



Archdiocese of New York + 2011

THE ORATIONS AND THE PRAYERS YOU NEVER HEAR

The Orations: The Orations are a form of prayer found in liturgy, and, in fact, the term “oration” means prayer. The Orations of the Mass are prayers entrusted to the priest alone and their role is to conclude a major portion of a liturgical celebration. There are three Orations in the Mass: *The Opening Prayer*, sometimes called the *Collect*, which concludes the Introductory Rites; *The Prayer Over the Offerings* following the Rite of Preparation of the Gifts and *The Prayer After Communion*. at the end of the Communion Rite. These prayers are rich in theological content; they interweave our prayers to God with the spiritual truths of our faith and give expression to the extraordinary events we celebrate in clear, majestic language.

History and Structure of the Orations: The Orations developed in the third and fourth centuries as an oral, extemporized form of prayer. At this time, one of the chief requirements of one called to priesthood was the ability to pray well publicly, drawing his prayers from his own spiritual grounding. Gradually the best of these orations found their way into written collections which, in the sixth and seventh centuries began to be used in place of extemporized prayer by priests presiding at the Eucharistic celebration.

These prayers were composed according to Roman literary formulas whose style was closely followed. Their structure involved a short invitation to prayer (Let us pray.); a moment of silence intended to allow those present to recall the presence of God and to formulate their own intentions; the prayer itself, Trinitarian in formula, that is, made to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit; and the concluding *Amen* by which all those present affirmed the prayer

and made it their own. The Orations we have today in the Roman Missal are prayers that have come down to us as part of this heritage. They are also called the “presidential prayers” because they *are addressed to God in the name of the entire holy people and all present, by the priest who presides over the assembly in the person of Christ.* (*GIRM* n. 30)

The Prayers You Never Hear: For the most part, the priest presiding at Mass is instructed to speak in a loud, clear voice so that those present can clearly hear him. This is because he speaks in the person of Christ and presides in Christ’s name over the entire Assembly. There are, however, several points at which the priest is directed to pray “in a low voice”, or “quietly,” in a voice inaudible to the people. These short prayers are found before and after the reading of the Gospel, during the Preparation of the Gifts and before and after Communion. At these times the priest is praying, not as the one presiding over the Assembly, but in his own name, seeking God’s help to fulfill his ministry with attention and devotion. For example, before the Gospel he prays:

*Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God,
that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel.*

Before the Conciliar reform of Mass, there were many such prayers, also called *apologia*. In them the priest acknowledges his unworthiness and his dependence on God. Following the reform their number was reduced, but these private prayers continue to hold an important place among the prayers prayed by the celebrant.