

LITURGICAL PRAYER FOR THE DEAD

By

Herman J. Graf, S.V.D.

Eight, respectively nine years ago, Rome published the reformed Rite of Funerals (1969), and the reformed Missal (1970) with an extensive section of Masses for the dead. Generally speaking both Ritual and Missal were well received by pastors and faithful. Occasionally however, we also encounter complaints, and questions are raised concerning the theology underlying the reform.

As far as the rites are concerned, the complaints should not be directed to Rome. Bishops should have seen to it that the rites be adapted to local conditions. They were to consider "carefully and prudently which elements from the traditions and cultures of individual countries could be appropriately admitted". Rome has always given its blessings where such proposals have been made.

But we find also complaints concerning the prayers of the Masses for the dead, and for the antiphons, responsories and intercessions of the Ritual. They take exception to the very paschal aspect of the Christian funeral which the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had so strongly emphasized (art. 81). Here follows a summary of complaints which reached the writer of these lines some time ago.

"The "old" prayers of the Missal, Breviary and Ritual have never asked for the resurrection of the body. In the new ones such a petition appears frequently. After death the future of the body is settled. To pray for a glorious resurrection of that body will be to ask God for a change of a "causa iudicata", a thing that will never happen. So why ask for the glorious resurrection of that body

"Concerning the soul it is different because there exists the possibility of purgatory. Here the suffrages of the Church are conditioned. If the soul be in purgatory those suffrages are applicable.

"To ask for the glorious resurrection of the body could be interpreted as not believing in the immortality of the soul. In our situation in the Philippines some of the prayers of the new funeral ritual can confuse the faithful who live together with members of

¹ Rite of Funerals, Introduction, n. 21.2.

sects (INC and Jehovah's witnesses) who believe that the soul, after death, remains in a state of hibernation, near the body, waiting for the day of resurrection. — To these complaints more could be added".

There is, first of all, complete agreement that it is meaningful to pray for the deceased. "The pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with great piety the memory of the dead. Because it is "a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins" (2 Mach. 12:46) she has also offered prayers for them".² We have witnesses of this conviction and practice from the second century on.

For what are to pray? — Most, if not all of the prayers of the pre-Vatican II Roman Missal and Ritual had been composed during the first Christian millennium, a time when the terms "condemnation" and "purification" had not been sufficiently clarified. People often thought of purgatory as a temporary sojourn in hell, or as an anteroom of hell. Sometimes they thought that those in purgatory were under the power of satan. It is within this context that we have to understand the former offertory antiphon of the Masses for the dead: "Lord Jesus Christ, free the souls of all the faithful departed from the pains of hell (infern) and from the deep pit; free them from the lion's mouth that they may not be swallowed up; may they not fall into darkness..."

Primitive Christianity was not at all sure about the fate of those who died as friends of God, except the martyrs.³ The latter went surely right away to heaven. But what happened to the others? Did they completely die for the time being? Were they in a state of sleep or unconsciousness? Something of this uncertainty seems to have influenced the composer(s) of the oldest, preserved prayer for the dead of the Roman Church, about the sixth or seventh centuries.⁴ Until the recent reform of the funeral liturgy it was found only in the third part of the Roman Pontifical,⁵ and consequently, was hardly ever used.

With some slight modifications this prayer was re-inserted into the reformed funeral ritual (n. 174) and promptly occasioned the accusation of heresy when it was used for the funeral of a cardinal

² Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, art. 50.

³ Cf. Constitution on the Church, art. 50.2.

⁴ A. Chavasse, *Le sacramentaire gélasien* (Bibl. de théologie IV, 1), Tournai 1958, pp. 57-60.

⁵ Pontificale Romanum, Mechliniae, H. Dessain 1934, p. 1032.

in Rome.⁶ The text in question is the following: "...ut lubeas suscipi animam famuli tui N., in sinum amici tui Abrahae patriarchae, resuscitandamque in novissimo iudicii magni die..." In literal translation: "Order the soul of your servant N. be received in the bosom of your friend, the patriarch Abraham and raise her (the soul) up on the last day of the great judgment".

But this translation is wrong. The word "anima" has here the same meaning as the Greek word "psyche", meaning the concrete human existence, the human life. It would be a mistake to understand "anima" in a hylemorphic sense. Hylemorphism entered theology only during the High Middle Ages "In the vast majority of cases the word soul (in Sacred Scripture) too means the whole corporeally existing man".⁷ The text of this liturgical prayer does not speak, therefore, of the death or sleep of the soul, and its subsequent re-creation or re-awakening. The official translation of this text in English — by the International Commission on English in Liturgy — is correct: "Welcome your son (daughter) N., to the company of Abraham (our father in faith), and raise him up on the last day, the day of judgment".

It is true that the prayers of the so-called Tridentine Missal, Breviary and Ritual never asked for the glorious resurrection of the body. These liturgical books hardly ever referred to the final resurrection, except where they quoted Sacred Scripture in their readings. This is strange indeed, especially when we consider the importance of the second-last article of the Apostles' Creed "carnis resurrectionem".⁸ Commenting on this article Cardinal Ratzinger wrote: "First of all, the hope of the resurrection of the dead simply represents the basic form of the biblical hope of immortality; it appears in the New Testament not really as a supplement to a preceding and independent immortality of the soul but as the fundamental statement on the fate of man".⁹

The ancient funeral ritual presupposed, as a matter of fact, a biblical theology, which placed man's death side by side with his baptism.¹⁰ The baptismal rite, especially in the form of immersion, symbolically represents the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

⁶ Anon., De oratione "Deus, apud quem omnia morientia vivunt." *Notitiae* 8 (1972) 15-17.

⁷ J. Ratzinger, Introduction to Christianity (London 1969) p. 270.

⁸ On the history and development of the Apostles' Creed cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (New York 1972) pp. 369-434.

⁹ J. Ratzinger, *l.c.*, p. 269.

¹⁰ Cf. H. R. Philippeau, in: *Le mystère de la mort et sa célébration* (Paris 1951), here quoted according to the German translation (Frankfurt 1955) p. 172.

The Christian is identified with Christ and with his saving acts. True, death is the passage from this life to the Father; death is the gateway to our true country and to the vision of God; death is the entrance into eternal rest in the light of God. But it is still not the end. The paschal mystery of Christ is to be completed in us through the final resurrection to glory.¹¹

It was really strange that the pre-Vatican II Roman funeral liturgy did not refer to the resurrection of the dead, because the ancient sources of the Roman liturgy frequently did so. A look into the so-called Leonine Sacramentary with its Masses for the dead proves that the Roman Church at that early time asked that the deceased person "may be able to look with secure hope and joy for the day of the resurrection".¹²

In several Mass formularies of the ancient Gelasian Sacramentary the Church prayed for the glorious resurrection of the deceased. We find there even the petition that the deceased may "share in the first resurrection".¹³ Jesus (Lk. 14:14: "resurrection of the just") and especially the Apocalypse (20:5-6)) hint at two resurrections at different times, separated from one another by a long intermediate reign of the just with Christ. Only the just are raised after the appointed number of the elect has been completed. The general resurrection will take place at the end of time when the last rebellion of satan has been quenched.

More frequent in the same Gelasian Sacramentary are the petitions for a glorious final resurrection. They ask that the dead person "may receive his body on the day of the resurrection and come to stand with the blessed at the right hand of God the Father".¹⁴ In another prayer the Church asked God: "Lord, raise him up in the company of your saints and elect".¹⁵ In still an-

¹¹ H. Ashworth, *The Prayers for the Dead in the Missal of Pope Paul VI*, *Ephemerides liturgicas* 85 (1971) 15.

¹² L. C. Mohlberg (et al. eds.), *Sacramentarium Veronense (Rerum Ecclesiasticarum Documenta. Series maior. Fontes I)* Rome 1956, n. 1148, p. 145: "... ut resurrectionis diem spe certae gratulationis expectet."

¹³ L. C. Mohlberg (et al. eds.), *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae (Rerum Ecclesiasticarum Documenta. Series maior. Fontes IV)* Rome 1960, n. 1612, p. 235: "... et habeat partem in prima resurrectione..." The same petition is found in nn. 1616, 1619 and 1620.

¹⁴ L. C. Mohlberg, l.c., n. 1612, p. 235: "... et inter suscipientes corpora in die resurrectionis corpus suscipiat, et cum benedictis ad dexteram dei patris venientibus veniat..."

¹⁵ Ibid., n. 1617, p. 236: "...resuscitare eum digneris, domine, una cum sanctis et electis tuis..."

other oration the Church prayed that "the body, buried by us in its weakness, may be raised in power among the saints".¹⁶

The Gregorian Sacramentary prayed in a similar tone that the dead person may find his "rest in the glory of the resurrection the company of the saints".¹⁷

Some prayers from the supplement of the Gregorian Sacramentary may stand here for later liturgical sources of the Roman rite. The compiler of this supplement is most probably St. Benedict of Aniane (+ 821). In it the Church prayed: "Order him to rise, when the day of judgment comes, together with your saints and elect".¹⁸ Another prayer text asked: "Join him to the great assembly of all the saints that he may rise with the elect and be crowned at your right hand".¹⁹

What was the reason for the disappearance of these and similar prayers from the liturgical books of the Roman liturgy? We do not know for sure. Some scholars think that in the moral decadence of the early Middle Ages the Church used in her pastoral approach the rod of severity rather than the balm of mercy and mildness: "During the centuries of the barbarian invasions, among peoples who had not been turned into saints straight away by baptism, we see outbursts of cruelty, lust, selfishness, showing how slowly does the leaven of Christianity permeate the ways of fallen mankind. The Church is obliged to be severe. To keep men on the right way, she had to act sternly and remind mankind of the punishment reserved for sinners, the terrors of the Last Judgment, of which the Lord himself gave us a foresight".²⁰ During this period — late ninth and tenth centuries—liturgical texts of a threatening nature, like the "Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna"²¹ entered the Roman liturgy.

Still, there remains the question why, after the Council of Trent, these negative elements were not eliminated, or at least repressed.

¹⁶ Ibid., n. 1623, p. 237: "... ut hoc corpus a nobis in infirmitate sepultum, in virtute et ordine sanctorum resuscitet..." Note the allusion to 1 Cor. 15:43.

¹⁷ H. Lietzmann, *Das Sakramentarium Gregorianum* (Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen, Heft 3) Muenster 1958 (2nd ed.), n. 225, 2, p. 131: "...ut in resurrectionis gloria inter sanctos tuos resuscitatus respiret."

¹⁸ J. Deshusses, *Le sacramentaire gregorien* (Spicilegium Friburgense, Vol. 16) Fribourg 1971, n. 1409, p. 461: "...et cum dies iudicii advenerit, cum sanctis et electis tuis, eum resuscitari iubeas."

¹⁹ Ibid., n. 1414, p. 463: "... omnium sanctorum coetibus adgregatus, cum electis resurgat in parte dexterarum coronandus."

²⁰ P. Herbin, *We Die Unto the Lord. Sickness and Death of the Christian* (London 1960) p. 85.

²¹ Liturgisch-woordenboek II (1968) 1527.

Why was the paschal aspect of Christian death not brought out more forcefully, since the reform aimed at restoring the liturgy "to the earlier norm of the holy fathers"?

For one, those entrusted with the reform had not those complete sources in classical editions at their disposal which we have today. Aiming at a restoration of the liturgy "to the earlier norm of the holy fathers" they were simply not able to reach that goal. A last valid answer to the question cannot be given, at least not at the moment. But the fact remains that "in the reform of the ritual those texts seem to have been preferred which speak of the fear of the judgment, rather than those which reflect on the hope and peace of heaven after the turmoil of life on earth".²² It was in view of this rather gloomy aspect of the liturgy for the dead in the Roman rite that the second Vatican Council demanded so strictly that the funeral rites should more clearly express the paschal character of the Christian death (Const. on the Lit., art. 81).

Summing up, we are consequently fully justified to say that in former times the Roman Church prayed in her official prayers for the glorious resurrection of the deceased. On orders of the Constitution on the Liturgy of Vatican II, the Church only resumed an ancient custom.

Originally it had been planned to take the new texts, to be introduced into the liturgical books, from existing, ancient sources so that they would harmonize with the formularies of the Missal of Pope St. Pius V which the reform intended to retain. In the end this proved impossible. Existing prayer texts had to be modified and corrected. Others drawn from ancient sacramentaries, had to be inserted. Even new ones had to be created to meet the requirements of the Constitution on the Liturgy.²³

Too many liturgical texts of the former funeral rites were affected by the ancient world view — no longer our own — that the heaven is 'up there' and hell down, somewhere deep in or under the earth. After death, it was thought, the soul started a difficult and arduous journey to heaven. This led her through the regions of the air which were considered to be the realm of demons. St. Paul wrote to his Christians that before their conversion they "were following the way of this world, obeying the ruler who governs the air" (Eph. 2:2). Toward the end of the same letter he writes: "Our battle is not against human forces but against the prin-

²² H. Ashworth, l.c., p. 4 — Cf. P. M. Gy, *Le nouveau Rituel romain des funeraillles, La Maison Dieu* 101 (1970) 17-18.

²³ H. Ashworth, l.c., 3-15. — Cf. P.P. Gy, *Ordo exsequiarum pro adultis, Notitiae* 2 (1966) 353-363.

cipalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above" (Eph. 6:12). In this world view the air is the habitat of demons.

As brigands and robbers made the roads frequently insecure in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, so the demons of the air were thought to make the way of the souls dangerous while journeying to heaven. Not all such texts have been eliminated in the reformed liturgy. Well known are the responsories "May the angels lead you into paradise" and "May the choir of angels welcome you". The Gregorian melodies of these texts are enchanting. Were they retained for the sake of their melodies?

The ancient sources used for the composition of new prayers, and for the adaptation of old ones, were not only Roman, like the Leonine and Gelasian sacramentaries. Valuable elements were taken from the ancient Spanish liturgy, especially from the Oracional Visigótico.²⁴ Also the writings of St. Peter Chrysologus yielded valuable material for the reform of liturgical texts for the Masses and rites for the dead.

The prayer for the resurrection of the dead makes sense, even when we keep in mind that it is absolutely certain that all will be raised (1 Cor. 15:51), either to the resurrection of life or to that of judgment, since Christ himself had said: "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear the voice (of the son of man) and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn. 5:28 f).

It can be meaningful to ask for a saving deed of God of which we are certain will happen. In each Mass the Church asks in the preconsecratory epiclesis that the gifts of bread and wine may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In Eucharistic Prayer II the celebrating priest prays: "Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ".

The Lord himself urged us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom. Actually, in his own person and work this kingdom had come: "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15). In its fullness and perfection this kingdom will come with absolute certainty;

²⁴ Published by J. Vives (Monumenta Hispaniae Sacra. Serie liturgica: Vol. I) Barcelona 1946. — Cf. J. Pinell Pons, *The Theology of Life and Death in the Mozarabic Rite, Concilium*, Febr. 1968, 14-18.

nothing can hinder or prevent its final coming in Christ's parousia. Despite this, Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10; Lk. 11:2).

Perhaps one could consider this petition of the Our Father as a means to speed up the coming of God's rule and kingdom. But can we not also pray for the acceleration of the final resurrection, since the resurrection of the dead is only a partial aspect of the coming of God's Kingdom?

When we ask God for something he has solemnly promised to give to us, our prayer is another form of thanksgiving. In our petitions we acknowledge that the saving act of the glorious "resurrection of the dead" is purest grace that comes exclusively from God, also for those who seriously collaborated with God during their earthly life and died in his friendship.