

Composing Collects: A Brief Guide to Powerful (but short) Prayers

by Evan B. Howard

I have taken to writing and praying "collects" these days. And I have found it to be a wonderful confidence-builder in my prayer life. Perhaps you would like to join me?

First, it might help to know just what a "collect" is. Our English noun *collect* comes from the Middle English *collecte*, which is may be a shortened version of the Latin *ōrātiō ad collēctam* or "prayer at the collection." Other historians identify the roots of the collect in the function of these prayers: a "collecting" of the intentions of the gathered people into one common prayer. Early in the history of the Church, prayers were written that expressed particular themes of the Church's celebrations and then offered during the common service of worship. For example, someone would summarize the Church's gratitude for the resurrection of Christ and its hope and prayers for new life in a single prayer offered during an Easter service. Over time, the writing and reciting of such prayers multiplied. Entire books of such prayers were published for use in the practice of common and personal prayer. The *Book of Common Prayer*, a very influential guide to common and private worship has sections devoted to both "collects" appropriate for certain days and occasions along with other similar prayers and thanksgivings. One such collect for the unity of the Church prays:

"Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*"

Beyond the possible occasion of these prayers (at the collection of offerings?), I see two important other "collections" involved in the making of collects:

- First, they *collect* the common and sincere intentions of the people of God around a single topic. Our common desire as Christians for the unity of the Church are expressed in a few phrases. "Be one," "bound together," "unity," and similar images and words are used to give voice to a prayer that we all might have, but might express in slightly different terms. A collect uses a few of these to indicate both the single theme and the different ways of expressing our common prayer to God. Thus we can all join in.
- Second, they *collect* biblical and theological language together around a theme into a single prayer. You can see in our example, how Jesus' prayer in John 17 stands behind this collect. Other passages from 1 Corinthians and 1 John are also reflected in this prayer. This is characteristic of collects. They are summaries of biblical truth in the form of prayer.

The result of this is a brief, easy to understand, prayer that expresses both the heart of God and the will of the people. A wonderful "collection."

Sometimes I struggle knowing what to pray. I am grateful for the ministry of the Holy Spirit who, in times like this offers my truest heart to God "in sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8: 26-27). But I have also learned to read Scripture regarding a topic, and summarize my learnings into a prayer that I then use to communicate my prayers and that of others. I write my own collects.

For example, I have wondered how to pray for the influence of the Holy Spirit for people who don't have a relationship with God. So I meditatively read passages that spoke about this ministry of the Spirit (like John 3:5-8; 15:26; 16:8-11; and Acts 8:29; 9:17; 13:2). Then I wrote the following prayer summarizing these passages and my desire for the Spirit's work among unbelievers (or a particular unbeliever):

O Holy Spirit - You, who links those you have made new with those who need your newness, You who empowers the message of those you have made new and accompanies their message with signs of your powerful presence, please arrange divine appointments. Bring conviction to _____ and lead them into new life. In the name of Christ the risen Lord. Amen.

This is really a very simple task:

1. identify a theme for your prayers and those of others
2. find scripture passages and theological summaries relevant to this theme
3. read and meditate
4. summarize in a single prayer

I have written many of these prayers over the years. I continue to use them in my prayers for and with others.

Perhaps you would like to join me?