

The Litany

by Pastor Adam Moline

During the season of Lent, a tradition that we follow at Good Shepherd is to pray the Litany for the prayer of the church on Sundays and Wednesdays. This prayer is one of the oldest prayers still in use in the Christian Church. In fact, Luther called it one of the greatest prayers ever, behind the Lord's Prayer of course. However, because we aren't especially familiar with it, sometimes we miss the structure and design of the Litany.

The Litany has its source in two places. First it is based on the words of Psalm 136, with its repetitive refrains. Secondly, it is based upon the 9-fold kyrie of the old Roman Catholic worship rite. It was originally used regularly between the Sermon and the Service of the Sacrament, where our prayers are still located today. In fact, our regular prayers still retain a shadow of their source in the Litany.

Our version is based specifically on Luther's revision of the Great Litany of 1529. He revised the prayer for Christians to pray in support of the 10,000 defenders of the city of Vienna, who were besieged (and withstood) by 100,000 Ottoman Turks. He purged away some of the errors that had crept in, for example the invocation of saints, allowing the prayer to be directed solely to the Triune God.

It consists of the following parts: Kyries (Greek for "Lord"), Deprecations (Prayer to divert evil), Obsecrations (Prayer of beseeching), Supplications (Earnest Requests), Intercessions (Asking God to intervene in our world), and the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God).

1. Kyries- "Lord Have Mercy". The petitioner prays these words 9 times. 3 times for each person of the Holy Trinity. This reminds us of the God to whom we pray, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Note the second kyrie makes this clear by naming the Persons of the Trinity. The first and third also indicate this by making clear Christ ("O Christ").
2. Deprecations- "From all sin...deliver us". Deprecations indicate the things that afflict us, to which we often give in. In other words, the problems that often separate us from God: sin, evil, the devil, death, pestilence and famine etc. We ask God to deliver us from these things. Note the reflection of the final petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Deliver us from evil."
3. Obsecrations- "By the mystery of your incarnation... help us." Obsecrations indicate the rationale for our requests from God. Why is it that we can ask God to deliver us? Because he took on our flesh (incarnation) was born, suffered, died and rose from the dead. The **only** rationale by which we may ask God for mercy is by the works of Christ. (Titus 3:5)
4. Supplications- "In all time of our tribulation...help us." Supplications are personal requests. Note that in this section the pronoun is "our". We are asking God to be with us as a group of individuals in these specific ways, to keep us in the faith trusting in Christ. In fact, for us as individuals there is nothing more

important. This is the shortest section, because all our needs ultimately can be summarized with the words of the prayer.

5. Intercessions- “To rule and govern... we implore you to hear us, Good Lord”
Intercessions are prayers for other people, governments, and groups, including even our enemies. This is the longest section, for the church in faith towards God spends more time praying for others needs than her own. We pray for the church to be united, for an end to heresies and divisions, and for the crushing of Satan. We pray for those who are struggling with or falling from the faith. We pray for peace in our world and land, for our rulers, those in danger, and those who travel. We pray for parents, especially mothers with their special and important tasks, for how else could the church move into the next generation? We pray that our enemies may be forgiven, repenting of their sins, and for God to provide all we need to support our bodies and lives.
6. Agnus Dei- Finally, we have an *Agnus Dei*, which is Latin for “Lamb of God.” It is prayed three times, to indicate very clearly that the only true God is revealed through Jesus Christ. This echoes the words of St. John the Baptist, who points to Christ specifically in the Gospels using these words.

After this, it is possible to pray a specific collect (short prayer) that further requests items of God, but at this time we have not introduced that practice here at Good Shepherd. Besides this basic format the litany may be slightly modified for use in Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Easter Vigil, and the Commendation of the Dying services. It also is a good one to pray regularly with your family, so that it is familiar when these other events arise.

My prayer is that as you now pray the Litany, you have a clearer picture of what is happening. It is more than just reading words on the page, it is a participation in the same prayer that Christians have prayed for almost 2000 years, making specific requests of God. If you have any additional questions, please let Pastor Goodroad or myself know!

In Christ,
Pastor Moline