

The Prayer of the Faithful: the work of a priestly people

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Some rituals are so simple that they pass us by! A case in point is that we *stand* together when we make requests of God when we take part in the Prayer of the Faithful in the assembly. The interesting thing to note is that it is not just a string of petitions simply bunched into one place for neatness: it is not the Prayers of the Faithful, but the Prayer. It is part of the task of the People of God to voice its needs, the needs of the community, and the needs of humanity before God. Voicing our needs is not the same as giving God information nor is equivalent to bothering God in the hope that more and more noise might move God to action! Voicing our needs is an acknowledgement of where we are as needy creatures, a declaration of our dependence on God, and a confession that the answer to the world's problems is greater than the creation.

The curious thing is that when we exhibit our neediness we do not grovel, nor kneel, but *stand*. In this we are following an ancient bit of ritual practice. Jesus' first followers stood in the synagogue when praying (Mt 6:5). A generation or two later, when they gathered they still stood to pray because Mark (11:25) puts this into the mouth of Jesus: 'whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.' And a generation later again, another teacher wishes 'that ... intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone ... and that in every place the people should pray, lifting up holy hands' (1 Tim 2:1 and 8).

Standing together praying is a statement that all the baptised are the priests of the new covenant.

If we remind ourselves of our common priestly dignity when we gather in Christ before the Father, a few other things fall into place:

First, we appreciate that we all celebrate the liturgy, the gathering is 'wholly celebrant' – this is how I render *actuosa participatio* in Vatican II – because we are a priestly people with a presbyter presiding. It is not a case that there is a priest *and* a people.

Second, we appreciate why reciting a prayer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, is wholly inappropriate. Mary is one with us in Christ, and we address the Father. In this priestly ministry of the Prayer of the Faithful we stand with Mary, not before her.

Third, we are reminded of our dignity as creatures brought into being through the Logos and made capable of standing in the divine presence through the Logos dwelling amongst us. We should see our standing as a reply to the patristic call: Christian: be aware of your dignity! We can also see the background to why the Council of Nicaea forbade kneeling on Sunday (1 Nicaea [325], c20).