



Building Blocks of a Prayer Service

ACE Advocates: Building a Movement in Service to Catholic Schools

This list contains elements used in Catholic prayer services along with a brief description of each. Not every prayer service will have all the elements. You may choose which ones to include based on the occasion, length of service and participants' needs.

Hymn: A song often sung to begin and close a prayer service; also sung after the proclamation of scripture and after.

Opening Prayer or Collect: A prayer that draws the community together into one heart and mind by stating the purpose of the prayer service and asking God's presence and aid.

Penitential Rite: A prayer admitting our sinfulness and asking God's mercy. In its shortest form: "Lord have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy."

Scripture: Usually one or two passages from any part of the Bible. Sunday Mass has 4 (Old Testament, Psalm, New Testament Letter, and Gospel).

Homily/Reflection/Sharing: A kind of preaching or teaching that comes after the Scripture reading. Only deacons, priests, and bishops may give a homily, but lay people may offer a reflection or share their thoughts on Scripture or on the occasion of the prayer service (e.g., Lent, Advent, graduation, community dinner).

Ritual Actions: Include the sign of the cross, standing, kneeling, bowing one's head, washing of feet, using incense-- a response to God's invitation to deeper faith. Ritual actions help people feel connected to God and each other, and should be used carefully and wisely.

General Intercessions: Also called Prayers of the Faithful. We ask God for what we need. A pattern is usually followed: pray for 1) the needs of the universal Church; 2) the world/society; 3) the sick; 4) local needs; and 5) the deceased.

Lord's Prayer (Our Father): This prayer taught by Jesus is rarely left out of Christian prayer services and is usually said near the end of the service.

Closing Prayer: Draws the prayer time to a close by mentioning the occasion or main point and requesting God's presence or aid as the participants go into the world.

Blessing: (By the presider or even a lay person) A request for God to do some particular thing (e.g., "May God grant you strength and peace as you continue to minister in your classrooms"). The simple form is the sign of the cross made over the group with the words, "May God bless you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen."

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Principles of Liturgy: Basic Do's and Don'ts

Do as the Church does.

- Use the readings of the day whenever possible.
- Follow the liturgical season of the year; be conscious of the liturgical colors of the season: Advent (purple); Christmas (white/gold); Ordinary time (green); Lent (violet); Easter (white); Pentecost and feasts of martyrs (red).
- Always stand for the Gospel reading.
- Use the sign of the cross to begin and end each prayer.
- Use the signs and symbols of the church: holy water, incense, light, etc.
- Lift up the saints in the liturgical prayer.

Slow down.

- Allow communal prayer to proceed at a slower, measured pace. This is God's time, special time, and it proceeds at a noticeably slower pace than "regular" time.
- Liturgy should take us out of time and space and transcend us into mystery. Read Scripture slowly, with feeling.
- Take time for silence. Even 5 seconds can help us center and be ready for prayer.

Life is messy; so is liturgy.

- The prayer service is meant to connect us to God. Prayer, not perfection, is the goal.
- Mother Teresa said: "God did not ask me to be perfect. He asked me to be faithful."
- Ignore mistakes. They happen, so it's best not to draw attention to them.

Less is more.

- Not every element needs to be in every service.
- Be conscious of how many words are used. A few words, well used, can have a big impact.

Be creative.

- Use natural items, stimulate the five senses, fire the imagination.
- Adjust expectations and these guidelines as needed.