

Lord, please don't hear this prayer - yet again

This past Dec. 28, I was jolted out of my morning fog at 8 a.m. Mass when the deacon offered this petition:

"For those who are considering abortion: may our prayers and the intercession of the Holy Innocents whom we honor today help them choose life as the best option, let us pray to the Lord."

I can't remember whether I blurted "*What?*" loud enough to be noticed, but I know I certainly didn't answer with the prescribed "Lord, hear our prayer."

The best option? Oh, so the decision whether to carry a child to term is a pragmatic calculation, and we're to pray that those concerned get the calculation, er, right? How did this morally degrading nonsense get written?

It happened because the parish, like many others, uses canned general intercessions for weekday Masses. They come with a tacky binder in a tear-'em-out-after-you-use-'em format, they fit neatly inside the ambo - so why not? Well, because more often than we'd like to admit, these intercessions are thoughtlessly written, reflecting the ambient cultural smog rather than the truth of Catholic faith.

Moreover, they're typically organized to suggest that the world of politics is, somehow, the real world: after a brief intercessory nod to the pope, the bishops, or both, we're immediately invited to pray for sundry social and political causes, never identified as such but wrapped in the gauziness of Feel Good Prayer.

And what gets omitted is often as instructive, and depressing, as what gets addressed. How often last year did you hear a general intercession petition for Christian unity? For the relief of persecuted Christians? For the conversion of non-believers? For victory in the war against terrorism? (Eight years and four months after 9/11, I'm still waiting for that one.) But I'll bet you heard a dozen or more exhorting you to environmental responsibility.

In parishes that take their liturgy seriously, the canned intercessions usually disappear on Sunday, to be replaced by intercessions composed locally by responsible parties. The solution to the weekday problem, I suggest, is to regularize and routinize the petitions at daily Mass, making them serenely formulaic and thus immune from the temptation to political or cultural homiletics.

Here's one possible scheme for such a "reduction:"

For the holy Church of God throughout the world, let us pray to the Lord.

For Benedict, Bishop of Rome, and the bishops in communion with him, let us pray to the Lord.

For this local Church of (name of diocese), for (name of bishop), its chief shepherd, and for the priests and deacons of [name of diocese], let us pray to the Lord.

For this parish of (patron of other name), its pastors and its people, let us pray to the Lord.

For an abundance of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life, let us pray to the Lord.

For the unity of all Christians, for the relief of those suffering persecution for their Christian faith, and for the conversion of their persecutors, let us pray to the Lord.

For the civil authorities, that we may be governed in justice and truth, let us pray to the Lord.

For those who are sick, and for all those with special needs, let us pray to the Lord.

For our beloved dead, let us pray to the Lord.

That, I suggest, covers the most important bases. Such a scheme also locates the local parish within the broader Christian community of the diocese, and locates the diocese within the ambit of the universal Church: facts about which Catholics in America often need reminding. And such a formulaic schema avoids politics while making clear that we should pray regularly that the politicians recognize both the responsibilities and limits of their power.

Try it. It is, if you'll permit me, the best option.

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