

Assignment One: Collect Prayer The Opening Prayer of the Feast of Saint Polycarp

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the use of the term collect derives from “*collecta*, as the title of a prayer said at one of the appointed stations where the people collected in order to proceed together to the church where mass was said. Here the meaning was ‘a prayer for (or at) the collection or gathering.’ But of even earlier date is the use, in the Gallican liturgies, of *collectio*, passing later into *collecta*, as a title of prayers, especially those of the mass, in which the sense was evidently the collecting or summing up in a prayer of the thought sketched out in the *Rogatio* or bidding, or suggested by the *capitula* for the day.¹” Thus the first definition, drawn from Roman liturgical practices speaks of stational liturgy, while the second, based on Gallican practice, refers to what in a modern Roman Catholic context is the collect following the Prayers of the Faithful (or General Intercessions) and that is evoked by the Scripture readings associated with a particular feast day. From this definition, it seems that the prayer that will be analyzed here is, like the entire Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, a Gallico-Roman amalgamation; in this case the usage of variable Gallican forms of *collectio* at the point in the liturgical celebration where the *oratio ad collectam* (opening prayers) from Roman stational liturgy would have occurred.

Given this background, the specific collect of the Feast of Saint Polycarp will be examined using structural, functional and contextual methods to understand its meaning as a single unit of the larger context of Christian worship known as the Eucharist.

I. Extended Structural Analysis of Collect:

A. The *editio typica* and modern English translations:

The authoritative text of the Opening Prayer to be used on the Feast day of Saint Polycarp was promulgated in 1971. Known as the *editio typica*, it is from this text

¹ Warren, F.E., cited in *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition*, “collect, *n*, definition 3,” Oxford, 1989.

that all authorized translations are based. This text is to be found in the *Missale Romanum* under the Proper of Saints for February 23, the date on which the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna is celebrated. It reads:

Deus univérsæ creatúráe,
qui beátum Polycárpum epíscopum
in número mártýrum dignátus es aggregáre,
eius nobis intercessióne concéde,
ut, cum illo partem cálicis Christi capiéntes,
in vitam resurgámus ætérrnam.
Per Dóminum.

The text of this opening prayer authorized was by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in November 1973 for use in the Dioceses of the United States. Widely published thereafter, this first English translation of the Opening Prayer for the feast day of Saint Polycarp is drawn from the approved the *Sacramentary* and reads:

God of all creation
you gave your bishop Polycarp
the privilege of being counted among the saints
who gave their lives in faith full witness to the gospel.
May his prayers give us the courage
to share with him the cup of suffering
and to rise to eternal glory.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son
who lives and reigns with you and the holy spirit
one God, for ever and ever.

In May of 1995, the International Committee for English in the Liturgy published a *Proposed Revision to the Proper of Saints*, which included the Opening Prayer on the feast day of Saint Polycarp. This proposed revision states:

God of all creation,
it was your gracious will
that the holy bishop Polycarp be numbered
among the company of the martyrs;
grant through his intercession
that we may share with him in the cup of Christ's sufferings,
and so rise again to everlasting life.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

B. Structural Analysis:

For the structural analysis, the *Proposed Revision to the Proper of Saints* promulgated by ICEL will be utilized, as it is more appealing to the listener, in both cadence and clarity of wording. It is worth noting, however, that the difference is slight as the earlier English translation is not as imprecise as one might have imagined, given the haste with which it was translated.

The methodology of the structural analysis of the opening collect of Saint Polycarp will rely heavily upon the methodology proposed by Helen Kathleen Hughes in her dissertation, *The Opening Prayers of The Sacramentary: A Structural Study of the Prayers of the Easter Cycle*, as laid out on pages 163-186. In her method, Hughes lays out five distinct parts of the analysis: i) dividing the text into small units of a single lexical meaning, ii) expanding these units into narrative statements, iii) determining the agents and functions of such statements, iv) specifying the relation of agents and actions by their syntactical and sequential placement, and finally v) commenting on the analysis. In doing so, five key elements of the collect prayer – namely the addressee and its deeds, the supplication, the intention and the agent of the prayer – will all be revealed. (See also the attached Table 1 for a side-by-side structural itemization of the lexical elements of the three versions of the collect as presented in the previous section).

God of all creation,

Those offering the prayer, the praying community, convey a great deal in this opening. The priest offering the prayer on behalf of the entire community addresses the opening prayer to God. This is a prayer offered directly to God, whom the community acknowledges as the “God of all creation;” the God who made all and is thus responsible for “all creation,” namely everything. Since neither Christ nor the Holy Spirit are explicitly named, one can infer that this prayer, like the majority of prayers connected to the Mass, are addressed to God the father. According to Hughes, this opening prayer does more than indicate that the addressee of the collect is God the father; it acknowledges and accepts the

community's relationship with God. Explicitly, this is a God who created and thus a community that was created. At a deeper level, the community accepts the covenantal nature of this relationship, and thus the conditions of the covenant on the community's part as well.

it was

The use of "was," the past tense of "be," the verb of existence, is important in two ways. First, it locates the action of the following phrase in the past. This is a God whose deeds of the past are extolled. Second, the use of "was" denotes that God himself existed in the past. It is as though this statement declares not only, "God is" but also, "God was." In connection with the covenantal aspect of the prayer that the praying community acknowledges by invoking God, as mentioned in the previous lexical unit, here the praying community implicitly acknowledges that this covenant is in the past.

your gracious will

What was it that was efficacious? It was God's "gracious will." The praying community qualifies that the will of God as being favourable and pleasing. Moreover, the effective aspect of God is able to accomplish deeds in the past. Implicitly then the praying community accepts that the will of God can make things manifest now, as they have in the past, which is an important supposition for the supplication to come later in the prayer if the praying community expects to be effected. God's will is powerful enough to make an action take place by a sheer act of his will. That God's will is explicitly "gracious" in this prayer is also indicative of the mercifulness of God, who gives his will freely. Here one sees the first deed that the praying community extols in God – the free giving of his prevailing will.

that the holy bishop Polycarp

As mentioned above, God's will is effective in carrying out deeds which the praying community praises. The specific subject of God's will as recollected in this prayer is set forth – the Bishop Polycarp. The Latin *editio typica* states merely that Polycarp was bishop, while the ICEL version under analysis here

states that Polycarp was a *holy* bishop, while the earlier English translation states that Polycarp was *God's* bishop.

be numbered

In this lexical unit, one can see the second deed of God – numbering Polycarp. The praying community praises God, who esteemed or dignified Polycarp as the Latin *dignatus* indicates, in numbering him. This indicates that the praiseworthy action is not in Polycarp himself, but in God who through his freely given and beneficent will. In the covenantal discourse, this recalls the promise God made with Abraham that he would number his descendants as numerous as the stars.

among the company of the martyrs;

Here, Polycarp is not to be numbered among the stars, but among the martyrs. This is a man whom God has esteemed because of his witness to the faith. The praying community qualifies the action of numbering mentioned in the previous lexical element by here stating with whom Polycarp has been numbered. The Latin *aggregare* seems to connote that the martyrs form an “association,” as the ICEL Proposed Revision reflects through its use of “company.” The earlier English translation does not mention anything about “association” or “company,” and deviates further from the Latin *editio typica* substantially here, not mentioning “martyr,” but rather “saints” which are further qualified by the phrase “who gave their lives in faith full witness to the gospel.” The ICEL seems to avoid the previous verbosity, preserving somewhat more the pleasant brevity of the Latin edition.

grant through his intercession

The praying community has moved to their supplication to God the father, through the intercession of Saint Polycarp. Now that the addressee has been named, extolled for his deeds, he is now invoked on behalf of the praying community. As was shown in the previous lexical unit, this lexical unit likewise demonstrates that the ICEL English translation is at the same time more faithful to the Latin and more expressive of the meaning than the earlier English translation. The ICEL translation indicates that the praying community is asking that Polycarp, who has been amassed with the martyrs, close to God, to intercede on

their behalf, as is indicated in the Latin. The ICEL translation, however, does not include the reflexive nature of this supplication: that the praying community is asking that God receive Polycarp's intercession *for the praying community*, as the Latin *nobis* conveys. This is still superior to the earlier English translation which asks that Polycarp's "prayers give [the praying community] the courage..."

that we may share with him

The supplication to God the father that the praying community makes is that they, through Polycarp's intercession, may share with Polycarp. This is the intention of the prayer, indicated by the preposition *ut* in the Latin *editio typica*. The praying community indicates their belief in what would now be called the communion of saints. The praying community is petitioning God so that he may number them close to himself, as he did with Polycarp.

in the cup of Christ's sufferings,

In qualification of the process of sharing with Polycarp as explicated in the previous lexical unit, the praying community here underscores what it means to share with Polycarp – to share in the suffering of Christ for the witness to Christ. The imagery of the communion of the saints is very evident in this lexical unit, whereby the praying community indicates that sharing with Polycarp in the communion of the saints means to drink from the same cup of suffering as both Christ and Polycarp. This is not the blessing cup of a peaceful Passover seder which is to be shared during the Eucharist, but rather a communion with suffering and death. In comparison to the earlier English translation, the ICEL version maintains the Latin notion of the cup being Christ's cup. The earlier English translation merely states "the cup of suffering," which seems to indicate that suffering in and of itself brings one to share with Polycarp, whereas this is clearly not the case – it is in sharing in the suffering, *as Christ suffered*, that the witnesses to Christ are all brought into communion.

and so rise again

The prayer moves from a qualification to another process – the crescendo process of sorts. The suffering with Christ and Polycarp does not end everything. The praying community is praying that they may share in such suffering so that they

may share with Christ and Polycarp in the resurrection. The praying community affirms a myriad of beliefs. First, the praying community indicates that rising is possible, resurrection from death is something for which the praying community can hope. Second, the praying community affirms that Polycarp has somehow warranted such a rising from the dead. If they wish to share with Polycarp in the suffering of Christ, to share in the communion of saints for resurrection, it must be that those such as Polycarp will have such a resurrection.

to everlasting life.

As a final qualification, the praying community affirms that the resurrection of which they prayed in the previous lexical element is not bounded by time, they will have life everlasting. The resurrection with Christ is eternal and is once and for all. This qualification on the process of rising seems to justify the entire rest of the collect. That is to say that the praying community extols God for his esteeming a man who was killed by his witness to Christ. Furthermore, the praying community entreats God to impart such suffering for his sake upon the praying community, not, however, for the sake of suffering itself, but to have a share in the eternal life, the everlasting sharing of the cup with the martyrs of all ages spoken of in this lexical unit.

**We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.**

The expansion of this closing, which is mirrored in the earlier English translation, stands in striking contrast to the terse ending in the Latin *editio typica*, which declares simply: *per Dominum* (through the Lord). In either case the praying community offers its prayer through the Lord. It seems that since the prayer is addressed to God, the father, that it would not close through the name of God the father, but rather God, the master, the Lord, the son, Jesus Christ as is done in the English translations. The Trinitarian nature of the collect is reinforced in the English translation of the closing in a way in which it is not in the Latin. A prayer that has yet to mention the Holy Spirit explicitly mentions the prayer being offered through the Holy Spirit and son, to the father, yet all are “one God for

ever and ever” as the earlier English translation translates it. At the beginning of this collect it was noted that God was acting in the past, and during the supplication of the prayer community God is assumed to act in the present, while here the praying community expresses their belief in a God that is also effective and existent in the future.

As has been demonstrated, the above extended structural analysis of the Opening Prayer of the Feast day of Saint Polycarp reveals a great deal about the praying community and their beliefs, as one would expect with the law of belief: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The five key elements of the collect prayer – namely the addressee and its deeds, the supplication, the intention and the agent of the prayer were all underscored in looking at the internal organization and meaning within the text of the collect. The praying community addresses their prayer to God the father, praising God for the deeds of numbering Polycarp with the martyrs. The praying community then asks God to have them share in the suffering of Polycarp for Christ, such that they may be raised and live in eternal communion with the company of martyrs. In closing, the prayer is offered through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

II. Liturgical Context

One’s understanding of the Opening Prayer of the Feast day of Saint Polycarp is, however, not complete by the above structural analysis alone. To further the understanding of this prayer, one must understand how this collect functions within the liturgy. We return to our definition of the collect from the Oxford English Dictionary to discern two contextual functions of the collect: one similar to that role which the *collecta* exercised in the Gallican liturgies, namely “summing up in a prayer the thought ... suggested by the *capitula* for the day,” and the other derived from the Roman liturgy, namely “to proceed together to the church where mass was said.”

A. Scriptural Context:

The readings that are associated with the Feast day of Saint Polycarp are very fitting not only to the life of Saint Polycarp, but are prefigured well by the Opening Collect addressed above that precedes the readings, liturgically. The First Reading is drawn from the *Book of Revelation*, authored by the Apostle John, from whom Polycarp directly gained a great deal of his teachings about the Christian faith. It is also fitting that the section of *Revelation* is addressed to “the church in Smyrna,²” where Polycarp was martyred. The reading continues to describe the voice which John heard saying, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.³” The Gospel is likewise drawn from the authorship of John, in which Christ reminds his followers that, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you...⁴” The theme of martyrdom is foreshadowed by the collect, which serves to put into prayer the thoughts stated in the Scripture readings for the day.

While it is not Scripture, there is an account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, which goes by that same name or The Letter of the Smyrnaeans, which contains a prayer attributed to Polycarp as he awaited his martyrdom. This ancient text seems to be the guide from which the author of the Opening Prayer of the Feast day of Saint Polycarp drew the text of the collect. The Smyrnaeans tell of Polycarp

...looking up to heaven saying; “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of Thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers and of all creation and of the whole race of the righteous, who live in Thy presence; I bless Thee for that Thou hast granted me this day and hour, that I might receive a portion amongst the number of martyrs in the cup of [Thy] Christ unto resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among these in Thy presence this day, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as Thou didst prepare and reveal it beforehand, and hast accomplished it, Thou that art the faithful and true God. For this cause, yea and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen.⁵”

Several elements of this prayer attributed to Polycarp resonate with the collect used as the opening prayer on his feast day. Structurally, the collect examined above perfectly parallels this prayer of Polycarp in that Polycarp acknowledges God as the God “of all creation,” and blesses God for the deed he has done of granting Polycarp

² Based on *New Revised Standard Version*, from the *Lectionary for Weekdays* of the Canadian Conference for Catholic Bishops, Ottawa, 1993, pg. 645.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 645.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 646.

martyrdom, so that he may share in a portion of the cup of Christ, thus leading to eternal life.

The Scriptures that the praying community reads on the feast day of Polycarp are not only reflected in the collect, but the collect serves to prefigure the Scriptures and prepare the praying community to receive the words of John. Just as the Scriptures that follow the collect are prefigured by the collect, so too is the collect itself prefigured by the prayer Polycarp offered at his martyrdom. While the actual prayer of Polycarp would not be used in a liturgical context, the effect of the collect to evoke within the praying community the memory of Polycarp and his prayer cannot be denied.

B. Context in Action:

The collect not only functions within the liturgical context with regards to the Scriptures which the praying community offers and listens to, the collect also functions in an active way. In much the same way that the *collecta* served to bring together the Romans celebrating a stationary liturgy, so too does the collect bring together the prayer community and unite them as such – a community that prays together.

Following the Introductory Rites, the collect pulls together the members of the community, in a somber and reverent manner, preparing them to receive the Word of God. The rites that precede the collect, including an entrance hymn and procession, a greeting, and the Penitential Rite, all serve to bring the community together and in many communities are loud, musical productions, creating a jubilant atmosphere. The collect serves to settle the community and prepare them for the Word of God.

By the presider offering the opening collect from the altar he also calls attention towards the altar where the action of the liturgy is to take place, away from those other places where the community may have been directing their attention, namely the nave during the procession, the area where the musicians are located and so forth.

As a last comment on the action of the collect as it is carried out in a liturgical context, this collect as well as all others are offered by the presider from a liturgical

⁵ *MartPoly* 14:1-3, Translated by Lightfoot, J.B., Athena Data Products, 1990.

text. This serves to introduce “the book” to the community, as the preceding rites relied to a larger extent on active engagement in the liturgy by singing and responding, rather than attentive listening, the focus of the Liturgy of the Word which this first use of a book during the Mass foreshadows.

Clearly, the action undertaken concerning the collect is important. The collect serves not only to collect the community “together [in] the church where mass [will be] said,” but changes the method of discourse from one of active participation to one of active listening.

A case has been made that the collect in question here is, like all opening prayers, a Gallico-Roman amalgamation, drawing from Gallican forms for variation to match the Scripture readings associated with that day, while at the same time deriving from the practice of Roman stational liturgy in which the collect served to herald the beginning of the Mass proper. Various methods have been employed, specifically structural, functional and contextual in order to understand the meaning of the opening prayer for the Feast of Saint Polycarp, both within itself and as an element within the larger Eucharistic celebration. What is clear is that this short and simple prayer has many, relates to various parts of the mass, and in so doing weaves a manifold set of meanings, as with any symbolic act. Keeping this analysis of the collect prayer in mind let one not forget the purpose of prayer as Polycarp himself saw it, when he declared, “let us return to the message that was handed down to us from the beginning: ‘watching to the point of prayer,’ ... asking the all-seeing God in our beggings ‘not to lead us into trial.’⁶”

⁶ Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians*, chapter 7.

<i>Editio typica</i>	<i>NCCB/USCC approved Sacramentary</i>	<i>Proposed Revision to the Proper of Saints</i>
<p>Deus univérsæ creatúra,</p> <p>qui beátum Polycárpum episcopum in número mártýrum dignátus es aggregáre,</p> <p>eius nobis intercessióne concéde,</p> <p>ut, cum illo partem cálicis Christi capiéntes, in vitam resurgámus ætérrnam.</p> <p>Per Dóminum.</p>	<p>God of all creation</p> <p>you gave your bishop Polycarp the privilege of being counted among the saints who gave their lives in faith full witness to the gospel.</p> <p>May his prayers give us the courage</p> <p>to share with hum the cup of suffering and to rise to eternal glory.</p> <p>We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son who lives and reigns with you and the holy spirit one God, for ever and ever.</p>	<p>God of all creation,</p> <p>it was your gracious will that the holy bishop Polycarp be numbered among the company of the martyrs;</p> <p>grant through his intercession</p> <p>that we may share with him in the cup of Christ's sufferings, and so rise again to everlasting life.</p> <p>We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.</p>

Table 1