

The Tradition of Intercessory Prayer Intercessory Prayer for Priests Saturday,
August 15, 2009 Breakfast after 8:15 AM Mass (Explanation of the ends of prayer)

.I would like just to share a few thoughts about prayer and especially **intercessory prayer in our biblical tradition, in our Christian and Jewish tradition**. If you go to **the four ends of prayer**, intercessory prayer is not one of them, if you notice.

The first is **thanksgiving or gratitude**. It is a very natural human response to the goodness of God or to the blessings that we receive and we see it traced all the way back to the beginning of culture in **prayers surrounding the hunt**. So early people had to eat; before farms developed they had to eat by hunting and gathering grains and fruits, but there weren't that many fruits and grains during the ice ages, and the ice ages only receded eleven thousand years ago. Well, we've been around a lot longer. So for a long, long period of time human beings ate basically what they could hunt, what they could catch. They developed rituals of gratitude and petition.

The second end of prayer is **petition**—gratitude and petition. They developed rituals involved with the blood of the animal itself, and it's associated with giving God praise and thanks and petitioning for more, because we've got to eat tomorrow too—so that idea. So that's a **primitive beginning of prayer in human culture, and it responds to natural human needs, the need to request and the need to thank and to show gratitude**.

Another fundamental end of prayer is—what? Contrition, yes, what else? Adoration, yes. So **adoration, and along with that you could say praise is a response to experiences of awe or experiences of wonder, or experiences of deep reverence**, which are also naturally occurring in human life. So people then came into periods of where they were struck with the beauty, the wonder of life or of nature, or of the Creator behind it. Now how much they thought about this we don't know. We simply know that they had these experiences and they expressed them in what came to be known as prayer or even liturgy or worship, if you want to call it that.

But then someone mentioned contrition. To my knowledge, **contrition is this specific idea of prayer found in the biblical tradition**. Why? Because the biblical tradition is **marked with the idea of covenant**. Covenant is an agreement between God and a people and **the people that are expected to live up to the agreement**, but if they fail to then there is need for some sort of redress, and that is what contrition is about, also called **atonement**.

Now apparently there was also a form called **propitiation**, but the exact word for propitiation in Hebrew, which I don't remember offhand, was actually something that was **condemned in the Old Testament by all the prophets**. It involved actually taking little children and throwing them into a fire. So apparently some people were believing that if they gave up something precious, that that would please God. And God, through the prophets, said this is not pleasing to me; **I do not want you to throw your children into the fire**. In fact, God said this was depravity, a form of depravity.

So not every form of prayer was really pleasing to God, so we end up with four within our tradition. The first one, which is **gratitude or thanksgiving**; the second, which is **petition**; the third, which is **adoration or praise**; and then the fourth is specific, which is **contrition or atonement**.

Now since it started with food and food was often involved in the expressing of prayer—so the killing of animals. In fact, in the biblical tradition God approved of killing animals, but not children. So in the Hebrew idea, **the killing of an animal meant that the breath of the animal went back to God because all living things breathe with the breath of God**, according to the teachings of the Book of Genesis. So the killing of an animal, “immolation” it’s called, the immolation of the animal, was an opportunity or an occasion in which the breath of the animal went back to God, and so they said we can use this breath going back to God as **the platform for a petition, or for a request**, or for something like that.

And so the sacrificial system became, well, it grew and grew because they thought this was a way to have a hearing. If you read in the Old Testament, sometimes people say, “Well, God, why aren’t you listening?” They thought he couldn’t hear, so they put their petition on the soul, if you will, or the breath of the animal, and then God would hear the petition. So sacrifice developed. And in time there came a ritual, especially the ritual of atonement, associated with contrition and with trying to ask for forgiveness for failing to live up to the covenant. The principal Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, in Israel became the principle day in which the whole people were represented by one man who is called the high priest. **The primary role of the high priest was to represent the whole people on the Day of Atonement**. What that involved was the taking blood and entering into the holy of holies—this only happened once a year—and **the pouring of the blood in front of what was called the mercy seat, the Kapporeth** in Hebrew, and that was believed to forgive the people of all their sins.

Well, now we know that **Jesus did not particularly appreciate a lot of the temple practices**. When he threw the moneychangers out of the temple and overturned their tables, he was undermining the very idea that you could constantly offer animals to God. He was taking that away. But we also know that Jesus himself had a very deep sense of the presence of God. So he didn’t need to kill an animal to get into the presence of God; **he was in the presence of God at all times. And he taught his disciples to pray also the way he did**. So he expected them to learn how to be in the presence of God without the killing of animals, and that’s apparently one of the primary ideas in the cleansing of the temple.

Now one of the traditions going back to Malachi was that the temple, **the rebuilt temple**, the second temple at the time of Herod, **was really not legitimate**. So not only Jesus didn’t appreciate all of this, but there are others who didn’t either. You might say there was a school of thought that said that temple was not legitimate because back in the time of the exile when Nebuchadnezzar came and invaded the temple, **the shekinah of God, which is the overshadowing of divine presence, departed from the temple and went up the hill**. What’s up the hill from the temple? The **Mount of Olives, the garden**

of Gethsemani. And so Malachi says that it will stay there until the coming of the Messiah.

Now we know that **Jesus went to the Mount of Olives**, which is the garden of Gethsemani, the night before he died and at other times as well we can presume, which would back up that Malachi tradition that that's where the shekinah of God was, not in the temple, but in the garden. Now what did Jesus do in the garden? We don't know; we know **he was in prayer.**

Now after his death and resurrection the Church was trying to figure out, well, **how do we understand what Jesus is doing for us now?** And the **Letter to the Hebrews** explains that we could think of Jesus now as entering not into the earthly temple but, because he died on the cross and poured out his blood, **he took that blood into the Father's presence in the eternal Temple**, the heavenly Temple, into the inner sanctum called the "holy of holies." Now that means that they were thinking that heaven reflected the earthly temple, and that if there was an inner sanctum in the earthly temple there must be one in the heavenly one. This is their thinking; this is their mental way of looking at things. So **they saw Jesus as entering that temple and offering his blood eternally.** So they saw his ministry, his heavenly ministry, **his eternal ministry, as interceding for his people and therefore they called him the "High Priest,"** and that's where the idea of the High Priesthood of Christ comes from. And out of the High Priesthood of Christ comes **the ministry of intercession of the Church focused primarily in the Eucharist.** So **we live Eucharist now not only when we are there, but throughout our lives. So intercessory prayer then becomes a way of living out the Eucharist.** Now the idea of intercessory prayer then is that **we on earth are invited into the High Priesthood of Christ and we speak prayers of intercession.**

Now why does God ask people to intercede? To me this is a mystery, and I cannot explain it, why God asks us to intercede for special purposes. What can we do to further the work of God? I mean why doesn't God just do it? I don't know, but **it is our tradition, and the belief of the saints is that God asks them to pray, and to pray in intercession for various purposes.**

Now some people have a gift whereby they actually hear God or sense God asking them to pray for specific people. I do not have that gift, but I have met people that do. Anyway regardless whether you have that gift or not, **you can live out your Baptism by entering into the High priesthood of Christ and sharing his eternal intercessory ministry.** And it fits into our understanding the four ends of prayer, especially through the idea of carrying on the atonement of Christ.

So those are just some reflections for your edification.