

# Purposes and Designs of Prayers

## Teacher Background

All texts are social and cultural constructs. They are composed for specific purposes and comprehended in social contexts. Prayer, as a text type, is no different. An examination of prayers in the Scriptures, from across history, in collections and in other texts, reveals that they are composed in the context of the life experiences and responses of communities, groups and individuals for specific purposes- e.g. to praise, to thank, to persuade, to argue, to inform, to transact, to ask for help, to say sorry, to invite, to console, to inspire, to forgive: indeed, to express the whole range of human emotions and desires. Individuals and groups can then take those prayers and adapt and use them for purposes other than those of the authors, in different social and cultural contexts.

The purpose of the prayer can also determine its form, mode of delivery and the need for accompanying ritual elements, or rubrics. In the, Old Testament, the Book of Psalms provides some examples of various purposes of prayer. In this book we find psalms expressing thanksgiving, petition, praise and sorrow. The Christian tradition has given particular emphasis in its prayer life to prayers of thanksgiving, petition, praise and sorrow. This is reflective of human living. A great deal of the day to day communication of human beings is for the purposes of making requests of one sort or another (petition), giving thanks for favours received (thanksgiving), expressing admiration or appreciation of persons or things (praise) and saying sorry and asking forgiveness (sorrow). In liturgical events such as the Eucharist, all four of these purposes of prayer find expression. Many traditional Christian prayers serve the purpose of expressing one or more of the four sentiments of thanksgiving, petition, praise and sorrow. A central Christian prayer such as the Lord's Prayer expresses all four sentiments.

The primary purpose of prayer is to respond to God's initiation of dialogue with us. It is always an act of faith and hope. The purpose of prayers of praise and thanksgiving is to give more explicit and deliberate form to our sense of the greatness and wonder of God and of our own place within the total scheme of reality. The purpose of prayers of contrition or seeking forgiveness is for us to acknowledge our failure to respect this fundamental relationship with God and deliberately open ourselves anew to God's abiding presence within us to make us better than we are. Prayers of petition or intercession assist us to come to terms with our needs and those of other people. They assist us to make ourselves evermore sensitive to our obligations to do whatever is possible to fulfil those needs, whether for ourselves, or others. The Catechism of the Catholic Church discusses each of these purposes in sections 2626-2643.

Is the purpose of prayer to reverse or alter the divine will? Can anything we say or do in prayer change God's mind? In one sense, the answer is "no". To say otherwise is to suggest God is not all-knowing and all-loving and all-powerful. Such a God already knows what is best for us. In another sense, the answer is "yes", because if this omniscient God sees everything in an eternal "instant", then our prayers are "factored-in" to determining and guiding the course of our human and personal histories. We can only take as a model Jesus, who prayed for a number of purposes and assured us that God indeed did hear and answer prayer. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that St. Augustine wonderfully summarises the three dimensions of Jesus' prayer: "He prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore let us acknowledge our voice in him and his in us."<sup>87</sup>

In the end, however, the problem is beyond resolution, suggests Richard McBrien in *Catholicism* (1994). He suggests that we resort to the well-known Ignatian formula: "Work as if everything depended on you, but pray as if everything depended on God".

## □ Thanks and Praise

### Teacher Background

The first and primary role of prayer for humans should be that of praise and thanksgiving to a God who cares for each one of us individually and knows each of us by name. St Paul urges us in I Thessalonians: *Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances. This is what God wants of you in your life of union with Christ Jesus. (5:16-17)*. The great prayers of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, contain some of the most wonderful prayers of praise and thanksgiving ever composed. Jesus' great thanksgiving prayer to God is offered in an hour of failure (Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21). Many of Paul's letters begin with prayers of praise and thanksgiving, which have become part of our prayer and hymn collections to this day. (See, for example, Ephesians 1: 3-11; Ephesians 3:20-21; Philippians 1:3-11; Romans 1: 8-11; and 2 Corinthians 3-6). St Therese of Lisieux described prayer as: *For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.*

### Prayers of Thanksgiving:

The Catechism of the Catholic Church emphasises the importance and necessity of prayers of thanksgiving:

**2637** *Thanksgiving characterises the prayer of the Church, which, in celebrating the Eucharist, reveals and becomes more fully what she is. Indeed, in the work of salvation, Christ sets creation free from sin and death to consecrate it anew and make it return to the Father, for his glory. The thanksgiving of the members of the Body participates in that of their Head.*

For Christians, the source and summit of their prayer lives is the Eucharist, which comes from the Greek meaning "Thanksgiving". The period of reflection after communion in the Mass has been traditionally referred to as "thanksgiving" and there are a number of traditional prayers of the Church for thanksgiving after communion.

The Catechism adds:

**2643** *The Eucharist contains and expresses all forms of prayer: it is "the pure offering" of the whole Body of Christ to the glory of God's name and, according to the traditions of East and West, it is the "sacrifice of praise."*

### Prayers of Praise:

The catechism defines prayers of praise:

**2639** *Praise is the form of prayer which recognises most immediately that God is God. It lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because HE IS. It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory. By praise, the Spirit is joined to our spirits to bear witness that we are children of God, testifying to the only Son in whom we are adopted and by whom we glorify the Father. Praise embraces the other forms of prayer and carries them toward him who is its source and goal: the "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist."*

The *Divine Praises* are another of the great traditional prayers of praise of the Church and have been traditionally recited after Benediction.

[www.catholicculture.org/liturgicalyear/prayers/view.cfm?id=564](http://www.catholicculture.org/liturgicalyear/prayers/view.cfm?id=564)

Some simple prayers of praise for children can be found at:

[www.bellaonline.com/articles/art14618.asp](http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art14618.asp).