

LITURGICAL FORMATION AND FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

Series 12 – The Collect

WHAT IS A COLLECT?

A Collect is a short form of prayer with a special characteristic of its own, originally marked by simplicity and conciseness.

The term ‘collect’ (*collecta*) was originally a title in the Gallican rite. It denoted the “collecting” of the petitions of the several members of the congregation into a single prayer. However, this sense of the word is thus not connected with the use of *collecta* for the assembly (‘collection’) of the congregation for worship, as has often been supposed.¹

Thus, a more probable explanation of the origin of the name is derived from the *Gregorianum*. In that Sacramentary the heading of the Collects is *ad collectam*. *Collecta* is a late Latin form of *Collectio* and means assembly. And the term *collecta* has often been understood in a sense defined by the late 11th century liturgico-canonical expert, Bernold of Constance, to mean a gathering. Rather, the term means to conclude or to collect the prayers that have gone before.²

Regardless the meaning of the term ‘collect’ may be, a Collect is simply a prayer designed to focus people's intentions and worship into a succinct prayer.

THE COLLECT TYPE

Collects were in use as early as the 5th century. In the earliest Latin rite, Collects appear as sets of prayers for specific days. The Collects form an independent liturgical unit and are often separated from their original association with a feast day or Sunday to reappear in another place in a subsequent liturgical book. Among the traditional prayers found in the Latin liturgy are those written by Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, and Pope Gelasius. The Lutheran reformers translated and adapted the medieval Latin Collects, which was then used in the Book of Common Prayer 1549. The Latin Collects of the Roman Missal Paul IV were translated into English in 1971-1974.³

The Roman Collects, which were largely developed between the 3rd and 6th centuries, have always been praised for their majestic flow and rhythm, which may be related to the fact that the writers had studied in the classical schools of rhetoric. The main factor in achieving a solemn form is the use of the *cursus* (a cadence at the end of a sentence or phrase), which has been followed in Latin artistic prose since the 4th and 5th centuries. The writings of Pope Leo I strictly followed this rule and some of the Collects in the ancient Roman sacramentaries were a product of him. The Roman Collects never used verses. In addition, chants were not used when reciting the Collects in the Roman rite.⁴

The Eastern and the Gallican Collects differ in style from the Roman Collects. In the former liturgy, the Collects are much more lengthy, not only the accumulation of divine names

¹ F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, “Collect,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 3rd Edition (Oxford University Press, 2005), 378.

² Roger E. Reynolds, “Collect,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2nd Edition (Garland Publishing, 1998), 269.

³ Martin Dudley, “Collect,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (SCM Press, 2002), 119.

⁴ Roger E. Reynolds, “Collect,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2nd Edition (Garland Publishing, 1998), 269.

and related predicates, but also the petition itself and the closing. Unlike the Roman Collects, the petitions in the Gallican Collects are always addressed to Christ. The Collects of the Gallican rite show more variation and are often overly complex both theologically and stylistically.⁵

In addition to the Latin Collects, the Roman Collects and the Gallican Collects, there is also Victorian Collects. There is not much information about the Victorian Collects, however, Martin Dudley mentioned the late Victorian Collects tended to be rather florid and overly rich in imagery.⁶

STRUCTURE OF THE COLLECT

The structure of a Collect is unique and typically has five parts:

1. Invocation
2. Ascription or Description of God
3. Petition
4. Aspiration
5. Conclusion or doxology

The first and last elements indicate that the Collect is based on the Scriptural teaching that intercession or supplication is made to God the Father through the mediation of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the prayer begins with the address to God the Father, indicating that the object of the prayer is God the Father, and ends with the words “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The second element of a Collect is a description of the God we are praying to. This means that we acknowledge the nature, attributes and characteristics of the God we are praying to.

The core of the Collect is its third and fourth elements, the petition and the aspiration. We make a request to God and indicate the further purpose of the petition (sometimes the desired result of the request).

The final element of a Collect is the affirmation that the prayer is offered through the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, sometimes and especially on festival occasions, this is replaced by an ascription of praise.⁷

- Example 1: The Collect for Epiphany 1 (the ASB version)

(Invocation)	<i>Almighty God,</i>
(Ascription)	<i>who anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit and revealed him as your beloved Son:</i>
(Petition)	<i>inspire us, your children,</i> <i>who are born of water and the Spirit,</i> <i>to surrender our lives to your service,</i>
(Aspiration)	<i>that we may rejoice to be called the sons of God;</i>
(Conclusion)	<i>through Jesus Christ our Lord.</i>

⁵ Roger E. Reynolds, “Collect,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2nd Edition (Garland Publishing, 1998), 269.

⁶ Martin Dudley, “Collect,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (SCM Press, 2002), 119-120.

⁷ *The Alternative Service Book 1980: A Commentary by the Liturgical Commission* (CIO Publishing, 1980), 50.

- Example 2: The Collect for Trinity Sunday (the ASB version)

(Invocation)	<i>Almighty and everlasting God,</i>
(Ascription)	<i>you have revealed yourself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and live and reign in the perfect unity of love.</i>
(Petition)	<i>Hold us firm in this faith,</i>
(Aspiration)	<i>that we may know you in all your ways and evermore rejoice in your eternal glory,</i>
(Doxology)	<i>who are three Persons in one God, now and forever.</i>

PURPOSE OF THE COLLECT

The Collect has been used at least from the early years of the 5th century, but its origin and purpose are unclear. One suggestion is that it marked the collecting of congregations from different churches which assembled occasionally for a united celebration. Another suggestion is that the Collect was intended to collect or sum up the intercessions which preceded it.⁸ It has been also suggested that the Collect originated as a conclusion to the Introit.⁹

However, the most probable explanation of the Collect is that it was originally related to the readings which followed it. According to the Book of Common Prayer of 1549, 1552, and 1662, the Collect came before the Ministry of the Word. Even in the 1980 ASB and the Book of Common Worship currently in use, the Collect still comes before the Ministry of the Word. In that case it performed for the Ministry of the Word the same preparatory function which the Collect for Purity performs. Whatever the origin and history of the Collect may be, the Collect are related on every occasion to the themes of the readings and may therefore be understood as a preparation for the Ministry of the Word.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The Collect, is a short form of prayer, constructed from an invocation, ascription, petition, aspiration and doxology. Building upon this brief definition, there are some facts that deserve our attention.

First, the Collects are theologically and historically rich. The Collects are theologically rich, especially the second element - the ascription. The words and the terms used in the Collect describe the nature, the divine attributes and characteristics of the Triune God, which characterise the doctrine and the core beliefs of Christianity and the teachings of the Bible. In addition, these descriptive words sometimes also express the actions of the Triune God in the world and for the world, which are historical events recorded in the Bible. So, the Collects are theologically and historically rich!

Second, the Collects guide us how to pray. As briefly explained in the third part of this article – STRUCTURE OF THE COLLECT, the content of the Collect is basically composed of five aspects: a) Invocation; b). Ascription or description of God; c). Petition; d). Aspiration and

⁸ W. K. Lowther Clarke, *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion*, 374-375.

⁹ Francis Procter, M.A., *A New History of The Book of Common Prayer* (Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1965), 523-524.

¹⁰ *The Alternative Service Book 1980: A Commentary by the Liturgical Commission* (CIO Publishing, 1980), 49.

d). Conclusion or doxology. Applying this structure can help us be more focused when praying personally. In addition, it can also become a "formula" for young Christians to learn to pray.

Third, the Collects guide us through the Church calendar. The Collects were written on the theme of feasts and seasons, and some commemorated the work of the saints and martyrs. The Collects, therefore, are some of the best liturgical indicators of the changing seasons of the Church calendar.¹¹

Based on these three points of reflection, the significance and the value of the Collects should not be overlooked.

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