

## AN AMERICAN USE OF THE PRONE

Once the Mass of the catechumens had become unintelligible to the body of the faithful, various substitutes arose to fulfil its function as a "service of the Word." One which originated in the early Middle Ages and still survives today is the ceremony known as the Prone.<sup>1</sup> A seventeenth-century description of the Prone is as follows:

Le Prône contient quatre parties; les prieres pour l'Eglise, pour les Princes, pour l'Etat, pour les besoins publics & particuliers: 2. L'Instruction comme il faut servir Dieu, l'explication du *Pater*, du *Credo*, des Sacremens, des Commandemens, & de l'Evangile: 3. Pour annoncer les Ordonnances de l'Eglise, les Fêtes, les jeûnes, les Indulgences, les Processions, les Mariages, ceux qui aspirent aux Ordres, & toutes les actions publiques de pieté: 4. Pour declarer les Mandemens des Prelats, pour publier les cas d'excommunication, les pecheurs publics & les excommuniez. C'est une fonction publique qui fert à executer ce que les Peres, les Conciles, & les Papes enseignent aux Fidelles, pour les instruire dans la pieté, leur apprendre la Loy du Seigneur; ainsi les peuples font obligez d'y assister, & les Curez à le faire, ou faire faire, comme il est ordonné par les Capitulaires de Charlemagne, & depuis par une infinité de Conciles; & même par le premier Concile d'Orleans, ainsi qu'il est rapporté par Yves de Chartres: *Le Curé les jours de Dimanche & de Fête, après l'Exhortation faite au milieu de la Messe solemnelle, avertira le peuple, conformement aux avis de l'Apôtre, de faire des prieres pour tous les besoins differens, de prier pour le Roy, pour l'Evêque, pour les Pasteurs de l'Eglise, pour la paix, pour les malades de la Paroisse, pour les morts; & pour toutes ces choses chacun dira en son particulier l'Oraison Dominicale, & le Prestre dira les prieres propres; ensuite on fera la sainte oblation.* Les Capitulaires de Charlemagne, *lib.* 5. c. 165. recommandent la même chose.<sup>2</sup>

In the library of Woodstock College there is a volume the contents of which closely fit the above description. The title page reads: "Appendice au rituel romain à l'usage de la province ecclésiastique de Québec publié par l'ordre et avec l'approbation de nn. ss. l'archevêque et les évêques de la province de Québec. Québec, chez P.-G. Delisle, imprimeur-éditeur, 1874." On the flyleaf is handwritten: "St. Aloysius' Church, Littlestown, Adams Co., Pa." The first half of the book is in French. The second half repeats everything in English with the exception of some of the specimen records for the use of the parish priest. About one hundred pages of the English text are devoted to announcements, prayers, and instructions to be read on the various Sundays of the year. Then follows what might be termed a busy

<sup>1</sup> From *praeconium*, according to some; cf. Ludwig Eisenhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik* 2 (Freiburg, 1933) 119.

<sup>2</sup> M. F. Grancolas, *Les anciennes liturgies* 1 (Paris, 1697) 525-26.

pastor's guide: rules for the episcopal visitation, rules for various officials of the parish, e.g., churchwardens, organist, sexton, clerks, and also specimens records. Among the rules for the master of ceremonies is: "He does not allow the clerks to lean against the stalls; to wipe their face with their surplices; to turn their head towards the nave; to chew tobacco. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Some excerpts from the text will give an idea of this ceremony as it was performed in at least one American parish seventy-five years ago:

## NOTICE

## CONCERNING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE PRONE.

After the gospel, the Parish-priest having taken off the chasuble and manipulum and retaining his stole and birettum or choir-cap, proceeds to the pulpit, accompanied by the beadle or other choir-attendant in surplice. In case he does not officiate himself, he merely puts on a surplice, without a stole.

When the Parish-priest or any other clergyman appointed to read the Prone, shall have entered the pulpit, he should pause for a few moments before beginning until perfect silence reigns in the auditory; then he will, with becoming gravity and in an audible voice, read the requisite publications. He may during this lecture be seated and have his head covered, with the exception of the prayers of the Prone and the reading of the gospel, when he is to be standing and uncovered.

He will give out the publications in the following order; after reading the abridgement of the Prone or the Grand Prone [if it be read on that day], he will publish the festivals or solemnities, the fasts, abstinence, processions, masses celebrated for private intentions, *Requiem* masses, or other exercises of piety which are to take place in the course of the week, as also ordinations, publications of clerical titles, when required. Afterwards he will proclaim the marriage banns, the pastoral letters of the bishop, the indulgences granted by the pope or bishop . . . then, as circumstances require, he announces the meetings of church-wardens and parishioners, the sale of pews and finally the demise of the parishioners or strangers whom he will recommend to the prayers of the auditory. In reading these different publication [*sic*] he will be guided by the formulas given in page 232. . . .

The publication of temporal matters should not take place at the Prone, but after mass, at the church door, by public criers or the officers of justice.<sup>4</sup>

There follows:

## THE GRAND PRONE

*Which the Parish-priest will read from time to time, in the course of the year, at least once in every three months. . . .*

[The sign of the cross]

Christian people, though every day and every moment of our lives belongs to God, as the author of all things; and though it is our duty to spend all of them

<sup>3</sup> P. 359.

<sup>4</sup> Pp. 234-35.

in adoring, loving, and serving him; nevertheless, Sunday is a day which should be more particularly employed in his service.

There follows an instruction on avoiding servile works and attending Mass. Then:

*Turning partly towards the altar, (the people kneeling down), the Parish-priest will say:*

Great God, we beseech thee, with a contrite and humble heart, to pardon the sins which we have committed against thy divine Majesty. . . .

We offer thee our prayers for thy holy Church, for all its Prelates and Pastors, and particularly for our Holy Father the Pope, for our Archbishop. . . .

We also offer thee our prayers, O God, for the peace and tranquillity of this country; for the union of all christian Princes, and especially for His Most (or Her Most) Gracious Majesty. . . .<sup>5</sup>

We offer up our petitions to thee, O Lord, for all orders and conditions; for the widows and orphans. . . .

We beseech thee to protect from all danger, pregnant women, that their children may receive the holy sacrament of Baptism. . . .<sup>6</sup>

We beseech thee to preserve the just in a state of grace, to enlighten the minds and change the hearts of sinners.<sup>7</sup>

We beg thee moreover, O God, to unite in the bonds of charity all the inhabitants of this parish; that, by living in peace, they may observe thy law, excite one another to the practice of good works, and thereby obtain eternal life. . . .

And, in order that we may ask of thee all that is necessary for us, we will offer to thee the prayer which Jesus-Christ himself has taught us, containing all that a christian heart can desire and pray for.<sup>8</sup>

There follows the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, the ten commandments,<sup>9</sup> the seven commandments of the Church.

<sup>5</sup> The words "and especially for His Most (or Her Most) Gracious Majesty" are penciled out in the Woodstock copy.

<sup>6</sup> Josef A. Jungmann, S.J., *Missarum sollemnia 2* (2nd ed.; Vienna, 1949) 488, considers this petition "remarkable" when it occurs in an English "bidding prayer" of the fifteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> It has been pointed out that the famous reply of Joan of Arc at her trial ("Asked if she knew whether she were in the grace of God, she answered: 'If I am not, may God put me there; if I am, may He keep me there.'") is taken from a prayer used in the Prone at that time; cf. A.-M. Roguet, O.P., "Le prône dominical," *Maison-Dieu*, no. 46 (1956) 74.

<sup>8</sup> P. 236.

<sup>9</sup> The 1552 edition of the Book of Common Prayer replaces the Kyrie and Gloria by the recitation of the ten commandments, the use of which at this point "seems to have been suggested by the *Ritus Ministerii* of the Alsatian Calvinist Pullain, published at London in 1551"; thus Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (2nd ed.; Westminster, 1945) p. 659. Pullain may have gotten the idea from their use in the Prone.

*Then the Priest, turning entirely towards the Altar, says alternatively with the clergy and people:*

- V. Salvos fac servos tuos et ancillas tuas;  
 R. Deus meus, sperantes in te.  
 V. Esto nobis, Domine, turris fortitudinis;  
 R. A facie inimici.  
 V. Fiat pax in virtute tua;  
 R. Et abundantia in turribus tuis.  
 V. Domine, exaudi orationem meam;  
 R. Et clamor meus ad te veniat.  
 V. Dominus vobiscum;  
 R. Et cum spiritu tuo.

## OREMUS

Deus, refugium nostrum et virtus. . . .

Finally there is a summons to pray for various deceased, after which priest and people alternate the *De profundis*, versicles, and the prayer, *Fidelium*.

The Short Prone, as it was called,<sup>10</sup> was to be recited every month. It contains a briefer list of petitions followed by the Latin orations for the living and for the dead, announcements, and a sermon.

The "Formulas for announcing at the parochial mass, the fasts, the feasts and the solemnities of the year"<sup>11</sup> is a veritable commentary on the liturgical year. On the Sunday before the seventeenth of December:

On N. next, the 17th instant, the Church begins to recite at the Vesper office the first of the seven solemn anthems which derive their appellation from the circumstance of their beginning with the particle O! which is an expression of desire. They are taken from different parts of the Holy Scripture, and are applicable to the Messiah, who was promised of God, and announced by the prophets for the salvation of mankind.

The object of the Church in recommending them to our piety, during the days of Advent, which immediately precede the birth of Jesus-Christ, is to induce us more efficaciously to prepare ourselves worthily for his spiritual birth in our hearts.

Let us enter into the spirit of the Church, and increase the fervency of our desires, begging that Jesus-Christ may visit us, enlighten and deliver us, instruct and sanctify us.<sup>12</sup>

The formula for the Epiphany contains an explanation of the three mysteries celebrated by the feast. On the first Sunday after Epiphany the decree *Tametsi* was to be read. Trinity Sunday was the occasion for a renewal of baptismal vows by the congregation. On the Sunday after First Com-

<sup>10</sup> P. 245.<sup>11</sup> P. 256.<sup>12</sup> Pp. 269-70.

munion there is a long exhortation to parents on the Christian upbringing of their children. The formula for St. John is typical of a saint's day:

On N. next, the Church celebrates the festival of St. John the Evangelist. This saint was the disciple whom Jesus most loved, and to whom he granted the favour of resting on his bosom at the last Supper, which he partook of with his Apostles on the eve of his death. Read his epistles, which contain lessons of love and charity. From them you will learn to love one another for God's sake and according to his holy will.<sup>13</sup>

How the use of this book came to a parish in Pennsylvania is no mystery. The priest who served the mission from 1865 to 1879 was a Frenchman, Fr. Francis X. de Neckere, S.J. Fr. de Neckere was born in 1810 and entered the Society of Jesus in France in 1844 already a priest. He was residing at Littlestown, Pa.,<sup>14</sup> in 1849. A *Rituale Parisiense* published in Paris in 1839 contains a *formula pronai singulis Dominicis legenda*<sup>15</sup> which shows, if any proof were needed, that the ceremony was very much alive in France during Fr. de Neckere's formative years.

Whether the custom of the Prone existed at Littlestown before or after Fr. de Neckere's years, I have been unable to discover. The present pastor of the nearby church in McSherrystown, Msgr. McGee, V.F., reports that there is no memory of the use of the Prone in that part of the diocese of Harrisburg.

#### THE PRONE IN CANADA

The *Appendice au rituel romain* was last edited in 1919. The edition is exhausted, but there are no plans to publish a new one.<sup>16</sup> The custom of the Prone is no longer generally observed in the province of Quebec but has not completely died out.<sup>17</sup> The *Discipline diocésaine* (1937) reminds the pastors of their duty to make the announcements, instruct the people of their obligations, denounce abuses, etc. The Synod of 1940 has the following:

Decretum 117. Libris paroecialibus accensendi et aequè diligenter conficiendi et conservandi sunt: 1. Liber concionum (vulgo *livre des prônes*), in quo parochus

<sup>13</sup> Pp. 272-73.

<sup>14</sup> Littlestown had a "house adapted for church purposes in 1791": John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* 2 (Akron, 1888) 291.

<sup>15</sup> Jungmann, *op. cit.* 1, 599, note.

<sup>16</sup> According to information supplied to the writer by Rev. J.-Adrien Gagné, of Laval University, head of the liturgical commission of the Archdiocese of Quebec, in a letter dated August 1, 1957.

<sup>17</sup> According to Edmond Desrochers, S.J., of Maison Bellarmin, Montreal, in a letter dated September 3, 1957.

ea omnia quae perquam clare scribat quae populo nuntianda, memoranda aut commendanda sunt inter Missarum sollempnia aliave divina officia.

Decretum 400. Cum experientia teste, fideles a sacris functionibus saepe avertant conciones nimis diuturnae, nuntia publica (vulgo *annonces*) strictissime contrahantur. . . .

It would seem from the above that the term *Prône* in Canada today means about the same as the announcements or notices made at Sunday Mass in a church in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

#### EQUIVALENTS OF THE PRONE

The liturgical movement has made it a commonplace that the corporate nature of our worship should be evident as such. We are also beginning to realize that the prayer and scriptural parts of our liturgy have too often been minimized because of the mistaken attitude that nothing really matters except the "essential matter and form."<sup>19</sup> The study of the history of the liturgy has shown how ancient is the practice of praying for various intentions at Sunday Mass<sup>20</sup> and how various and widespread were the medieval substitutes for the vanished *oratio fidelium* and the Gelasian litanies of the ancient Roman rite.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a partial and somewhat random listing here of certain practices would serve to emphasize the irrepressible tendency toward and pastoral need for having the congregation pray vocally at Sunday Mass.

The Leonine prayers after low Mass survived the settlement of the Roman Question, their original intention. Benedict XIV prescribed in his Bull *Etsi tamen* of 1742 that the acts of faith, hope, charity, and contrition be recited during Mass.<sup>22</sup> These acts are still recited at Sunday Mass in

<sup>18</sup> In France, on the other hand, current usage has made the word *prône* synonymous with the Sunday homily; Roguet, *art. cit.*, p. 74: "Dans le langage courant, on confond souvent le prône avec le sermon ou l'homélie de la messe dominicale."

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Godfrey Dieckmann, O.S.B., "Two Approaches to Understanding the Sacraments," *Worship* 31 (Oct., 1957) 504-20.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apologia prima* 67 (PG 6, 429; tr. T. Falls, in *Fathers of the Church* [New York, 1948] pp. 106-7): ". . . On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. Then, when the reader has finished, the president of the assembly verbally admonishes and invites all to imitate such examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer up our prayers, and as we have said before, after we finish our prayers, bread and wine and water are presented."

<sup>21</sup> Adrian Fortescue, *The Mass* (2nd ed.; London, 1913) p. 295, and Jungmann, *op. cit.* 1, 592-605.

<sup>22</sup> Jungmann, *op. cit.* 1, 607, note.

some countries, e.g., Venezuela. In Ireland these prayers were preceded by the collect of the thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost and all of them were recited before Mass on Sunday.<sup>23</sup> A long prayer which summarizes the meaning of the Mass and includes a list of intentions for which the Mass is being offered ("We offer it for the propagation of the Catholic Faith, for our most holy father the Pope, for our bishop and for all pastors and clergy . . . for all those in high station, etc.") is still recited before Sunday Masses in Ireland.<sup>24</sup> St. Peter Canisius' prayer for the needs of the Church is still recited at Mass in parts of Germany.<sup>25</sup> Pope Leo XIII commanded that the rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary be recited every day at Mass during the month of October, a practice still observed in many American churches. In 1810 a letter of the American bishops on the persecution of the pope ordered the recitation of Psalm 120 and the prayer, "O God, the pastor and governor of all the faithful, etc.," at each Sunday Mass.<sup>26</sup> Archbishop Carroll's well-known prayer for the Church and civil authorities was written for recitation at Mass on Sunday. Some American dioceses have required for many years now the recitation of the Divine Praises and/or the collect for peace after the Leonine prayers.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> John Brady, "Prayers before Mass in Ireland," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 69 (1947) 659.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 665. An Irish use similar to that of the instructional part of the Prone is also attested; *ibid.*, p. 659: "In the *Ordo administrandi Sacramenta* (Dublin: P. Wogan, 1785) will be found a number of exhortations in English and Irish on the Commandments, Sacraments and Virtues to be read by the priest 'before the parochial Mass.' The exhortations end with the Acts of Contrition, Faith, Hope and Charity."

<sup>25</sup> Otto Braunsberger, *Petrus Canisius* (Freiburg, 1917) p. 104; quoted in Eisenhofer, *op. cit.* 2, 121.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Guilday, *The Life and Times of John Carroll* (New York, 1922) p. 595: "... either immediately before Mass or Sermon."

<sup>27</sup> Adoption by some priests of the Protestant practice of improvising prayers both for divine services and for secular gatherings seems to have prompted the following decree of the Second Council of Baltimore, *Concilii plenarii Baltimorensis II acta et decreta* (2nd ed.; Baltimore, 1894) §§ 398-99: "Cum vero apud nos eo usque devenerint ut sectarum praecones tum in earum templis tum etiam in populi coetibus, politicis hujusmodi precibus, quae saepe ex iratis partium studiis proficisci noscuntur, Deum non honore sed contumelia potius afficere fere cotidie audeant; volunt Patres ut nullae preces publice in templis recitentur, praeter eas quas Ecclesia ipsa probavit.

"Si vero aliquando, ob publicas calamitates vel necessitates preces vernaculo sermone recitari in fidelium coetibus visum fuerit, id nonnisi statuente Ordinario fiat, eaeque tantum adhibeantur orandi formulae quas ipse praefinierat. Idem et de diebus pro gratiarum actione a Civili Magistratu designatis statuimus. . . De rebus autem politicis ne umquam e suggestu fiat sermo districte vetamus."

## RESTORATION OF THE PRONE

The widespread custom in American churches of offering an Our Father and Hail Mary (and in some places the collect for the deceased) for the sick, the dead, "and those in the armed services" after the announcements at Sunday Mass is a lineal descendant of the *oratio fidelium*, the Gelasian litanies, the *deprecatio* of the Celtic rite<sup>28</sup> and the "bidding prayers" of medieval England. Its present truncated state and frequently perfunctory performance hides, it is true, the fact that it is a venerable part of liturgical tradition. It would be a simple matter, however, to restore it to a more meaningful and functional role in the ordinary Sunday Mass. All that is needed, as a start, is the insertion in all future editions of the Sunday Epistles and Gospels of a set of litanies and prayers episcopally approved. It should contain a regular form for each Sunday and also the petition and prayers for special occasions such as elections, droughts, disasters, presidential illness, etc.

An example of a version of the "prayers of the Prone" adapted for the use of a contemporary Sunday congregation is the following recently authorized for the diocese of Coutances in France:

*Priest:*

On this tenth Sunday after Pentecost [e.g.] when we are gathered together to sanctify the Lord's day by commemorating His glorious resurrection and recalling that He will come on earth at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, let us pray, my brethren:

For the holy Church, our holy Father the Pope, our bishop, the clergy, and all the people of God.

*Congregation:*

We beseech Thee, hear us. [This response is repeated after each of the petitions.]

*Priest:*

For the aged, the sick, the oppressed, the refugees, and all our brethren suffering and absent.

For the parish community; for priestly and religious vocations, Christian teachers, and those engaged in Catholic Action.

For our brethren separated from the Catholic faith, those who are looking for the truth, and all unbelievers and lapsed Catholics.

<sup>28</sup> Diptychs containing names of deceased were brought by the deacon to the celebrant, and their contents announced by him during the Offertory; cf. F. E. Warren, *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church* (Oxford, 1881) p. 105.

For peace, for those who govern and all those charged with promoting the general welfare.

For the deceased (especially NN.) and all the faithful departed.

Let us pray: O God, our refuge and our strength. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Even with the addition of one or two special intentions with their corresponding collects each Sunday, no more time would be "lost" by the recitation of the above Prone than is taken up now with the prayers from the pulpit and the Leonine prayers. Surely much would be gained in the way of outward form and inward devotion at Sunday Mass.

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<sup>29</sup> The French text is in Roguet, *art. cit.*, p. 77.