

An Inclusive Litany of the Saints

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Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women
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Introduction

The litany of the saints is part of several Roman Catholic liturgies, including baptism for children, Christian initiation of adults (and hence the Easter Vigil), and ordinations. In the traditional form of this prayer, a leader intones the names of a series of saints, one at a time, and the people respond to each by singing or saying, "Pray for us." At the end of each of several categories of saints a general petition is added, for example, "All holy martyrs for Christ, pray for us." Petitions to Christ and for various needs may be added. The litany as a whole is a prayer of petition.

The singular term "litany of the saints" actually applies to a range of specific prayer texts because the individual saints that are named (and other petitions) differ from one use of the litany to another. The litany therefore also varies in length.

The saints included in traditional versions of this prayer are largely male, largely clergy (especially popes and bishops), largely unmarried, largely ancient and medieval, largely postbiblical, and largely European. Women's names generally are placed in a single category ("virgins and holy women") following the male saints. Some modern versions do place women in more than one category, for example "apostles and followers of Christ," "martyrs," "priests and religious," and "laity." However, names of male saints still predominate and the women's names come at the end of each section.

Theologically, the traditional liturgy of the saints has to do with (a) mediation by the saints, (b) the relationship between living and dead members of the church, (c) the communion shared by God's people in the church, and (d) the expression of God's grace in the lives of individual persons.

The litany of the saints offered here is intended as a model for eventual use in the liturgies of the church. This version differs from traditional texts in several respects.

First, it is inclusive. It includes (a) female and male saints in roughly equal number, (b) male and female saints together rather than separately, (c) saints from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as from the Christian Scripture and the period of the Christian church, (d) saints who lived throughout the twenty centuries of Christian experience, (e) saints who are married as well as single, (f) saints from all parts of the world, (g) saints who exercised different ministries or played different roles in the life of the church.

This inclusivity with respect to saints' names is intended to point to the fact that both the earthly church and the communion of saints are inclusive in composition, and not predominantly male, clerical, European, etc. This litany presents an image of church and communion of saints that is broad in time, geographical scope, and membership. Individuals and local church communities who pray this litany accept and rejoice in this perspective.

The saints named are viewed as companions and friends rather than patrons and mediators. They are friends – of God, of each other, and they are our friends as well. They are also companions on the journey, guides and mentors. We and they are in solidarity with one another; they embrace us as fellow friends of God. It is an honor to have such a close relationship with these saints and to be included among such a company.

This type of litany also proclaims the goodness of God and the mystery of God's free grace in creating humankind and in choosing some for special friendship. Both gifts are completely gratuitous. We marvel at such great variety and rejoice that we are included in this great cloud of witnesses.

This litany omits the title "saint" before each name. This is intended to encourage the addition of names that go beyond any official list of persons who have been canonized. (The extensive repetition of "saint" can also become tedious and cumbersome.)

This litany is not petitionary in character. Instead it is primarily a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God. In part it is also an expression of companionship, and of membership in the communion of saints. As a consequence, the people's response is not "pray for us" but rather may be "Blessed be God" or "Thanks be to God." As an expression of solidarity, affirmations such as "Companions on the journey," or "Friends of God" may be used. A petitionary note in the midst of such thanksgiving may be provided by responses such as "Walk with us" or "Be companions on our journey."

This inclusive version of the litany of the saints is offered as a model and as a resource; in both respects it is intended to be a challenge and an opportunity. As a model it presents one possible way of listing saints inclusively, and one way of grouping and identifying them. The saints actually named in a particular liturgy need to be adapted to particular circumstances; the style and presentation may also be adapted. At a baptism, for example, the names of saints for whom the children are named might be included, or those of the church or locality. The list may also be shortened. For the sake of focus, petitions to Christ and for various needs have not been

included. As a resource, it offers a relatively long list of saints from which those most appropriate for a particular celebration may be selected; it may also provide inspiration for choosing other names.

Though not traditional, an invitation may be helpful. The following, for example, might be suitable for the baptism of children.

Holy people of God:
[as these children process to the font]
let us celebrate the communion of saints,
of which we are members
and into which these children are being baptized.

Depending on the liturgical context, it may be appropriate to conclude the litany with a brief collect.

Litany of the Saints

Titles in square brackets are for identification only; they are not intended to be spoken.

[The Family of Jesus]

Mary and Joseph
Anne and Joachim
Elizabeth and Zechariah
John the Baptist

[Prophets and Ancestors in the Faith]

Abraham, Sarah and Hagar
Moses and Miriam
Tamar and Rahab
Ruth and Naomi
Hannah and Samuel
David, Bathsheba and Solomon
Elijah and Elisha
Deborah and Huldah
Isaiah and Jeremiah
Esther and Judith

[+ other names]

Holy ancestors and prophets

[Apostles and Followers of Christ]

Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb
Peter and Paul
Priscilla and Aquila
Andrew, James and John
Phoebe and Junia
Matthew, Mark, Luke and John
Euvodia and Synteche
Barnabas, Silas and Timothy

[+ other names]

All disciples of Christ

[Martyrs]

Stephen, Ignatius and Polycarp
Perpetua and Felicity, Agnes and Lucy
Thomas Bechet, John Fisher and Thomas More
Isaac Joques and Jean de Brebeuf and companions
The Ursuline and Carmelite Sisters martyred in the French Revolution
Charles Luanga and his companions
The martyrs of Japan, China and Indo-China [+ other names]

All holy martyrs for Christ

[Leaders in the church]

Thecla of Iconium and Genevieve of Paris
Leo and Gregory
Ambrose and Augustine,
Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen
Cyril and Methodius
Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux
Martin of Tours and Patrick of Ireland
Bridget of Ireland and Bridget of Sweden
Boniface and Lioba [+ other names]

All holy leaders in the church

]Laity, Priests and Religious]

Monica of Hippo and Benedict the African
Benedict and Scholastica
Clare and Francis
Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier
Rose of Lima and Julian of Norwich
Vincent de Paul and Francis de Sales
King Louis, King Henry and King Casimir
Queen Hedwig of Poland and Queen Elizabeth of Hungary
Princess Olga and Prince Vladimir of Kiev
Kateri Tekakwitha and Marguerite Bourgeoys
Marguerite d'Youville and Jane Frances Chantel
Gertrude the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux [+ other names]

All holy men and women.