



## The Prayer of the Faithful

The petitions we know as the General Intercessions or Prayers of the Faithful are called the Universal Prayer in the 2012 revision of the Roman Missal. Their purpose remains the same—to appeal to God for the needs of our community and the needs of the world. The official name may cause us to pay more attention to the global focus of the prayer. In the flow of the mass, the Universal Prayer follows the Creed and concludes the section of mass known as the Liturgy of the Word.

An old adage recommends that these petitions be composed with the Scriptures in one hand and a newspaper—or newsfeed — in the other. It’s good advice. These intentions are meant to address local and specific needs as well as the needs of all of God’s creation. “[P]etitions may be offered for holy Church, for those who govern with authority over us, for those weighed down by various needs, for all humanity, and for the salvation of the whole world,” according to the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM).

It may come as a surprise but our Intercessions evolved from the 18 Jewish synagogue prayers of petition called *Tefillah* or *Amidah* and became part of early Christian worship. Over the centuries they fell out of use until they were recovered with the liturgical revisions of Vatican II.

The Universal Prayer has three parts: An **invitation** to the assembly to present their needs, the reading of the **petitions** with a response and a **closing prayer**. Let’s look at this structure more closely.

The presider invites the assembly to bring their needs before God. The *Introduction to the Lectionary of the Mass* says that he may use a reference from the Scriptures of the day in his invitation. A deacon or a lector reads the petitions speaking to the assembly, not to God. These petitions “should be sober, be composed with a wise liberty and in few words, and the should be expressive of the prayer of the entire community” (GIRM). Each petition concludes with a cue to the people, such as, “Let us pray to the

Lord.” The assembly’s response, often “Lord, hear our prayer” is the actual prayer addressed to God.

Petitions are most effective when they address actual needs of the community. “Canned” resources should be carefully edited. Remember that petitions are to be universal and should include global and national issues that affect all of God’s people. Nonetheless, petitions should avoid making political or partisan distinctions.

Some cautions: Avoid **anonymous prayers**, such as, for a *special intention*. These are to be public prayers with intentions that everyone can agree to pray for. Avoid **prayers of thanksgiving**. The entire Eucharistic celebration is all about thanksgiving. These are to be prayers of petition. Avoid **the phrase “for N., for whom this mass is offered**. Parishioners often make a donation to the church asking that a loved one be remembered at a mass. For these petitions, use this or a similar form “For N. and all who have died...” This retains the fundamental belief that mass is offered for all of us.

The Universal Prayer is a dialogue between reader and people and the new Missal encourages us to sing dialogues when possible. Here are some suggestions. The people’s response may be a sung. The cue to the response, and the people’s response itself, may be sung. For more festive liturgies, the petitions themselves might be sung, as on Good Friday, with its tradition of sung solemn petitions and sung response.

To help engage the community, a general intention followed by a brief pause may help: “For peace in the world,” (Pause for the assembly to consider the situations of war and violence in need of prayer.) “that *country N.* and *country N...* may see beyond their differences and seek peace.” This allows all of us to join our personal prayers for peace with the specific petition and praying “Lord hear our prayer.”

In the Universal Prayer, we acknowledge our need for divine help and this opens us up to the transformation of our relationship with God—and with our community.