

"OREMUS"

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HE fact that Catholic churches throughout the land are crowded several times every Sunday of the year is inexplicable to the average non-Catholic. Brought up in an atmosphere of individualism in matters of religious belief and practice, and accustomed to empty pews, he is at a loss to account for this superhuman phenomenon. Especially is this true, when attending Holy Sacrifice of the Mass out of curiosity or on the invitation of a Catholic friend, he attempts to explain the great devotion of the people, the profound silence which reigns throughout the church particularly during the Consecration, the solemn chant of the choir, the bowed heads of the kneeling throng. He is certain of taking especial note of the celebrant, turned, not toward the congregation, as is the custom in his own church, but toward the altar, reading the words of the Mass in an unfamiliar tongue. Surely, to him, "it surpasseth all understanding."

To the well-instructed Catholic, all this is no mystery. He sees in the priest the chosen instrument of God offering the Sacrifice of Calvary, and acting as the agent of the Church in her office of mediator between God and man. He realizes that the Church recognizes man's unworthiness and therefore, in the solemn Eucharistic Rite, appoints the priest to present the needs of the faithful before the Throne of Almighty God. This is the reason why the Church commands the presence of her children at Mass every Sunday and Holyday of obligation during the year, as every Catholic knows. And he willingly executes this command, attends Mass and renders to God this act of love in reparation for his offences, in thanksgiving for the blessings he has enjoyed in the past, and in supplication for their continuation.

It is literally true that the laity have a share in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. They are members of the Church, and it is the whole Church that is praying in the Mass through the ministry of the priest. There is no part of the Mass which illustrates more clearly how this end is accomplished than the first prayer, or collect, which is recited at the Epistle corner of the altar immediately preceding the Epistle.

The priest turns to the congregation and with outstretched hands greets them, saying, "Dominus vobiscum," that is, "The Lord be with you." The acolyte responds in the name of the people, "Et cum spiritu tuo," "May He be with thy spirit." By this greeting, all, both priest and people, are united in spirit as some special favor is about to be sought from God. The priest goes to the Epistle side of the altar where he reads the first prayer of the Mass, the collect.

According to the best authorities, the word "collect" comes down to us from the earliest ages of the Church since even at that time it was the first prayer offered after the people were collected together for divine worship—the "Oratio ad Collectum." It brings us back in spirit to the age of faith when the Church was at the height of her struggle with the pagan world, to the days when it was said over many who were destined to pour out the last drop of their blood as martyrs for their faith. As we offer the collect today, the prayers of these sainted martyrs are mingled with ours in our present struggle with the powers of darkness.

Many of us are unfamiliar with the words the priest uses in these collects. We have, indeed, understood in a vague way that he prays for the needs of the people, but the richness and beauty of the prayers themselves have escaped us. There are, however, few of us who have not known from our earliest years that the Latin word "oremus" means "let us pray". This is in fact an exhortation, and is meant not for the priest alone, but for all the faithful. It is a golden opportunity to cast our burden of care at the feet of God, to ask Him to help us to bear it more joyfully and with greater resignation. The whole Church is now praying for us. With the experience of two thousand years behind her, she can pray more perfectly and more efficaciously than any one of us, because she understands so well the nature of prayer.

In every collect there are four parts, all of which are essential to the formation of a perfect prayer, namely, the elevation of the heart to God; thanksgiving; the petition, and the supplication. We shall see now these logically follow one another in the collects, and although in reading some of the prayers it appears that one or more of these parts is absent, a closer study will demonstrate that they are there, implied at least, if not expressed.

The elevation of the heart to God is accomplished by the opening words, "O God" or "O Lord." In almost every instance the prayers of the Mass are directed to God the Father, because, as Christ our example addressed His prayers to the First Person of the Blessed Trinity, it is most fitting that the Church should do likewise. When He was speaking to the multitude on the mountain-side, He said, "Thus therefore shall you pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." On another occasion, He addressed to His Apostles these words, "Amen, amen I say to you: if you ask the Father anything in My name, He will give it you." In this way we bear witness to the Fatherhood of God, and recognize in Him, our Creator, the Giver of all good gifts on whom we must call in all our needs, and Who will grant us, not all that we desire, happily, but those things that are good for us. In union with the priest, the laity of the whole Catholic world are now urged to raise their hearts to God and in all simplicity to present their petitions. They are assured that their prayers will be heard and granted in the manner that is most fitting, for oftentimes the suppliant asks for things that are only apparent blessings which would, if his petition were granted, prove to be harmful to his welfare. Thus in this raising of the mind and soul to God there is expressed resignation to His holy will. It is thus that the Church in her prayers always manifests the dependence of her flock upon the providence of an All-wise Father who reads the hearts of those who throw themselves upon His mercy.

From time immemorial it has been the custom, when addressing an earthly king with a view to obtaining a favor, after having acknowledged his sovereignty, benignity and excellence, to thank him for past favors before presenting the particular petition for a further benefit. What could be more appropriate than that the priest, our spokesman, the ambassador of Christ, should thank God for all the blessings we have enjoyed since the day when life was first infused into our bodies, which he now does in the name of the Church for the first time during the Mass.

In the collects this part of the prayer usually takes the form of an acknowledgement of God's Providence, as "O God the protector of those who hope in Thee . . .," "O God whose Providence erreth not in its ordinances . . .," or of His Goodness, as "O God who hast prepared for those that love Thee such good things as eye hath not seen . . ." We acknowledge His

Graciousness in many prayers with such words as "Almighty and Eternal God, who in the abundance of Thy loving-kindness art wont to give beyond the deserts and prayers of Thy suppliants . . ." In some of the prayers especially those of Our Lord and the saints, there is made mention here of the feast itself, or of the most eminent virtue of that saint whose feast is being celebrated, in preparation for the third part of the prayer, the petition, in which we are to ask for a special grace or blessing. For the feast of the octave of the Epiphany this acknowledgment is a reference to the Incarnation and Redemption, "O God, whose only-begotten Son hath appeared in the substance of our flesh . . ." In the feast of the Epiphany itself, the Church acknowledges its debt of gratitude that through the visit of the Magi Christ manifested Himself as having come to save all men, Jews and Gentiles, for no longer is there to be a dividing line between the chosen people of the old dispensation and the rest of mankind. She joyfully says, on this great feast, "O God, who on this day by the guidance of a star didst reveal thine only-begotten Son to the Gentiles . . ." She recalls the Incarnation in the prayer of Christmas Day with the words "O God who hast made this most sacred night to shine forth with the brightness of the True Light . . ." In the beautiful prayer of Pentecost she brings to our minds the indwelling of the Holy Ghost in the souls of the just, leading them in the paths of virtue, "O God who on this day didst instruct the hearts of the faithful by the Holy Spirit. . . ."

In the prayer for the Sunday within the octave of Christmas we have an example of one which seems to lack the second part, as above described, but wherein the acknowledgment is implied from its wording. "Almighty and Eternal God, direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure, that in the name of Thy beloved Son we may deserve to abound in good works." Elevation of the heart to God is expressed by the first words of the prayer. The petition is that part in which we ask God that "we may deserve to abound in good works" in the name of Our Lord. In the words "direct our actions according to Thy good pleasure," however, we acknowledge the Providence of the Creator and our complete dependence upon the decrees of His will. These examples will serve to explain the manner in which the Church officially acknowledges the bounty of God, and how she properly disposes us to present our petitions.

Our needs are many and diverse. It is a question whether we ourselves fully know them or would remember to present them in the proper way. We are burdened with cares and often find it difficult to search out those things which will be for our greater benefit both spiritual and temporal. What a joy and consolation it is to know that with the experience of many centuries the Church with the loving care of a mother for her children, asks in our stead that God will grant us grace so that with purified minds we may serve Him, and that our bodily wants may be supplied. In the annual cycle she places before the throne of God in supplication every one of our needs. In the Christmas prayer, she asks God to "grant that we who have known the mystery of His Light upon earth, may enjoy also His happiness in Heaven." In that of the Feast of the Circumcision, after having returned thanks for the coming of the Redeemer through the instrumentality of the Blessed Virgin she says, "grant, we beseech Thee that we may experience her intercession for us, through whom we were made worthy to receive the Author of life, Jesus Christ." At Pentecost it is most fitting that the Church should ask to "grant us by the same Holy Spirit to relish what is right and ever to rejoice in His consolation."

Throughout the whole year the Church asks for special blessings for her kneeling children. She expresses their longing for the coming of the Redeemer; that their faith may be strengthened; that in their dark moments they may be lifted up by a blessed hope in the future of eternal beatitude. She asks for them mutual love, and peace; fortitude in trials and temptations; security from the attacks of earthly and infernal enemies. In short, she prays first for an increase of every virtue in the hearts of her people, the strength that they may perform the works necessary for salvation, and finally divine inspiration that they may direct all their actions to the end for which Our Saviour died.

This is the spirit in which she asks that her people "may be delivered from present sorrows and enjoy everlasting gladness," "that amid the changing things of this world our hearts may be set where true joy is found." She realizes the need of prayer and asks "that we may dwell in mind amid heavenly things" in accordance with the words of St. Paul, "but our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now follows the conclusion of the collect, the supplication. Through our representative at the Court of Heaven, the priest, our petitions are presented to God "through Our Lord Jesus Christ Thy Son, who with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth forever and ever." It was through Christ that man was redeemed, Christ Our Lord who came upon earth and paid with His Precious Blood the price of man's ransom from the bonds of Satan. He died, conquering death, and now lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Ghost. It is through Him that we ask God to incline a gracious ear to our pleadings, assured of a hearing. Men through Christ became heirs of heaven, and now confidently beg through Him an answer to the inmost desires of their hearts as they kneel before His altar during the Mystical Sacrifice of His Body and Blood.

The priest now finishes his plea, and the acolyte, in the name of all present, answers "Amen," "so be it done." This word is of great antiquity and has been consecrated by its use in divine worship since the beginning, but especially by that with which it was employed by Our Lord while He walked among men in far-off Galilee. We read in the Apocalypse that it is sung by the angels in Heaven as they prostrate themselves before the throne of the Most High. It re-echoes the words of the priest and gives an added solemnity to the prayer that he has just offered in the name of the faithful. Said with fervor and true devotion it will open for us the flood gates of God's mercy and forgiveness of our offences, and will help to merit for us a place amongst the Blessed in Heaven.

No object may be appreciated at its true worth unless it be known. In order then, to appreciate the beauty and the power of the prayers of the Mass we should familiarize ourselves with them. This may be done by making use of an authorized translation of the Missal, which may easily be obtained at the present time. Such a study will serve to make easier for us the way of perfection and give us ready access to the very heights of devotion. We shall be better able to reap the plentiful fruits of the Mass the perfection of prayer; and we shall also be fortified with a ready response to the objection of our non-Catholic friend who cannot understand why the priest turns, not toward the congregation, as in his own Church, but toward the altar, during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.