

Collect

The final part of the Mass from the Introductory Rites, that takes place after the Penitential Rite and after the Gloria, if it is said, is the prayer of the priest known as the Collect. So, according to the Roman Missal, it says this, this is #9:

The Priest, with hands joined, says: *Let us pray.* (Latin *Oremus*)

And all pray in silence with the Priest for a while.

*Then the Priest, with hands extended, says the Collect prayer, at the end of which the people acclaim: Amen.*¹

Now, you would recognize this prayer even if you never heard it called a Collect before. If you're anything like me and you are just a regular layperson going to Mass, obviously you know that after we finish the Gloria, the priest will extend his hands and say, "Let us pray." But you might not know that that prayer is called the Collect. This is the prayer of the priest, which often begins...it basically has four parts. It begins with some kind of address like "Almighty and eternal God." Then it has a relative clause, you know, "who did such and such." Then there's a request or petition, "Grant that we, so and so, may obtain whatever." And then there'll be a conclusion. And these can vary, but often it'll be, "Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever." And then we all say "Amen." And again, if you're like me, this is actually one of those prayers that's a little hard to follow along, both because the structure is complex and it's easy for me as a lay person to just kind of check out and then say "Amen", you know, whatever Father said, "Amen" to the Collect. But it's actually a really important part of the Introductory Rites of the Mass, because in this prayer, the priest collects all the prayers of the faithful, all the sentiments that we've begun the Mass with. He, in a sense, gathers them up and offers them to the Father in a petition through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So I want to look at this for a minute and kind of unpack it. Before I do so, one thing I would highlight is, this is one of the things that the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, that I've mentioned before, it's the instruction on how to say

¹ Roman Missal, *The Order of Mass*, no. 9.

Mass that's at the beginning of every Missal. It's actually a long document, but it's a very important document. You can see here I have all these tabs highlighting the important parts, hundreds of tabs. But in the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, one of the things it says, even in the most recent edition, issued by John Paul II in 2011, the translation of it, it says that whenever the priest says the name of Jesus, he should bow his head. It's maybe something you've noticed that if the priest is praying the Collect, he may say, "Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son," and he'll bow his head. This is a gesture that accompanies the words of the Collect, which the General Instruction describes as follows:

A bow of the head is made when the three Divine Persons are named together and at *the names of Jesus*, of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of the Saint in whose honor Mass is being celebrated.²

So when we come to the Collect, kind of like with the Sign of the Cross, we not only have words that are significant, we also have gestures that are significant. The words of the prayer and then the gesture of bowing the head at the name of Jesus Christ or the name of the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, just to put some flesh on the bones and make sure we know what we're talking about here, I thought I would give you an example of two Collects from the Roman Missal. The first one is going to be real familiar to you, or at least it should be real familiar to you. This is the Collect from the 4th Sunday of Advent. So if it's the Fourth Sunday of Advent, during the Advent season, and the priest is going to say Mass, this is how he would begin the Introductory Rites:

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son,
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may be his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection.

² *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* no. 275.

Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.³

Now, does that ring a bell? Does that Collect ring a bell to you? Well, it should because this is the same prayer that is used in the Angelus, the traditional prayer often prayed at noon or even three times a day by Roman Catholics. The Angelus, although it's a popular prayer said by the lay faithful and others to mark the significant moments of prayer during the day, it's actually taken from the Missal. It's actually a Collect of the Roman tradition that the priest will say in the Introductory Rites at the beginning of Mass on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Which makes sense because this Collect is gathering up the prayers of the people to lead us into the mystery of the Incarnation, which is what the Angelus reminds us of throughout the day when prayed in a private way. That's one Collect. Here's another one. This is a very ancient Collect, not from the Advent season, but from the Christmas season. If you go to Mass at Christmas during the day, at the end of the Introductory Rites, the priest can pray this Collect. Listen to it:

*O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it,
grant, we pray,
that we may share in the divinity of Christ,
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen*⁴

All right, so notice that the Collect from the Christmas Mass is very similar to the prayer during the Offertory that the priest or deacon will pray when mingling the water, “by the mixture of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” Now again, that's a very fitting prayer to pray during Christmas, because that's precisely what happened in

³ Roman Missal, *Fourth Sunday of Advent*, Collect.

⁴ Roman Missal, *The Nativity of the Lord*, At Mass During the Day, Collect. See Lauren Pristas, *The Collects of the Roman Missals* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 76-77; St. Leo I, *Sermon 21*.

the mystery of the Nativity. The Son, the second person of the Trinity, who was fully God, took on our human nature and became man and became a partaker of our human nature, and we too can become a partaker of his divine nature through the mystery of Baptism, the mystery of the Eucharist, and ultimately, entry into eternal beatitude.

Now, what's fascinating about that Collect is that it is very ancient. It actually goes back to one of the sacramentaries, the ancient Roman books on how to say the Mass, that is associated with Pope St. Leo the Great, who was the 5th-century Pope. So it's sometimes called the Sacramentary of St. Leo. And sure enough, this is a good example of how certain Collects in the Roman Missal, that was promulgated by Pope St. Paul VI after the Vatican Council, the Second Vatican Council, in 1969 and 70, actually restore some ancient prayers from the ancient Roman Collects. There's a whole study of this in this book by Lauren Pristas called *The Collects of the Roman Missals*. So if you're interested in kind of digging into the history and theology of these prayers, in other words, if you're a liturgical nerd and you want to dig in, that's an excellent study of the Collects of the Missal, not just in the new Missal but also in the pre-Conciliar Missal, sometimes called the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the Missal of Pope St. John the XXIII. All right, well that just gives you a basic idea. So these Collects are particular prayers of the priest at the end of the Introductory Rites that often will be tied to some theme or theological mystery appropriate to that particular Mass or to that season of the year, like Advent or Christmas.

The last thing you'll notice about the Collect, before we look at where it comes from in scripture, is that the Collects are complicated. I mean, look at the rhetorical structure of the prayer. "Oh God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully, restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen." Now, that kind of a long string of relative clauses with an initial address and then a final petition can be a little hard on English ears. We don't tend to talk that way. But this is actually a distinctive element of the Roman Rite. So these prayers reflect the Latin language in which they're composed and the kind of high level or high register Latin that was part of Roman rhetoric, part of the Roman court, and

they're a distinctive element of the Roman liturgy. So sometimes I've had priests, you know, privately kind of, you know, admit to me that man, those can be a tongue twister when you're trying to say the Collect at the beginning of Mass. But, and that's true, but they are an important part of the Roman liturgy and of the Roman tradition. And if you slow down and maybe pray with them and prepare them before Mass, if you're a priest, right, or if you're a layperson wanting to kind of figure out what's the theme of this Mass, like what what mystery are we going to enter into. They are actually very rich theological aspects of the Roman Missal and can repay much study. They are very beautiful if you slow down a bit and listen to what the words are saying.

Okay, so that's just a little introduction to the Collect. The question now is, why do we pray the Collect? Where are these from in the Bible? Are they from anywhere in the Bible? Where are they from in the sacred Tradition? And what's the mysticism of this moment of the Mass? What do they reveal to us about what's happening invisibly in the mystery of the liturgy? So, when it comes to Scripture, let me just point to two things first. The gesture of the priest holding his hands extended, extending his hands while he says the Collect, believe it or not, it's the truth...It's Jewish, right? So this is a good example of the Jewish roots of the Roman Rite. That might be a book I write one day. This posture goes all the way back to the book of Psalms. So for example, in a Psalm attributed to King David who, remember, is not just a king, but a priest. David acts as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He offers sacrifices when he brings the Ark of the Covenant up. What does it say in Psalm 141:1-2:

Let *my prayer* be counted as incense before you,
and *the lifting up of my hands* as an evening sacrifice!

So the idea of lifting one's hands when one prays is an ancient Jewish, kind of visible gesture of offering a prayer up to God, especially a sacrificial prayer or prayer of petition, which is what the Collects are really doing. They're, in a sense, gathering up the prayers of the faithful and offering them to God as we enter into the sacrificial liturgy of the Mass, the sacrificial liturgy of the Eucharist. And this isn't the last time we'll see the priest use that gesture of praying with his hands

extended, but that's an ancient gesture that goes back to Judaism and back to the priests and the liturgy of the old covenant.

That's the gesture. What about the words of the Collect? Well, its fascinating, it took me a while to stumble onto this, but I actually realized that there is something that's strikingly similar to the Collect in the prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the altar in Jerusalem. So if you recall from the Old Testament, David does not build the Temple. He has too much blood on his hands. God doesn't allow him to build it, even though he wants to. It's Solomon who's going to take the Tabernacle, put it into a permanent building known as the Temple in Jerusalem, and when he finishes building that Temple and the glory cloud of the Lord comes down upon the Ark to fill the sanctuary of God's presence, Solomon has a prayer of dedication where he actually faces the Temple, faces the altar in front of the people, and extends his hands and says a very rhetorically complex prayer, not all that different from what we do in the Collect. So listen to this prayer of dedication of King Solomon at the Temple in 1 Kings Chapter 8:

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven; and said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing mercy to your servants who walk before you with all their heart; who have kept with your servant David my father what you declared to him; yes, you spoke with your mouth, and with your hand have fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, O Lord, God of Israel, keep with your servant David my father what you have promised him, saying, 'There shall never fail you a man before me to sit upon the throne of Israel...' Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yes, hear in heaven your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive."⁵

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994..

That is from 1 Kings 8:22-25, 30. And that's not even all of it. I actually trimmed it for you. So if you think our Collects are complicated to pronounce, try reading the Collect, the prayer of King Solomon before the dedication of the Temple. But notice what you see there. You see it's being prayed with arms extended in the Tabernacle, in the Temple I should say. It's addressed to the Lord God. It describes what he's done with these relative clauses, and it ends with a petition asking the Lord to grant some favor, in this case forgiveness and hearing the prayer of the people. So the idea of this kind of petitionary prayer led by a priest on behalf of the assembly is something, once again, that goes all the way back to the Old Testament and to the actions of Solomon in the Temple in Jerusalem.

All right, so those are the biblical roots of the Collect. What about its roots in tradition? Where does it come from in the Roman tradition? So when it comes to tradition, regarding the prayers, the Collects of the Mass, one of the key witnesses to early traditions is the *Book of Pontiffs*, the *Liber Pontificalis*, which begins to be written down in the 6th century and then continues to be written down up into the Middle Ages, giving little biographies of the Popes. And according to the *Liber*, one of the first popes who is attributed in the tradition with composing prayers for the Mass, like some of the Collects, is Pope St. Gelasius, who's in the 5th century. So if you look, the *Liber Pontificalis* says this about Gelasius:

Gelasius, born in Africa... produced with careful wording prefaces and prayers for the sacraments...⁶

Now, we are going to look at the prefaces of the Roman Rite later when we get to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, but in the later tradition, in some of the medieval writers, the prayers that are linked with St. Gelasius in the 5th century are, in particular, several of the Collects that are in the Mass. And you can actually see this tradition reflected in another ancient Roman book, what's called *The Gelasian Sacramentary*. So this is an ancient book describing the Roman Mass that was linked with St. Gelasius, so that it actually acquired the name, *The Gelasian Sacramentary*. It is a fascinating book in Latin which actually contains a lot of the prayers that we would later go on to link with the Collects of the Roman Missal. So

⁶ *Liber Pontificalis* 51.6. In Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs*, 42.

it's not just the tradition of the *Liber Pontificalis* that links the prayers and collects with St. Gelasius, it's actually the *Gelasian Sacramentary* itself. Now, those prayers of the Collects are going to be one of the more variable aspects of the Roman liturgy. There are lots of Collects in the Mass. Sometimes they're going to be added later and composed by various individuals. Sometimes they'll fall out of use in the Roman liturgy. So according to the Roman tradition and some of the medieval writers, we'll see that it's not just St. Gelasius to whom is attributed some of the prayers of the Mass, like in the Collects, but also other popes, like Pope St. Gregory the Great and Pope Leo the Great in the 5th century.

We've already looked at Leo the Great when we were looking at the Lyonsine Sacramentary, but I'd like to actually point out just one more witness, or a couple more witnesses, sorry, from the tradition on Gregory. One of the most important books on the Mass from the medieval period is by Walafrid Strabo. He was writing in the 9th century AD. There was a flurry of liturgical scholarship and writings at the time of Charlemagne, and in the 9th century several major works were produced, and Walafrid Strabo's book on the Liturgy is one of the first books to attempt to catalog the history and development of the Roman liturgy. So Strabo is not as well known or as widely read, just kind of in popular parlance, in part because it's only recently that his Latin book on the history of the Roman liturgy was translated into English, but it's very crucial because it's really one of the first books to not only attempt to explain the mysteries of the Mass, of the rites and ceremonies, but it actually attempts to give a history of the development of the Roman liturgy, especially which Popes added which parts to the Mass. And so I have here, this is an English translation of Strabo's book on the Mass, but unfortunately the translator here left the title in Latin, so you're not going to find this one easily at your bookstore. The title is the *Libellus De Exordiis Et Incrementis Quarundam In Observationibus Ecclesiasticis Rerum: A Translation and Commentary*. So a very exciting text here, but it's actually, honestly, it's riveting because it does give a kind of medieval description of how Catholics in the Middle Ages thought about the history of the development of the Roman liturgy. And so Strabo, in the 9th century, has this to say about the development of some of the prayers, like the Collects. I'm quoting him here:

Because many prayers by so many undetermined authors were dubious and lacking in sound meaning, blessed *Gregory carefully collected the reasonable ones, setting aside the excessive or inappropriate; he put together a book which is called a sacramentary*, shown clearly in its title.⁷

So notice here, according to the Roman tradition in the *Liber Pontificalis*, Gelasius composed a number of the prayers in the Mass, and then, according to Walafriid Strabo's book on the development of liturgy, Pope St. Gregory the Great, in the 7th century, also composed a number of prayers in the Mass. But notice, he didn't just compose prayers, he also removed prayers that he thought were dubious or lacking in sound meaning. Because a lot of these Collects, and a lot of the Prefaces too, were composed by unknown individuals, some of them were of higher quality than others. So one of the things St. Gregory the Great did when he was arranging his sacramentary, which in tradition is known as the Gregorian Sacramentary, it's attributed to him, was that he edited it. So certain things he took out of the liturgy that were part of the liturgy before, and he added things to liturgy that were not there before. One of those things that he edited, or at least was known for editing in the Roman tradition, were the prayers of the Mass . The Prefaces, which we'll look at later, but also some of the Collects of the Mass, these prayers that were part of the Introductory Rites.

So we see here, and if you want an example of this I actually have a copy here. This is a copy of the Gregorian Sacramentary, another one of these Mass books in Latin that most of it, actually a lot of it, is just the various prayers and prefaces that the Roman priest would say at the beginning of the Mass or at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer. One of the distinctive elements of the Roman liturgy were the cycle of Collects and Prefaces and prayers over the offerings that were part of the Mass, but were variable, they would change throughout the different seasons of the liturgy and for particular Masses. So they add a richness to the liturgy, the Collect adds a certain richness. It's kind of a lens through which to see this particular liturgy, this particular Mass at this particular time of the year or liturgical season.

⁷ Walafriid Strabo, *Little Book on the Origins and Growth of Certain Things in Ecclesiastical Observations*, Chapter 23. In Alice L. Harting-Correa, *Walafriid Strabo's Libellus De Exordiis Et Incrementis Quarundam In Observationibus Ecclesiasticis Rerum: A Translation and Liturgical Commentary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 135.

All right, so that's just an example of where the Collects come from in tradition. In short, some of them are written by people who don't know. Some of them were written by Popes. All of them were edited and governed by the Magisterium, by the regulation of the various pontiffs that were attributed in the tradition to the respective Popes and to their authority over the Roman liturgy and the development of the Roman Liturgy.

Now, with that said, I want to add one last point though. That's with regard to the words of the Collect in tradition. What about the gesture of bowing the head? This is something that I think people are often unfamiliar with, but I'd like to highlight it. So, as I mentioned before, in the General Instruction on the Roman Missal, it says that when the priest says the names of the Holy Trinity or the name of Jesus, he is to bow his head. That's the custom of the Roman Rite. And I recently was doing a little research on this and found out that that gesture, that custom, that gesture actually goes all the way back to one of the ecumenical councils. So, in the 13th century, just to give a little more background and show how ancient this practice is, the Council of Lyons II, the Second Council of Lyons... So just like we have Vatican II, which is the Second Vatican Council, Vatican 1, Vatican 2. There were also two councils of Lyons, Lyons I and Lyons II. And the Council of Lyons, in France or Gaul, in the 13th century, 1274 AD, was the 14th ecumenical council of the Church. And in one of its canons it actually decreed that in the Roman liturgy, in the liturgy of the Roman Church, that it would be fitting for the head to be bowed every time the name of Jesus was pronounced. So listen to this, this is fascinating. So all the way back in the 13th century, here's what we hear:

Those who assemble in church should extol with an act of special reverence the "name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9)... the name, that is, of Jesus Christ... Each should fulfill in himself that which is written for all, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil 2:10); whenever that glorious name is recalled, especially during the sacred mysteries of the mass, everyone should bow the knees of his heart, which he can even do by a bow of his head.⁸

⁸ Second Council of Lyons (1274 A.D.), Constitution no. 25. In Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 1:328.

So notice that, when you see the priest bow his head at the name of Jesus, or when you see the faithful bow their head at the name of Jesus, as the General Instruction on the Roman Missal prescribes, we're practicing a custom of honoring the name of Christ, the precious name of Jesus, that goes all the way back at least as far as the 13th century, and which an ecumenical council of the Church prescribed as a fitting gesture, especially during what? The sacred mysteries of the Mass. So notice once again, the Mass is a mystery. We see the Church over and over again, referring to the mysteries of the Mass, that move us beyond the visible to the invisible, beyond the sign to the thing signified, to recognize that we are in the presence of Jesus Christ and that it's fitting that we bow our heads every time his sacred name is named.

Okay, so we've looked at where the Collect, the words of the Collect come from in Sacred Scripture as well as sacred tradition. We've looked at the gesture of bowing the head during the Collect and where that comes from, both where it's rooted in Scripture and then where it comes from in the tradition of the Roman liturgy, especially in the Ecumenical Council of Lyons II. Now, let's just close with one last point. What is the mystical meaning of this rite? Like what's invisibly happening? Why is this an important part of the Mass? And here I would look to St. Robert Bellarmine, again in his 17th century treatise on the Mass, a Doctor of the Church, one of the great Jesuits in the history of the Church. This is what he says:

The first ceremony with respect to God, i.e. the elevation of the hands...

And here he is talking about during the Collect.

...has an example in Scripture... Moses obtained his request while praying with his hands elevated [Exodus 17:11-12]. Likewise, ...Solomon spread his hands to heaven when he was about to pray [1 Kings 8:22]. ...David says: "The elevation of my hands as an evening sacrifice" [Psalm 141:2]. St. Paul... "I will that men pray in every place, uplifting pure hands" [1 Timothy 2:8]⁹

⁹ Robert Bellarmine, *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, chap. 15. In Bellarmine, *On the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass*, 240.

So for Bellarmine, what is he expressing here? That the lifting of the hands by the priest in the Collect is not just an ancient biblical gesture, it is a powerful gesture that adds an element of invocation and petition to the Collect, that especially echoes the words and the actions of Moses in the desert. Remember? I didn't get to that one, but if you look back in Exodus 17, remember this was when the Israelites were doing battle during the Exodus with the enemies, the Amalekites, And when Moses lifted his hand, the army would prevail, and when he let his hands fall, the army would be defeated. And so he stood there and interceded with outstretched arms for the Israelites. So the mysticism of this rite is that at this moment in the Mass, the priest is like Moses interceding for Israel, and the people are like the Israelites entering into battle at the time of the Exodus. The priest is like Solomon at the dedication of the Temple, and the people are like the assembly praying in union with Solomon in the presence of the Lord, and in doing so they fulfill, at this moment in the Collect, the command of St. Paul, that in every place men would pray with outstretched hands, invoking the graces and the gifts of the Lord, as we enter into the mystery of the Liturgy of the Word.