

The Collect: an Anglican/Episcopal Treasure

Episcopalians who are adults today have lived through a period of extraordinary liturgical change. In the brief span of thirty years, the four-hundred-year-old Prayer Book tradition has been largely swept away.

But what seems to us a turbulent time pales before what our English ecclesiastical ancestors experienced in the tumultuous years of the Reformation. From the medieval Latin Mass retained by Henry VIII, to the first Book of Common Prayer of 1549, to the second Prayer Book of Edward VI only three years later, to the return of the Roman liturgy under Queen Mary, to the restoration of the Book of Common Prayer by Queen Elizabeth — all of this transpired in ten years' time.

One constant that remained throughout, and still is with us in the contemporary liturgies of our day, is the Collect. Imagine being transported in a time machine to fifth-century Rome on a particular Sunday of the church year and knowing enough Latin to recognize with delight and surprise the very same prayer to be found for that day in the Book of Common Prayer!

That is entirely probable, for the vast majority of the Prayer Book Collects are in fact pre-Reformation. Most are taken from the Sacramentaries of three famous Bishops of Rome: Leo I (440-461), Gelasius (492-496), and Gregory the Great (590-604). A Sacramentary was a book that contained the fixed prayers of the Eucharist and the variable Collects of the day.

What is a Collect? The origin of the term *collecta*, while rather obscure, refers to the "gathering of the people together" as well as to the "collecting up" of the petitions of individual members of the congregation into one prayer. This at first extemporaneous prayer would later also be connected to the Epistle and Gospel appointed for the day. A Collect is a short prayer that asks "for one thing only" (Fortescue) and is peculiar to the liturgies of the Western Churches, being unknown in the Churches of the East. It is also a literary form (an art comparable to the sonnet) usually, but not always, consisting of five parts.

I. The Address

The invocation is to the Father. "And in that day ye shall ask me nothing . . . whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you" (St. John 16:23). The exceptions to this rule are Advent III, Lent I, and St. Stephen's Day, when the Son is addressed directly. Trinity Sunday also stands outside this maxim, since in that case there is no distinction of Persons.

II. The Acknowledgment

This gives "the foundation of doctrine upon which our request is made" (Dean Goulburn). It reflects some quality of God related to that which we shall be asking Him in the Petition: His power, His grace, His transcendence, His mercy. In a few cases, however, what is acknowledged is our weakness or frailty or sinfulness.

III. The Petition

Here is the actual prayer concerning basic needs: cleansing, forgiveness, protection, guidance, comfort, holiness, love.

IV. The Aspiration

Not appearing in all Collects, this is introduced by the conjunction "that." An example is found in Trinity XXI: pardon and peace are desired so *that* we may be better fitted for God's service. The petition ("pardon and peace") is not an end in itself but claims a higher purpose in the aspiration.

V. The Pleading

"... through Jesus Christ our Lord." Christ is our only mediator and advocate. Through Jesus alone can we draw near to the Father. The pleading historically contained the doxological words "who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end." This ending was so well-known that Archbishop Cranmer either omitted it or placed "&c" in lieu of it. But this omission led to forgetting, and the full wording was restored to some Collects in 1662 and, finally, to all of them in the 1979 American edition.

Here is the pattern for the familiar and much-loved Collect for Purity from the service of Holy Communion:

- I Almighty God,
- II unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid
- III cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit
- IV that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name,
- V through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Another example is that of Trinity XIX:

- I O God,
- II forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee
- III mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts,
- IV
- V through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Collects are not only necessary to the liturgy, but also are part of the pastoral tradition of the Church. The Prayer Book Collects are a priceless part of English-speaking Christianity. They are also for the present use of everyday Christians in the trials and testings of life. This book is meant to be used devotionally with Bible in hand.

We have chosen the Collect as the basis for this volume on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer. As we await the next round of liturgical change, we pray that the revisers will have a deep appreciation of the integrity of both Holy Scripture and the Prayer Book tradition, unlocking our liturgical heritage for generations to come.

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Source

"Introduction." Zahl, Paul F. M. and Barbee, C. Frederick, eds. *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1999. [Kindle Edition]

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