

The Prayer of the Faithful

A few years ago when we celebrated the Eucharist together on a priests' retreat, we offered spontaneous petitions. Here is how one came out:

"For our congressmen, that they will recognize their responsibility to the American people and will carry out that responsibility by voting against the giveaway of the Panama Canal. Let us pray to the Lord."

There was a very weak, "Lord, hear our prayer." Apparently, most of the priests were on the other side of the issue, I was grateful that no one followed up with a counter-prayer—as sometimes happens.

At most Sunday Masses the Prayer of the Faithful (more accurately called the General Intercessions) actually seems to go quite well. The thing we have to watch out for is petitions that are too long and involved. These latter are aimed more at the congregation than at the Lord.

Both of these hazards would best be eliminated by avoiding "that" clauses in the petitions. What's a "that" clause? Let me explain.

A very simple and appropriate petition might be:

For the poor, let us pray to the Lord.

Take that same petition, add a few "that" clauses:

"For the poor, that we might recognize more clearly the unjust and oppressive systems in our society causing so many people to be trapped in a cycle of poverty, and that our realization of this will cause each of us to reflect on ways in which we perpetuate such unjust systems by the what we do or don't do in our own lives. Let us pray to the Lord."

A petition has just turned into a sermonette. Every word might be true and the thoughts worthwhile, but getting a message across to the congregation is not the purpose of the prayer of the Faithful.

It is very beautiful and simple to pray *for* someone or something. Things start getting complicated when we finish the "for" and add a "that." Someone should start an organization entitled, "The Society for the Reduction of 'That' clauses in Prayers of the Faithful" (SRTC PF).

Too many petitions can be another problem. There is no rule that says we have to “come up with” a certain number. Instead of trying to dream up a specific number of petitions, we should simply think about those things that are appropriate and timely for this congregation at this time. If that means three petitions, then let there be three. If it means 12 – well, that too many. There should be an outside limit, at least a rule of thumb, and my preference would be five. As I mentioned earlier, one of the greatest obstacles to good liturgy is the attempt to include everything in every Mass.

We’ve got a good thing going in the Prayer of the Faithful. We should be careful not to ruin it by forgetting that it is a small jewel, not a giant catchall. Maybe it would help if we admitted that the priest is not the one to write it. The job might go to the one – priest or layperson – who is gifted with a sense of what is timely and the ability to say it concisely.