

The Prayer of Humble Access: Fr Ken Clark, The Personal Ordinariate of OLSC

In the Ordinariate mass, *Divine Worship: The Missal*, the third form of the Roman Rite Mass authorized for use by Roman Catholics in the Personal Ordinariates established under Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum Cœtibus*, the Prayer of Humble Access is located before communion. What is the Prayer of Humble Access?

We do not presume to come to this thy Table,
O merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in thy manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy so much
as to gather up the crumbs
under thy Table.
But thou art the same Lord,
whose property is always to have mercy:
Grant us therefore, gracious Lord,
so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ,
and to drink his blood,
that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.

The history of this prayer is rather unique though it does bear some correlation to the earlier *Apologia Sacerdotum*ⁱ, or the Apology of a Priest, said before the altar by the priest alone. It first appears in English, in the “1548 *Order of the Communion*, a newly-decreed collection of prayers in English to prepare worshippers for the sacrament in both species, bread and wine.”ⁱⁱ It was written by Thomas Cranmer who was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532 until his trial for heresy when he was deprived of his Archbishopric on December 4th 1555. One could ask the question, could anything good come from a heretic, and the answer must be that God uses all, even heretics, as this prayer now is part of *Divine Worship – the Missal*.

In a blog post dated, 29 November 2016, Fr John Hunwickeⁱⁱⁱ posted about the Prayer, stating that the Prayer borrows from sacerdotal apologia, beginning as it does with a phrase of the 'Ambrosian Prayer' given in the S Pius V Missals for use by the celebrant before Mass.

The Ambrosian prayer is reproduced in full below, and even though it is much longer, it bears a striking similitude to the Prayer of Humble Access.

Prayer of Humble Access	(Prayer of St. Ambrose Before Mass)^{iv}
We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.	Lord Jesus Christ, I approach Thy banquet table in fear and trembling, for I am a sinner, and dare not rely on my own worth, but only on Thy goodness and mercy. I am defiled by my many sins in body and soul, and by my unguarded thoughts and words. Gracious God of majesty and awe, I seek Thy protection, I look for Thy healing. Poor troubled sinner that I am, I appeal to Thee, the fountain of all mercy. I cannot bear Thy judgment, but I trust in Thy salvation. Lord, I

<p>We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.</p> <p>But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:</p> <p>Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.</p>	<p>show my wounds to Thee and uncover my shame before Thee. I know my sins are many and great, and they fill me with fear, but I hope in Thy mercies, for they cannot be numbered.</p> <p>Lord Jesus Christ, Eternal King, God and man, crucified for mankind, look upon me with mercy and hear my prayer, for I trust in Thee. Have mercy on me, full of sorrow and sin, for the depth of Thy compassion never ends.</p> <p>Praise to Thee saving sacrifice, offered on the wood of the cross for me and for all mankind. Praise to the noble and precious Blood, flowing from the wounds of my crucified Lord Jesus Christ and washing away the sins of the whole world.</p> <p>Remember, Lord, Thy creature, whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy blood; I repent my sins, and I long to put right what I have done. Merciful Father, take away all my offenses and sins; purify me in body and soul, and make me worthy to taste the Holy of Holies. May Thy Body and Blood, which I intend to receive, although I am unworthy, be for me the remission of my sins, the washing away of my guilt, the end of my evil thoughts, and the rebirth of my better instincts. May it incite me to do the works pleasing to Thee and profitable to my health in body and soul, and be a firm defense against the wiles of my enemies. Amen.</p>
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One can see in the Prayer not a collection of disparate parts, but a cohesive whole built on a biblical basis, with Catholic theology and spirituality. It might not have been what Cranmer meant when he wrote the prayer but this is what has been brought into Catholic devotion.

If we look at the prayer in another way we can better understand the parts that are used to construct it. The antecedents for this prayer can be seen in a unique combination of several sources, including phrases or concepts from Mark 7:28^v, the Liturgy of St Basil^{vi}, a Gregorian collect, John 6:56, the writings of Thomas Aquinas^{vii}, and in the Sarum Rite^{viii} ('Let not the sacrament of thy body and blood, O Lord Jesus, which, although unworthy, I presume to receive, be to me for judgment and condemnation, but may it avail, through thy mercy, for the salvation of my body and soul. Amen.')

<p>We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.</p>	<p>This has echoes of the story of the centurion who protested that he was not worthy that Jesus should even enter his house (Matthew 8:5-18)</p> <p>Lord Jesus Christ, I approach Thy banquet table in fear and trembling, for I am a sinner, and dare not rely on my own worth, but only on Thy goodness and mercy. (Prayer of St Ambrose before Mass, St Pius V Missal)</p>
<p>We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.</p>	<p>Echoes the story of the Syro-Phoenecian woman who asked only to eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table (Mark 7:24-30).</p>
<p>But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:</p>	<p>The contrast of our righteousness with God's mercy as the basis for God's action is found in Daniel 9:18: "For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy."^{ix}</p> <p>Scholars also hear echoes of this same contrast in the Orthodox liturgies of Basil ("Not according to our own righteousness, for we have not done anything good on earth, but by your mercy and your compassions that you have bestowed liberally on us, do we approach with confidence your holy altar") and James ("for our confidence is not in our righteousness but in your good mercy by which you make us your people").^x</p> <p>Lord Jesus Christ, Eternal King, God and man, crucified for mankind, look upon me with mercy and hear my prayer, for I trust in Thee. Have mercy on me, full of sorrow and sin, for the depth of Thy compassion never ends. (Prayer of St Ambrose before Mass, St Pius V Missal)</p>
<p>Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.</p>	<p>This association of the Lord's Body with the needs of our bodies, and of his Blood with the needs of our souls, is a medieval idea going back to an unknown writer whose works were mixed up with those of S Ambrose, so that he is for convenience known as Ambrosiaster. S Thomas Aquinas, who in the Summa (III, lxxiv, 1) teaches this distinction (as had that enthusiastic</p>

	<p>Carolingian upholder of the Real Presence, S Paschasius Radbertus), quotes it as from S Ambrose; and I think it is clearly what the Angelic Doctor had in mind when he wrote the third stanza of his <i>Verbum supernum prodiens</i>; I give a literal translation: To whom [i.e.the disciples] He gave flesh and blood under twofold appearance that He might feed the whole Man of double substance. That is to say, He gave himself in the two species so that He might feed the entirety of Man who is composed, doubly, of both body and soul.^{xi}</p> <p>Remember, Lord, Thy creature, whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy blood; I repent my sins, and I long to put right what I have done. Merciful Father, take away all my offenses and sins; purify me in body and soul, and make me worthy to taste the Holy of Holies. May Thy Body and Blood, which I intend to receive, although I am unworthy, be for me the remission of my sins, the washing away of my guilt, the end of my evil thoughts, and the rebirth of my better instincts^{xii}</p> <p>See also John 6:53-56, in which Jesus says that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood continually dwell in him, and he in them</p>
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What we have in the Prayer is a unique prayer, prayed before communion by both the Priest, and the people together. It is very fitting that this occurs here as it is the final words of the Body of Christ, those who have united their sacrifice to that of the priest at the beginning of the Canon, at the *Oratres Fratres* (Pray brethren...) reminding the people that the Sacrifice offered is not the priest's alone, but the whole Body of Christ offering the Sacrifice. And so here at the Prayer of Humble Access it is the whole Body of Christ that acknowledges itself as unworthy, and it is the whole Body of Christ that asks for mercy and the eternal placement with Christ.

Of course, what makes the prayer Catholic is not its history, but its place within *Divine Worship -The Missal*, which clearly proclaims Catholic Eucharistic teaching, as it is approved by the Supreme Pontiff and authorised for use by the Catholic Church within the Ordinariates.

i Gregory Dipippo, *The Theology of the Offertory - Part 2: the Offertory and Priesthood in the Liturgy*, Friday February 14th 2014, Behold, o Lord, behold, I, a wretched and unhappy man, who was unworthy to enter the porches of Thy church, nor cross the threshold of Thy house, I come to minister at Thy holy altars, and stand here, guilty and a sinner, before the sight of Thy divine majesty, without any adornment of good works, and without any fruit worthy of penance, and without any clean thought.

ii The Anglican Prayer of Humble Access, March 19, 2009

<https://churchmousec.wordpress.com/2009/03/19/the-anglican-prayer-of-humble-access/>

iii The Prayer of Humble Access: Fr John Hunwicke: <http://liturgicalnotes.blogspot.com.au/2016/11/29-november-2015-was-memorable.html>

iv <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/AnteMissam/Ambrose.html>

v Mark 7:28 Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (RSVCE)

But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

vi Badie, Katie. "The Prayer of Humble Access." (2006): 103-117.

churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_120_2_Badie.pdf

...trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.

The biblical source is Daniel 9.18, which reads, according to the Great Bible of 1539—'for we do not cast our prayers before thee in our own righteousness, no, but only in thy great mercies.' This phrase had already passed into the eastern Eucharistic liturgy: the liturgy of St. Basil reads—'Not according to our own righteousness, for we have not done anything good on earth, but by your mercy and your compassions that you have bestowed liberally on us, do we approach with confidence your holy altar.'²² The Liturgy of St. James is similar: '...for our confidence is not in our righteousness but in your good mercy by which you make us your people.'²³ In the Western Church, we find the same phrase in Florus of Lyons.

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table...

The source is clearly the narrative of the Syro-Phoenician woman. The wording is closer to Mark's version (Mark 7:24-30). This text does not seem to have been employed in a liturgical context before. The link is the repetition of 'thy Table', which marks a significant point in the historical context. In the gospel narrative, this sentence is not referring to the bread of the Lord's Supper but is an image of the priority of the Jews in salvation history. It is not a question of worthiness, but of God's plan. Jesus even praises the woman for her faith in perceiving that she can, as a Gentile, like a dog under the table, 'eat of the children's crumbs', something that the Prayer suggests we are not worthy to do. This is, of course, true—we are not worthy. As often in the New Testament, this sentence is leading us to the 'But' of the following one: we are sinners, but God is rich in mercy (e.g. Rom. 3:23, Eph. 2:4).

...but thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.

If by 'the same Lord' Cranmer is referring to the 'Lord' of the Gospel narrative in the previous sentence, he is affirming Jesus as Lord, which continues the ambiguity between the Father and the Son in the words 'thy Table'. Another possible source is Romans 10:12: 'For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek; for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him' (AV), a relevant commentary on the Syro-Phoenician woman narrative. 'Whose property is always to have mercy' is also found in the Litany that Cranmer had published in 1544, following the Sarum Missal which itself followed the ancient Latin source *Sacramentarium Gregorianum*:

non de ullis nostris meritis sed de
multitudine miserationum tuarum
sperantibus.

Putting our hope not in our merits

but in the multitude of thy mercies

vii Marion Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayerbook*, New York: Seabury Press, 1981. p. 382

viii The use of Salisbury which was discontinued under Cranmer, but restored under Queen Mary, and as such was a variation of the Roman Rite approved in Great Britain

ix Badie, Katie. "The Prayer of Humble Access." (2006): 103-117.
churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_120_2_Badie.pdf

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xi The Prayer of Humble Access: Fr John Hunwicke: <http://liturgicalnotes.blogspot.com.au/2016/11/29-november-2015-was-memorable.html>

xii <http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/AnteMissam/Ambrose.html>