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THE INTERCESSIONS: Their Scope and Sequence and Style

1 The Intercessions – prayers for others – have been part of Christian worship since the beginning of the Jesus Movement. The Apostle urges Christians to pray without ceasing (1 *Thessalonians* 5:16-18). Jesus urges us to pray even for our enemies (*Matthew* 5:44). The tradition of Christian public worship through the ages – Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper – has always included a period of prayer for others. The (Lutheran) Nairobi Statement on Worship suggests, not a four-fold, but a five-fold ordo for Christian worship: Gathering, Word, Intercessions, Meal, Sending.

2 Let’s examine today those public prayers that are part of this noble tradition. Their Scope and Substance, their Sequence, and their Style.

3 First, then, the SCOPE and Substance of the Intercessions. It’s important to note at the start what they are NOT. The Intercessions are not an extension of the sermon. They do not provide an opportunity for the preacher to elaborate some items from the sermon he may have forgotten.

4 Importantly, in Lutheran tradition, the Intercessions do not even belong to the preacher, or even the Presiding Minister (PM). They belong to the Assisting Minister (AM), a layperson.

5 Ideally therefore, it’s the (lay) Assisting Minister who composes the Intercessions each week. There’s a growing library of resources prepared specifically to assist the AM each week in the composition of the Intercessions, with some splendid models for every Season of the Church Year. Indeed, for every Day of the Church’s calendar.

5 Further, the Intercessions are meant to be scrupulously non-partisan. The Christian community is made up of a truly catholic (small c) multitude. Rich and poor, old and young, black and white, gay and straight, left wing opinions and right wing opinions. Everyone present – of this diverse and truly catholic aggregation – should be able to say “Amen” to what has been prayed. See 1 *Corinthians* 14:13-16.

6 Note that the sermon is another thing altogether. The sermon is the place for partisanship. Not the prayers. Not the Intercessions. In the sermon, worshippers have a right to hear how the Spirit is specifically speaking to this specific Preacher. But the prayers, the Intercessions? Everyone should be able to say “Amen!”

7 The Intercessions belong to all parties, to all opinions.

8 Now, as to the scope, the substance of the Intercessions: What should we be praying about when we gather as Church? Read the rubrics on pages 105-106, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELWorship)*. Listed in that rubric is the full scope and substance of the Church’s Intercessions. Every Sunday.

9 Hence, here’s what we should be praying about and for, each and every time we gather: A) the Reign of Christ and the church universal, B) the well-being of creation, C) peace, justice, and the nations, D) the poor, the oppressed, the sick, etc... E) all who suffer... F) this specific congregation and its special concerns, and G) additional prayers from the community itself, and H) Finally, thanksgiving for the faithful departed.

10 Your parish prayers are not complete without mention of each of these categories of concern. Every Sunday. You’ve attended worship, as I have, where all the concerns prayed for were narrowly focused on individual needs: F) and G) in 9 above. Aunt Minnie’s gall bladder operation. John and Mary as they begin life as a married couple.

11 That’s OK. But it’s only part of the scope and substance of a truly catholic congregation’s weekly concerns. Christian worship’s weekly concerns should reflect nothing less than the entire scope of the Kingdom of God, the Coming Rule and Reign of Christ. It is no accident that Jesus taught us to pray first and foremost for the coming of that Rule and Reign of God. See Luther’s insightful explanation to the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, page 1163 in *ELWorship*. All our subsequent prayers, in a sense, depend on this conviction. Flow from this conviction.

12 One more matter regarding scope. In the catholic tradition, we are all known in public prayer simply by our Baptismal names. No family names, please. No titles. Just first names. Given names. Baptismal names, in 9E above. In the Church’s public prayer, we may correctly pray for the office, as in 9C above. And it’s legitimate enough to mention the name of that office-holder, in our public prayer. But ultimately, even the Queen is just “Betty” in The Kingdom of God. Even the Pope is simply “Jorge”.

13 Now: SEQUENCE. In what sequence or order should we pray these Intercessions? I’d argue we should pray for the concerns listed in 9 above in the order in which they’re listed in the rubric. Listed in 9 above.

14 It’s a question of priority. What’s most important in our public praying? What’s of more parochial importance? What’s a strictly personal concern? I’d argue that the sequence of our concerns in the Intercessions reflects our priorities as Christians. First, the cosmic and eschatological: the Kingdom of God, the Rule and Reign of Christ (9A above). Then our more public concerns, for the well being of creation, for peace and justice among the nations (9B, 9C, and 9D). Then our more parochial concerns 9E and 9F). And finally, 9G and 9H), the most personal.

15 The sequence of our prayer concerns in the Intercessions is thus a truly consequential matter. It provides a teaching tool about Christian priorities. We are narrowing our focus as we pray. We don't forget Aunt Minnie and her gall bladder. But we do put her in context. In proper priority.

16 And note this: Truly catholic public prayer always ends with 9H above. With gratitude for the witness of those who have died, we include ourselves among the faithful of every generation. That conviction, prayed publicly, will not fail to be discerned also as proclamation by the gathered community. It will be heard as a "blessed assurance" by all those present.

17 Finally, STYLE. What style or form may our Intercessions take from week to week? There are at least four prayer forms possible at the Intercessions; a) Litany-style, b) Bidding Prayer style, c) a series of Collect-style prayers, and even d) a solo Pastoral Prayer.

18 It's a pity that, since the publication of *ELWorship's* predecessor volume, *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)*, "the green book", parishes have used, in my experience, almost exclusively a) a litany-style prayer form.

19 In a litany style prayer, 17 a) above, the leader – properly the AM – prays a brief petition and concludes the petition with what might be called a kind of cue-line, such as "Lord, in your mercy". The people answer with a brief, easily-appropriated response, such as "Hear our prayer."

20 That litany-style prayer form is a dandy! It requires from the assembly no reading, no proficiency in literacy. At the same time, it is engaging. As a worshiper, you are swept up in the very praying of the prayer. So that's all to the good.

21 But it's only one possible prayer style, out of four! Is it too much to hope that congregations can actually learn three more, three others? It's a matter of enlarging your liturgical vocabulary. Learning to be ritual-savvy!

22 So for example a second form or style that the Intercessions might take is that of 17 b) the Bidding Prayer. The Bidding Prayer is an ancient prayer-form associated with Good Friday. See *ELWorship*, page 263. But it's too useful to remain there. Again, let's enlarge our ritual vocabulary!

23 Note the rubric on page 263 that describes the Bidding Prayer. I won't repeat that description here. The "cue line" in a Bidding Prayer is simply the AM's "...through Christ our Lord." To which the people respond with a simple and vigorous "Amen." The a) litany-style response in 19 above is inappropriate in a Bidding Prayer.

24 Still a third prayer-style appropriate for the Intercessions is 17 c) a series of Collect-style prayers, to which, once again the people respond with a simple "Amen."

25 The Collect-style prayer is a classic of Christian ritual tradition that every Christian pastor or priest should know by heart. See the classic Collect-style prayers in *ELWorship*, pages 72 through 87. You'll discern there the traditional form or shape of a classic Collect.

26 A traditional Collect – dating from historic Latin roots – is composed of five parts: I) An Address (Example: “O God...”), II) the so-call Antecedent Reason (the grounds on which you presume to pray), III) the Petition itself (what you are actually praying for), sometimes IV) the Results Desired, and finally V) a Concluding Doxology or Oblation (literally “offering”). See the classic Collects in *ELWorship* for some splendid models, to understand what I am talking about.

27 Once again, the people’s response to a Collect-type prayer is a simple and vigorous “Amen”, cued by the Collect’s Doxology. Litany-style responses are not appropriate whenever a Collect is prayed.

28 I would almost never utilize, in the Intercessions, the fourth prayer-form or style, d) the so-called Pastoral Prayer. It consists of an extended “solo” by the AM or PM.

29 This style of praying is popular among many – shall I say – less well-informed worship leaders. Its inadequacy for Christian public prayer includes the fact that it offers no opportunity for the people to participate in the prayer, other than a final “Amen”. Save 17 d) for moments of extremity!

30 Well. This has been heavier-going than I expected! But you get the message. The Intercessions are an important part of weekly worship, among Christians. Don’t neglect them!

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