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## INTRODUCTION

### BLESSING PRAYERS

*Blessing — benediction — eucharist — Eucharist.*

These prayers are grounded in the conviction that there must be a seamless connector, an unbroken thread, between the individual Christian's life of personal prayer and the public liturgy, the Eucharist, of the Christian community. Granted, the action of the Eucharist, as the culmination of the church's sacramental reality, is an action of a different order than personal prayer. But if it is not only different from but also not grounded in the blessing-life of the community's individual members, it risks becoming that most counterfeit of all realities, a dead sacrament.

These prayers had their origin in the Holy Week services of a small Christian community. A word about their genesis will serve to highlight further convictions on which they are founded.

The community in question has gathered each Holy Week for over 20 years, at one of the centers run by the Grail movement, in Loveland, Ohio. Each year a small group would gather early in the year to reflect on the ways we were experiencing the action of God in our world, personally and collectively. We asked ourselves the questions: *How is what is taking place in our world moving and affecting us? Where is God in all this? What is God trying to communicate to us? What light does the mystery of Jesus have to shed on these experiences — and how do they lead us into new questions about the Jesus we thought we knew? What form does our blessing of our God need to take in light of these events?*

A second conviction easily discloses itself within these questions. It is the faith that our secular world is not some irrelevant play-thing tossed out into space and left on its own by a whimsical god, but rather the arena in which the reality and intentions of God are disclosed and made accessible to us. The events of civic, public, national, and international life — its excesses as well as its hard-earned wisdom — are the stuff of God's continuing self-disclosure and self-communication. To desire to contact the all-holy One while denigrating the importance of realities which stir deep movements within our human spirits is to risk some sort of gnostic, anti-incarnational quest for transcendence. It is ultimately to deny the meaning of Jesus. An a-historical Eucharist should be a contradiction in terms.

The women who reflected on their experience in order to discover what we might be called to pray about each Holy Week were also deeply grounded in the riches of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And thus another conviction. Christian prayer, while arising out of the contemporary experience of the journey of life, finds its finest expression in the heritage of a people stretching back to the origins of creation, handed down in the holy writings we call sacred scripture. You will find in these prayers recurring evocations of ancestors who live within our psyches, of the events in which they encountered God, and the meaning they have wrestled from those events. The Christian community at worship is not some cocoon concocting fleeting wisps of meaning out of its own puny experience in isolation from the immense work of God, it is one cell of a life-stream fed by generations of men and women who have wrestled with angels and demons in the search for wisdom.

One aspect of the Holy Week experience that cannot be communicated by the prayers in this collection is that of the ritual which accompanied their initial proclamation. The community that prayed these prayers appreciates the power of ritual: body, sight, sound, smell, music, environment, and gesture were not merely 'accompaniment' but rather integral to the prayer experience. In prayer as in every human activity we are body-persons, not simply minds — or even only spirits. As you pray these prayers in the absence of the rituals which originally incarnated them, I encourage you to attend to the physical settings, sounds, smells and body gestures which might make the words have fuller life for you.

How did we get from the liturgical, Eucharistic settings for which these prayers were composed to their form as presented in this book? Once again, through experience. Participants at these liturgies frequently commented that the oral event of hearing the texts 'on the fly' was rich and deeply nourishing but it left them with the desire to return to the words in a more personal setting, where they could stop at a word or a phrase and let it have its own life within them. Gradually the idea took hold that this work could enrich a wider audience.

But only as formal Eucharistic prayers? That notion was too restrictive, besides running counter to the first conviction named above. If the prayer form used in the liturgy becomes some sort of formula so stylized and set apart that it would not enter into the consciousness of an individual Christian to use it for personal prayer, the communal has become dangerously separated from the individual. If it is to be genuine, the prayer of blessing must be personally evocative whether it is intoned in a cathedral or whispered in the stillness of one's private space.

With that in mind, and with the help of wise friends, I have re-cast the prayers in such a way that you might use them for your personal prayer, or for table prayer for the family church, or for a small faith-sharing group. On the other hand, they remain close enough to their original form that a leader of formal liturgical prayer will easily be able to make the adjustments needed to make the prayer fit the need of the group to be led.

Forgive me if I offer a perhaps too obvious suggestion for the most fruitful use of the prayers. They have been cast in a sense-line format so that the visual layout itself will invite you to linger — either in actual time or at least in “mental time” — over the distinct phrases. The hope is that through such an approach you may give your linear mind permission to break its tendency to rush along to the next period. Instead, you may allow individual phrases or even words their own power to bring you up short and invite you into a question or a wonder you might never before have formed for yourself. If my formulation leads you to leave the text totally behind and pursue some new personal byway, some new exploration of your own — even to tiptoe into an uncomfortable thicket you had always noted out of the corner of your eye but were never quite ready to risk — why, so much the better. The God who revels in surprise may be playing hide-and-seek with you.

Reading — even poring over — a book is not the same as “being there.” But in another sense it may take its place as yet one other form of communion along that unbroken, if meandering, path toward the fullness of Eucharistic blessing. I regret that our contact is only one-way, but if it invites you to share your prayer of blessing with someone else, I will feel rich indeed.

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