

Let Us Pray

In 1 Cor. 14 Paul addressed confusion in worship that arose when Christians spoke out of turn. Another kind of confusion happens in our present day worship services when someone stands before the congregation and says, "Let us pray."

It is a silent confusion, and often an unspoken one.

The invitation to corporate public prayer moves parents to keep vigil over their children, offers worshippers a chance to check their watch and review the bulletin, or allows the busy among us to review their day's schedule.

The majority of congregants, however, take the invitation seriously, yet they continue to wonder how they are supposed to participate. It seems that three options are available: meditate in the silence, pray a prayer ourselves, or listen.

Meditation is helpful for worship. It can direct the worshipper in finding the right tone for worship at the right moment. Quieting one's heart in silent preparation for worship at the invocation time, for example, can prove meaningful.

Since the invitation is for "us" to pray, it has always made sense that when one person stands to pray in public, a multitude of worshippers are praying at the same time. What we hear as silence God hears as a chorus of voices expressing their hopes and cares, their grief and joy.

This response, however, has its limitations. We may find ourselves in prayer, yet when the one leading a spoken prayer says "Amen" we raise our heads and end our prayers as well, sometimes leaving them unfinished.

Frequently people simply listen to a public prayer. Perhaps this explains why many are "nervous" about praying in public. They think others will judge them or their theology when they pray. Their reservations may be justified given that prayer is inherently a private act and speaking our prayers in public makes us feel vulnerable if they are real, or hypocritical if they are not heartfelt.

At our best, when we listen to others pray we hope to hear someone else voicing our despair or celebration. We hope to discover that the larger community somehow understands the concerns we carry and that the words we long to speak will be heard by God and God's people in this act of public prayer.

In the end, listening to someone else's prayer has a theological limitation. These words are not intended for us, but for God. Set this theological consideration beside Jesus' admonition to pray in secret and not like the "hypocrites" (Matt. 6: 5-6) and the question is raised, "Should we have public prayer at all?"

Regardless of these questions and the confusion that may arise, when Christians gather together in all kinds of settings, we will pray. Perhaps Saint Benedict's rule may prove a wise word for those of us who lead in public prayer: "Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace. In community, however, prayer should always be brief." (Rule of St. Benedict, 20:4-5)

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