

Christian Prayer VII

Liturgical Prayer

A few pointers

This resource is designed especially to support classroom prayer. Mostly liturgical prayer will be offered elsewhere and at other times. It is also likely to be planned and prepared for in other ways.

However the Church's liturgical prayer is the high point of her prayer life, and indeed is described as the source and summit of Christian life.

It would be wrong entirely to neglect it here, so here are just a few, but hopefully helpful and practical tips.

1. *It is good to help ministers to minister well...*

If a reader reads but no-one can hear or understand, what is the point of them reading?

If the musicians or singers do not know when to start a song, the rhythm of the worship is disrupted and they are not serving the congregation well.

Student ministers, especially, generally will need help to do their job well, so that they can support and encourage the congregation's prayer.

2. *...but is at least as important to help the congregation to do its job well*

But often it is not clear to a congregation what their job is. Sometimes they can think they are like an audience at a show or a play, and that it is the job of the priest and other ministers to 'entertain' them. The trouble is, Mass and the like are not very entertaining, and if we go looking for entertainment, we are mostly going to be very disappointed.

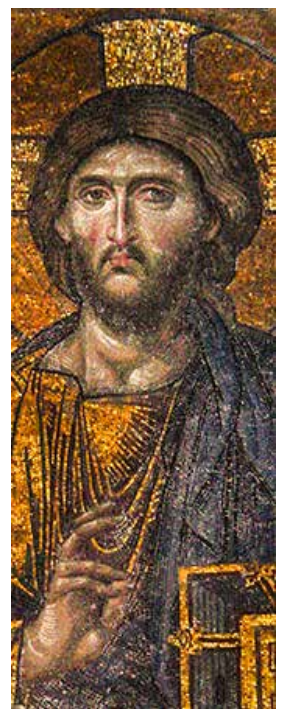
The congregation's job, basically, is to participate, fully, actively, consciously. It is to worship and pray, engaged with the Liturgy and with what (who) the Liturgy makes present. It is to be present to Christ in the Church visibly gathered as the congregation; to be present to Christ in the word proclaimed; present to Christ in the Sacrament celebrated (most visibly in the bread and wine that becomes his Body and Blood); to be present to Christ in the priest who presides for the people present as Christ.

In the Liturgy the whole congregation comes together to be present to Christ, to engage with, meditate on, be nourished by his real presence in all these different ways.

What the congregation does is not so evident as what the other ministers do. When they read, play instruments and so on, they in a sense perform *for us*. But what the congregation as a whole most particularly does is perform *for God*, engage with God and his love and mercy, so that we may grow and mature in our Christian identity.

When we do this it is not just us as individuals that benefit. When, as members of the congregation, we actively participate we make a real difference to the way that everyone else present participates. We know what a difference it makes when the congregation is engaged, active, praying... and when they are not!

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3. *Help the congregation to want to be there*

Adults (at least out of a school setting!) will mostly only be at Liturgy when they have themselves chosen to be there.

Children, mostly, will be at Liturgy because someone else has thought it good for them to be there.

If we ourselves do not have a reason to be there, and do not know what to do when we are there, especially as members of the congregation, then it is somewhat doubtful that there is good reason for us being there. Indeed, the Church teaches that it can even be harmful for us to be there and ‘just doing things’ or still worse just being there and watching other people do things that mean nothing to us, and especially harmful for children.

‘It should be kept in mind that external activities will be fruitless and even harmful if they do not serve the internal participation of the children.’

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So it is really important to help junior members of the congregation find reasons for being there! If we do not do this then not only will it be a missed opportunity here and now, but it could be establishing a block or resistance to participation in the future.

This is not the easiest of things...

Helping people want to be at Mass, who are not already persuaded of its relevance to them, is not the easiest thing to achieve.

Sometimes, and instead, teachers and leaders will settle for doing things to ensure that the Mass becomes entertainment (albeit usually not of a very entertaining sort). But ‘entertainment’ too is alien to what Mass is about - namely worship, prayer; our active participation with God present to us in the actions (and silences) of the Mass.

Making Mass ‘entertaining’ simply avoids the more important issues of Christian formation for participation – and in the long run will also prove fruitless and harmful.

And it does take time...

Our choice to be at Mass, or not, is something that develops, matures, waxes or wanes, over a lifetime.

To encourage students, obliged to be at a Mass, to prepare for the Liturgy it is helpful to give them some time and space in advance to understand why the Liturgy is being celebrated. For example:

- Is it to mark a particular feast, or occasion? If so, what is its importance?
- Spend some time before the Mass reflecting together on the Gospel of the Mass (and/or other readings) in advance. Our hearing of the word of God is enhanced by our familiarity with it. If we are struggling with a first hearing of a passage we are unlikely to have the space also to be asking ourselves what does this have to say to me? But unless we do ask that, we may be (trying to) listen with our ears, but we may well miss out listening with our heart.

A quick fix

Probably the quickest and simplest way of encouraging students to participate is to give them time beforehand to consider

- one thing they want to say thank you to God for during Mass
- one thing they want to say sorry for
- one thing they want to ask God's help with.

Hopefully the rest of the Liturgy will engage them also, but those three things will be a good start to participation.

You might also highlight the communal dimension of the Mass by inviting your class to think what is one other thing that every member of the class will promise to pray for.

4. Build up skills in participation through Classroom prayer

Formation for participation in liturgical prayer does take time.

The whole of this 'Christian Prayer' resource is directed to helping promote this formation and to help ensure that students are resourced to take more and more responsibility for their own fruitful participation in prayer and worship.

The hope is that their experience of classroom prayer at school will help them become

- more familiar with taking scripture to heart, there to ponder on it and draw nourishment from it
- more comfortable with silence and familiar with different ways of making use of the silence in their prayer
- above all, more used to speaking with God and listening to him.