that the assembly’s members may themselves embody some of the answers God provides to their prayer.

10 GIRM, para. 69.

11 This practice is commended by *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 445.

12 Eileen Crowley argues that such “liturgical media arts” might be an appropriate dimension of liturgical prayer in the contemporary “participatory culture” made possible by digital technology and projection. See her “Liturgical Media Art: Past, Present, and Future,” *Worship* 92 (2018): 249-68.

13 GIRM, para. 71.