

**THE PEOPLE'S PRAYERS VI.
BEING SOME CONSIDERATIONS
ON THE USE OF THE LITANY IN
PUBLIC WORSHIP**

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Alcuin Club Tracts

VI

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PREFACE

In the following pages it is endeavoured to point out the due liturgical position of the Litany or General Supplication of our Book of Common Prayer, as the modern expression therein of the People's Prayers, which formed a notable landmark in the primitive scheme of the Liturgy : and also to maintain the traditional method of rendering it in quires and places where they sing. Incidentally some notice has been taken of the Bidding of Prayer ; which, though not in the Book of Common Prayer, is authorised by the 55th canon of 1604, and is equally an expression of the same primitive feature as the Litany.

It is right to acknowledge here my indebtedness to a previous tract on the Liturgical Use of the Litany by a member of our Committee, the Rev. T. A. Lacey.

THE PEOPLE'S PRAYERS

In the Liturgy of subapostolic days the prayers offered by the whole congregation form one of the chief landmarks of the service. The earliest account of the Eucharist of that period is given us by Justin Martyr in his first Apology. He describes it twice: once as it was celebrated after a solemn Baptism, and once as on ordinary Sundays. In the latter case, after the Scripture Lessons and the Sermon, he says:

Then we all stand up together, and offer up prayers; and, our prayers being over, bread and wine and water are brought in, etc.¹

The corresponding passage in the other account runs:

We offer up common prayers, both for ourselves and for the baptized person, and for all other persons in every part of the world . . . Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss.²

The Prayers of the Faithful are thus set before us as coming between the Sermon and the Offertory, in the Liturgy of the second century: or between the mass of the Catechumens and the mass of the Faithful, to use the western terminology of later days.

In the East, these People's Prayers by degrees took on the

¹ *Apologia*, i. cap. 67.

² *Apologia*, i, cap. 65,

form of a dialogue or responsorial type, in which the deacon announced a theme or petition, to which the people and children answered with the cry, *Kyrie eleison*. An early stage of this custom is to be found in the account of the Pilgrimage of Etheria to the Holy Land, circa 386. One of the deacons read out the names of those to be prayed for, and a number of children answered to each, *Kyrie eleison*; and when the deacon had finished all that was appointed for him to say, the bishop said the first orison, and prayed for everybody.¹

If we turn to the extant liturgies of the East, we find in almost everyone this diaconal litany, between the mass of the Catechumens and that of the Faithful; that is, in the same position which is occupied by the People's Prayers in Justin Martyr's outlines of the liturgy of the second century. Its length varies, and the petitions are not always identical; but they are all in the form of dialogue prayers between the deacon and the congregation. In Greek this kind of litany-prayers is called an Ectenè. At the end (or simultaneously in the later use) the bishop sums up the petitions in a collect.

We can clearly see in this an origin of our present Litany or General Supplication.

In the Roman and African Churches the development of the People's Prayers took a somewhat different turn. In the eighth century, after the gospel (the sermon had dropped out of the Roman rite by that time), the pope turned, according to *Ordo romanus*, to the people and said: *Let us pray*. But in spite of his invitation no one at that period prayed; it was, however, all that remained in the Roman rite of the

¹ *S. Silvoiae Aquitanae Peregrinatio ad loca sancta*, Ed. Gamurrini, Romae, 1888; p. 47.

eighth century at that liturgical moment of the People's Prayers mentioned by Justin Martyr as being offered up at this part of the service. This is not quite true, however, for on two days in the year, Wednesday and Friday before Easter, it was customary to recite a number of collects at this place, for the Faithful, the Church, the State, and the Heathen and Jews; and in these Fleury,¹ and after him Duchesne,² recognise the remains of the prayers which we are considering.

As the latter author points out, there is nothing in these solemn orisons to connect them in any way with the solemnities of Passion Week: so far as their contents are concerned, they might be said with propriety on any and every day of the year. St. Austin of Hippo³ refers to similar prayers in terms which suggest that they were in use in the African Church at every Eucharist: "Thou hearest the Priest of God at the altar exhorting the people of God to pray for *unbelievers*, that God may convert them to the faith; for *catechumens*, that he may inspire them with the wish for regeneration; and for the *faithful* that they may cultivate the gift which is implanted in them." These prayers no doubt were those preceeding the dismissal of the unbelievers and catechumens respectively; followed by that for the faithful, which was said when all else had departed. In the Roman Church a writer of the fifth century, in a letter purporting to be written by Pope Celestin I to the bishops of Gaul,⁴ tells us that "the prelates and the whole

¹ *Les Moeurs des Chrestiens*, Paris, 1682; p. 137.

² *Origines du Culte Chrétien*, Paris, 1898; pp. 164-5.

³ Epist. 217: cap. i: n 2: *Opera*, Antwerpiae, 1700; t. ij, col. 608.

⁴ Labbe, Cossart and Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova Collectio*, t. iv, col. 427.

Church groaning with them, pray that to the *unbelievers* may be given faith ; that *idolators* may be delivered from the errors of their impiety ; that, the veil being taken away from their hearts, the light of truth may appear to the *Jews* ; that *heretics* by receiving the catholic faith may come to their senses ; that *schismatics* may take afresh the spirit of charity ; that the medicine of penitence may be brought to the *lapsed* ; that *catechumens*, by being brought to the sacrament of regeneration, may have the courts of heavenly mercy opened to them."

Here again we have the same kind of prayers, apparently in frequent use ; and there can be no doubt that the reference is to the prayers made before the Offertory.

In the present Roman rite these solemn orisons are still appointed to be said, but only on Good Friday. Let us look a little more closely at their structure, and see what can be learned therefrom. Those for Jews and Pagans excepted, the form in each case is as follows : First, a bidding to prayer, by the priest : secondly, an invitation to kneel from the deacon, followed at once by another to rise up again ; and thirdly, a prayer offered by the priest, for the purposes which he indicated in his bidding, to which the people answer *Amen*. An example will make the case clearer, and we will take the first of them, that for the Church.

Priest. Let us pray, dearly beloved, for the holy Church of God : that our God and Lord would vouchsafe to pacify, unite and keep it, throughout the whole world, subjecting to it principalities and powers ; and that he would grant us to lead a quiet and peaceful life, to glorify God the Father Almighty. Let us pray.

Deacon. Let us kneel down.

Deacon. Arise.

Priest. Almighty, everlasting God, who hast revealed to all nations thy glory in Christ, preserve the works of thy mercy ;

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