The Prayer of the Faithful

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We are quite familiar with signed petitions. Whether with a knock on our house door, leaving the local mall, walking through downtown, or the frequent forwarded e-mails that fill our inboxes, we are asked for our signature to show our allegiance to a particular cause. I have to admit that I always have been cautious about signing my name to anything, since signing one’s name to a document is a powerful act. There is another kind of petition that I am not cautious about, and that is the petitions that are part of the Prayer of the Faithful.

The word “petition” comes from the Latin for “request.” The Prayer of the Faithful, which concludes the Liturgy of the Word at Mass, is composed of petitions. First, the presider invites us to pray. Then a deacon or lector — or cantor, if sung — proclaims each intercession, or petition. These petitions ask, or request, something to happen. These petitions call us to God’s future, to God’s hopes for us in the present. There is a future vision of what should be, that we pray will become present in the contemporary. For instance, if a country or region has recently been struck by a natural disaster, we should include a petition that prays for God’s love and care of those human persons afflicted. Or, we pray for those sick who seek God’s healing presence. Though these petitions or intercessions are not addressed directly to God, we know that we have to be gifted by God’s Spirit and so pray, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

To each intercession, the liturgical assembly replies typically with “Lord, hear our prayer.” We are told in our official liturgical documents that liturgies not involving special occasions such as funerals or marriages, the Prayer of the Faithful should include an intercession in four categories. These categories are: “a) for the needs of the Church; b) for public authorities and the salvation of the whole world; c) for those burdened by any kind of difficulty; d) for the local community” (General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM], 70). Each category involves all of us in different ways. Moreover, they are also the communities in which we find ourselves: church, world, nation, local assembly, neighborhood and those in all of our communities who are in particular need. We are members of the Church; we are political persons who are stewards for the earth in which we live; we and others have special concerns that arise due to natural disasters, political unrest, genocide, wars, and so forth; and finally, we are members in this local community. These are the faithfuls’ prayers for four communities.

We pray for various communities because we were baptized as “priests, prophets and kings” (1 Peter 2: 5, 9). Part of what it means to be baptized is to pray to the high priest, Jesus Christ on behalf of the world.

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