Ask new adult Catholics to name a highlight of the Easter Vigil at which they were initiated, and they are likely to mention the Litany of the Saints. Ask any deacon or priest what he remembers about his ordination, or ask religious women or men about their final vows-taking, and they often mention their prostration on the church floor and the waves of saints’ names and petitions which washed over them in the chant litany.

Litanies are powerful forms of prayer; and the “When the Saints Go Marching In”: The When, Why, How, and Who of Litanies of the Saints

By Paul F. Ford

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Assembling a Litany

As a parish liturgical leader, you have the opportunity of putting together, year after year, the required Litany of the Saints for the final rites of initiation during the Easter Vigil. For the baptism of infants, you also regularly rehearse the cantor(s) in the petitions and the names of the saints invoked at the time of the intercessions. You are also encouraged to restore the ancient practice of singing the Litany of the Saints for solemn occasions for the entrance procession for the First Sunday of Lent. St. Mark’s Day (April 25), the three days before the Ascension, and St. Isidore’s and St. Maria’s Day (May 15) are also days when litanies to implore God’s protection against calamity and God’s blessing on the crops are traditionally sung. Some liturgists suggest that the litany is especially effective on All Saints day as the entrance song or as a form of the general intercessions.

The Litany of the Saints for solemn occasions may also be used during the principal celebration of the special days or periods of prayer mentioned in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (373), or specified in the same place for the dioceses of the United States of America, or mentioned in other documents:
For Christian Unity (January 18–25)
For the Fruits of the Earth
For Human Rights and Equality
Day of Penance for Violations to the
Dignity of the Human Person (January
22 or 23)
For the General Needs of Humankind
Days of Preparation for the Coming of
the Holy Spirit

More rarely, if you are involved in planning
for an ordination, a vow-taking, a
dedication of a church (new or in use), or
a dedication of a fixed altar, you are also
responsible for the litanies connected with
those liturgies. And in the unlikely event
you are asked to prepare for the blessing
of an abbot or an abbess, again, preparing
the proper litany belongs to you.

This task is not an easy one; but when
you know how a litany is composed, you
will find your task less difficult.

Common Structure

All litanies of the saints are structured
in the same way. They begin with a cry
for mercy to Christ the Lord or supplica-
tions to the Trinity. These are followed by
invocations of the saints, beginning with
the Blessed Virgin Mary and the angels and
including, in order, prophets and ances-
tors of our faith; apostles, evangelists, and
first followers of Christ; martyrs; bishops
and doctors; priests and religious; and la-
ity. These invocations lead to invocation
of Christ for protection against various
evils and invocations of the power of the
paschal mystery in its phases. Finally,
there are petitions (general and specific)
for various needs and a conclusion.

There are basically three kinds of lita-
ancies: the shortest, the standard, and the
solemn. The standard litany (illustrated
on page forty-five) is sung for the final
rites of initiation during the Easter Vigil,
the baptism of infants, the ordination of
bishops, priests, and deacons, final vow-
taking, the dedication of a church (new or
in use) or of a fixed altar, and the blessing
of an abbot or an abbess. (In my opinion,
this litany ought to be added to confirma-
tions with the confirmandi prostrate for
its singing.) The solemn litany is sung as the entrance processions for the First Sunday of Lent,
St. Mark’s Day, the three days before the
Ascension, and St. Isidore’s and St. Maria’s
Day (May 15). It may also be sung on All
Saints Day as the entrance song or as the
general intercessions and during the prin-
cipal celebration of the special periods or
days of prayer mentioned above.

The shortest litany is used in the com-
memoration of the dying. In Part II of the
ritual Pastoral Care of the Sick, called
“Pastoral Care of the Dying,” the following
rubric appears at paragraph 219B: “A brief
form of the litany may be prayed. Other
saints may be added, including the patron
saints of the dying person, of the family,
and of the parish; saints to whom the dy-
ing person may have a special devotion
may also be included.”

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for him/her
Holy angels of God, pray for him/her
Saint John the Baptist, pray for him/her
Saint Joseph, pray for him/her
Saint Peter and Saint Paul, pray for him/her

Other saints may be included here.

All holy men and women, pray for him/her

Customizing Litanies

Paragraph 221 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (and similar paragraphs in all the rites which use litanies) encourages you to add at the proper place the names of the other saints or petitions suitable for the occasion.

However, it is the experience of many
that, wittingly or unwittingly, cantors
delete many of the required saints, lump
all the “extra” saints at the end of the list,
and never take advantage of the encour-
agement to add pertinent petitions. This
may happen because some worship aids
and even some editions of the rites care-
lessly indicate that saints may be added
only at the end of the list and/or because
people are ignorant of the structure and
the rules of litanies.

Using the structure given above, saints
are added according to their rank in the order of their heavenly birthday (their date of death). Petitions are added ac-
cording to their kind. You are permitted
by the rites—even encouraged—to add
to the names and petitions, but you are
not permitted to delete any names or
petitions from any of the litanies found
in the rites. Some saints must be invoked
in every litany, and some petitions must
be made not because the saints would be
offended if they were deleted or because
the unprayed-against calamity might hap-
pen (in other words, not for superstitious
reasons) but because the mention of these
names and petitions inserts us into the
great stream of people and universal con-
cerns which the Church deems it essential
to remember for our spiritual growth.

In the case of any litany, then, you
would do well to consult with your other
priests, deacons, liturgists, musicians, and
catechists about who or what needs to be
added to the standard litany.

Your parish litany should contain the
names of the principal and secondary
patrons of your diocese as listed in the annual Order of Prayer in the Liturgy of the
Hours and Celebration of the Eucharist,
otherwise known as the Ordo. If religious
order priests, sisters, or brothers staff your
parish, it is appropriate to add at least their
founder to this litany. You are not per-
mitted to invoke blesseds unless they are
listed in our national or your diocesan
or religious order calendar; these calendars
have to be approved by Rome.

There are two things to notice about
invoking saints. First, the saintly people of
the Hebrew Bible not included in the Ro-
man Catholic canon of saints are invoked
as “Holy” (e.g., “Holy Aaron, Miriam, and
Moses,” “Holy Jeremiah,” and the like).
They are placed in the litany in historical
order to the extent that this can be deter-
mined by consulting a reliable dictionary
of the Bible. Second, the honorific (either
“Holy” or “Saint” — if the person has been
recognized as such) is used before every
name taken from the Bible or associated
with it in Christian legend (e.g., “Saint
Joachim and Saint Ann”).

If your parish church (or mission church) is named for a saint or for our Lady under a certain title (e.g., Our Lady of
Taipa, Mother of Sorrows, and the like),
you ought to include this invocation. Our
Lady is the only saint who may be invoked
under several titles in litanies of the saints;
it is important, however, not to get carried
away at this point. The Simple Gradual
uses only three invocations of Mary, and
the two extra ones follow the invocation,
“Holy Mary, Mother of God.”

Litanies for the ordination of bishops
add the names of all the apostles; the
ordination of deacons adds to its litany
the deacons Vincent and Ephrem and
separates Francis of Assisi from Dominic
to underscore the fact that Francis was a
deacon; and at religious professions and
the blessing of abbots and abbesses, the
litanies contain a special list of religious
saints.

If your parish church is named for a
mystery of our Lord’s life (e.g., the Trans-
figuration, the preaching of the Beatitudes,
the Nativity), these can be included at
the proper place in the litany. Mysteries of
our Lord’s life are added chronologically
under the “invocations of the power of
A Litany for the Easter Vigil

Here is a sample standard litany for the Easter Vigil pointed for the standard chant settings (see below, for the John Becker setting). Every name and petition in plain type is required. Everything in italic is optional. The ancient accent indicates an ascending pitch, and the grave accent a descending pitch. Do not sing anything in parentheses but print this material in your worship aid. Printing the entire litany in your worship aid also educates people in their understanding of the saints and in enlarging their prayer concerns.

You will notice that I have put into parentheses all cognomens (“identifiers” such as “of Antioch” or “the evangelist”; traditionally only St. John the Baptist and St. Mary Magdalene retain their cognomens; no others are sung (hence the need to print the litany in your worship aid). By tradition Saint John Mary Vianney is invoked with his first and middle names.

I. Prayer to God

Cry for Mercy to Christ the Lord
or Supplications to the Trinity

Lord, have mercy.        Lord, have mercy.        Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.        Christ, have mercy.        Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.        Lord, have mercy.        Lord, have mercy.

Solemn litanies may also begin with the following four invocations, to which the response is, “Have mercy on us”: “God the Father of Heaven,” “God, the Son, the World’s Redeemer,” “God the Holy Spirit,” and “Holy Trinity, One God.”

II. Invocation of the Saints

The Blessed Virgin Mary and the Angels

Holy Mary, Mother of God,        pray for us.
Our Lady of Guadalupe (patroness of the Americas),        pray for us.
Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception (patroness of the U.S.A.),        pray for us.
Saint Michael,        pray for us.
Holy angels of God,        pray for us.

By tradition, Our Lady may be invoked under several titles but I try to limit these to three or else the litany begins to feel like a litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Prophets and Ancestors of Our Faith

Holy Abraham and Holy Sarah,        pray for us.
Holy Miriam, Aaron, and Moses,        pray for us.
Saint Zachary and Saint Elizabeth,        pray for us.
Saint Joachim and Saint Ann,        pray for us.
Saint John the Baptist,        pray for us.
Saint Joseph,        pray for us.

By tradition St. Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is always the last patriarch invoked.

Apostles, Evangelists, and First Followers of Christ

Saint Peter and Saint Paul,        pray for us.
Saint Andrew,        pray for us.
Saint John,        pray for us.
Saint Mary, Saint Martha, and Saint Lázàrus (patrons of hospitality),        pray for us.
Saint Mary Mágdàlene,        pray for us.

St. Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus (previous invocation), and St. Mary Magdalene are two different saints.

Martyrs

Saint Stéphàn (tc. 34, first deacon),        pray for us.
Saint Ignátius (of Antioch tc. 107, Apostolic Father),        pray for us.
Saint Perpetua and Saint Felicity (†203, North African matron and servant),        pray for us.
Saint Láwrènce (†258, Roman archdeacon and almoner),        pray for us.
Saint Céòstphèr (†3rd century, patron of travelers),        pray for us.
Saint Añgènes (†304, Roman virgin, patroness of young girls),        pray for us.

Holy English Martyrs

Saint Andrew (Kim) and Companions (Nineteenth century Korean martyrs),        pray for us.

Christ may still be invoked even though his feast was removed from the universal calendar in 1969. Large groups of saints, like the English martyrs or Andrew Kim and the Korean martyrs, are invoked as “Holy” or by “N. (name of first saint) and Companions”; surnames and other cognomens may be printed but not sung.

Bishops and Doctors

Saint Athanásìus (†373, archbishop of Alexandria and doctor of the church),        pray for us.
Saint Basìl (†379, archbishop of Caesarea and doctor of the church),        pray for us.
Saint Mårtìn (†387, bishop),        pray for us.
Saint Augustine (†430, bishop and doctor of the church),        pray for us.
Saint Gréóry (the Great †604, pope and doctor of the church),        pray for us.

Priests and Religious

Saint Bénèdict (†547, founder of western monasticism),        pray for us.
Saint Dominïc (†1221) and Saint Fráncìs (of Assìsi †1226),        pray for us.
Saint Fráncìs (Xavier †1552, patron of foreign missions),        pray for us.
Saint Céthérìne (of Siena †1380, virgin, doctor of the church),        pray for us.
Saint Teréssà (of Avíla †1582, virgin, doctor of the church),        pray for us.
Saint John Máry (Vianney †1859),        pray for us.

Laity

Saint Helena (†c. 330, finder of the True Cross),        pray for us.
Saint Monica (†387, mother of St. Augustine, patroness of married women),        pray for us.
Saint Isidore and Saint Marià (†1130, farmers, patrons of farmers)        pray for us.
Saint Íñácìo (Diego †1548),        pray for us.
All holy men and women,        pray for us.

III. Invocations of Christ

Lord, be merciful        Lord, save your people.

Prayers against Various Evils

From all evil,        Lord, save your people.
From every sin,        Lord, save your people.
From sudden and unprovided death,        Lord, save your people.
From anger, and hatred, and all ill will,        Lord, save your people.
From impurity and jealousy,        Lord, save your people.
From the scourge of earthquake,        Lord, save your people.
From plague, famine, drought, and war,        Lord, save your people.
From everlasting death,        Lord, save your people.

Invocations of the Power of the Paschal Mystery
in Its Phases

By your coming as man,        Lord, save your people.
(or: By your becoming human, or: By your incarnation)

By your baptism and your fasting,        Lord, save your people.
By your death and rising to new life, Lord, save your people.
By your gift of the Holy Spirit, Lord, save your people.

### IV. Prayers for Various Needs

**General Petitions**
- Be merciful to us sinners, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Guide and protect your holy Church, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Keep Pope Benedict (XVI) and all the clergy in faithful service to your Church, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Bring all peoples together in trust and peace, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Strengthen us in your service, Lord, hear our prayer.

*Note: After the first petition in this set, the other four petitions given here are optional only at celebrations of the sacraments of initiation. In other litanies, other general petitions are added here and other specific petitions are added in the following category.*

**Specific Petitions**

*Note: If there are candidates to be baptized (pause briefly at the superscript commas):*

- Give new life to these chosen ones by the grace of baptism, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Give new life to these chosen ones and pour out your Holy Spirit, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Give new life to these chosen ones and feed them with your Body and Blood, Lord, hear our prayer.

This pausing is also done at ordinations, final professions, and the blessing of an abbot/abbess.

*If there is no one to be baptized:*
- By your grace bless this font where your children will be reborn, Lord, hear our prayer.

**V. Conclusion**

- Jesus, Son of the Living God, Lord, hear our prayer.
- Christ, hear us. Christ, hear us.
- Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

*Note: After the first petition in this set, the other four petitions given here are optional only at celebrations of the sacraments of initiation.*

*Note: There are many musical settings of the litany available. The most recent Peoples Mass Book from World Library Publications (2003) uses the same setting (#617) as Worship III (#827) and other GIA publications; and these are the same as those published by OCP except for the closing invocations (OCP skillfully simplifies the four last types of responses of the people: “Lord, save your people,” “Lord, hear our prayer,” “Christ, hear us,” and “Lord Jesus, hear our prayer”). These require little or no rehearsal with the assembly but can tend to be monotonous (but then, some would say, that is the nature of a litany).*

### Musical Settings

There are many musical settings of the litany available. The most recent Peoples Mass Book from World Library Publications (2003) uses the same setting (#617) as Worship III (#827) and other GIA publications; and these are the same as those published by OCP except for the closing invocations (OCP skillfully simplifies the four last types of responses of the people: “Lord, save your people,” “Lord, hear our prayer,” “Christ, hear us,” and “Lord Jesus, hear our prayer”). These require little or no rehearsal with the assembly but can tend to be monotonous (but then, some would say, that is the nature of a litany). In By Flowing Waters I offer two settings: the standard litany for the Easter Vigil (with my two added special petitions) and the Litany of the Saints for Solemn Occasions. The latter setting is much closer to the Latin chant because I want
to encourage the retention of most of the Latin and Greek responses: “Kyrie, eleison,” “Christe, eleison,” “misericordias nobis,” “libera nos, Domine,” “Te rogamus, audi nos,” “Christe, audi nos,” and “Christe, exaudi nos.”

As you decide among the settings available, keep in mind that you are going to be using this music for many years to come: It must wear well. And when you train your cantors (it is traditional to use two or four), remind them that invocations and petitions which end on a monosyllabic word sing that final syllable at the single higher pitch indicated in most settings (e.g., “Gød,” not “Gö-öd”). (However, Worship III recommends that, in petitions that end on a monosyllabic word, sing that syllable with the final two ascending pitches.) I don’t recommend accompaniment of any of the chant versions.

The John Becker litany has found a solid place in the repertoire and can be adapted for most of the uses already discussed. The published edition is not always faithful to the actual texts at Number 134 in the General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, §26. Properly prepared, litanies can be some of the most powerful sung prayer forms. The work you put into them now will have a harvest in eternity.

Notes

1. For an English version of the Graduale Simplex, see Paul F. Ford, By Flowing Waters: Chant for the Liturgy (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 91–93, 404–410, 426–428. The original Latin is available as Graduale Simplex in Usum Minorum Ecclesiarum (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), available from OCP and GIA.


5. See the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts, January 16, 1988 (USCC Publication 219-5), 22; the Ceremonial of Bishops, 261; and the annual Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications). The litany takes the place of the entrance song and all the introductory rites up to the opening prayer. In the solemn form of the procession, the people assemble in a suitable place other than the church. The presider is dressed in alb, stole, and cope. After an appropriate gathering song, the presider greets the people and he (or another priest or a deacon) gives a brief introduction. The presider then says an opening prayer (several alternatives are suggested in the Ceremonial) and then puts incense in the censer. The deacon announces, “Let us go forth in peace,” and the procession moves to the church. When it reaches the church, all go to their places; the presider reverences and incenses the altar; then the presider goes to the chair and exchanges the cope for a chasuble. At the end of the litany, the presider sings or says the opening prayer of the Mass.

6. Frequently assigned to the third week of the month of September or to Thanksgiving Day in the U.S.

7. Frequently assigned to the first full week of resumed Ordinary Time or to Independence Day in the U.S.

8. Frequently assigned to the first week of Advent or to New Year’s Day in the U.S.

9. Frequently assigned to the Fourth Week of Lent or to Ash Wednesday in the U.S.

10. Observed on the weekdays after Ascension and before Pentecost (see the General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, §26).

11. Except for the litany sung at the baptism of infants (in which the petitions come first and the saints come second) and for the litany as part of the commendation of the dying (in which only the saints are invoked).

12. This one is unusual in that the petitions come before the invocations.

13. The longer commendation litany has some lovely invocations and petitions:

Abraham, our father in faith, pray for him/her David, leader of God’s people, All holy patriarchs and prophets, By your suffering and cross, By your death and rising to new life, By your return in glory to the Father, By your gift of the Holy Spirit, Be merciful to us sinners, Lord, hear our prayer Bring N. to eternal life, first promised to him/her in baptism, Raise N. on the last day, for he/she has eaten the bread of life, Let N. share in your glory, for he/she has shared in your suffering and death,

14. For further guidance as to what else might be appropriate in this circumstance, see the “Table of Liturgical Days According to Their Order of Precedence” at the end of the General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, 4d, 8d, and 11a. These norms are found in the Roman Missal (Sacramentary) and the Lectionary for Mass as well as in such collections as The Liturgical Documents: Volume One, fourth ed. (Chicago, Illinois: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004).

15. My wife, Janice, and I wrote a litany for our wedding that invoked a whole list of married saints.

16. Examples of traditional petitions in these categories are found in the Litany of the Saints in The Handbook of Indulgences (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 2001). This too should be on your bookshelf.

17. Petitions may be added from the beautiful texts at Number 134 in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (but see note 9).

18. Ordination of a Bishop, 12; Ordination of Priests, 8; Ordination of Deacons, 8; Blessing of an Abbot, 15; Blessing of an Abbess, 10; Rite of Religious Profession, 50; Dedication of a Church, 13; Dedication of a Church Already in Use for Sacred Celebrations, 16; and Dedication of an Altar, 57.

19. Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), 134 and 137.
20. RCIA 236, 241, 327, and 592.

For those canonized by Pope John Paul II, see http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ELENCO_SANTI_GPII_ok.htm.

24. The incorporation of the petitions for the about-to-be-initiated might be better worked out as follows (the asterisk indicates a required petition, the acute accent indicates an ascending and the grave accent a descending pitch).

Give new life to these chosen ones,*

By the grace of baptism,* hear our prayer.
Give new life to these chosen ones*

By the sending of your Spirit,*

Give new life to these chosen ones

feed them with your Body,*

Give new life to these chosen ones

feed them with your Blood,*

Last System: Christ, hear us,

Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

If you wish to use the Becker setting at ordinations, consider the following versions of verses five and six and the addition of a seventh verse (the asterisked petitions are required):

Verse Five
Lord, be merciful,* save your people.
From all evil and addiction,*

From every sin,*

From the scourge of earthquake,*

From everlasting death,*

By your incarnation,*

By your death and resurrection,*

By your outpouring of the Spirit,*

Last System: Christ, hear us,

Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

For diaconate ordinations, the following one and half verses work (the asterisked and the section marked are required):

Verse Two
Peter,* Paul* and Andrew,* pray for us.
James* and John* and Mary Magdalene* pray for us.
Deacon Philip and his daughters pray for us.
Deacon Stephen,*§ Deacon Lawrence,*§ pray for us.
Ignatius,* Deacon Vincent§ pray for us.
Perpetua,* Felicity,* pray for us.
Athanasius* and Basil,* pray for us.
Augustine,* Deacon Ephrem§ pray for us.

Last System: All you holy men and women, pray for us.

Verse Three
Patrick,* Gregory,* and Benedict,* pray for us.
Dominic* and Deacon Francis,*§ pray for us.
Catherine,* Teresa,* pray for us.
Ignatius, Francis Xavier,* pray for us.
etc.

If you wish to use the Becker at the dedication of a church, consider the following version of the second half of verse six:

Verse Six
Bless the troubled and afflicted,*

heal our prayer.
Unify all Christians,*

Bless all spouses and all children,*

Give peace and justice to all peoples,*

Lead all peoples to the Gospel,*

Have mercy on all prisoners,*

Save all who have helped us,*

Make us strong in your service,*

Last System: Christ, hear us,

Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

Verse Seven
Have mercy on us sinners,*

heal our prayer.
Guide your holy Church,*

Protect your holy people,*

Bless the pope and all the clergy,*

Bless these chosen men,*

Bless them, make them holy,*

Bless them, consecrate them* for their sacred duties,*

Last System: Christ, hear us,

Lord Jesus, hear our prayer.

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