

PUBLIC PRAYER IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

‘How Catholic Should Our Prayer Be?’

Recently, I have received inquiries from mission leaders and CEOs as to how “Catholic” our interreligious prayer services need to be. On the one hand, they recognize the diversity of beliefs that exists among our associates, physicians and patients and wish not to offend; but at the same time, they know the growing focus on institutional Catholic identity and the fact that rituals are a constitutive element of culture.



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For centuries, our Catholic institutions have used rituals and prayers that reflect the faith of the Catholic Church. To deny or minimize that in the name of “political correctness” or cultural and religious diversity damages the Catholic identity of our organizations and is a disservice to building true respect and understanding

of people with differing faith traditions.

We know to avoid the extremes, such as offering public prayer in the form of only Catholic devotions. Such a practice would exclude people of other traditions who choose to work or receive their health care in a faith-based setting. The other extreme is to be so cautious and politically correct that we never use the names of Jesus or Mary in our prayers and only refer to God in the most generic way possible (Source of All Good, Holy One, Fount of Creation).

Early in my mission leader career, I was asked to lead a prayer or reflection at the physician holiday party — our health system had stopped

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calling the event a Christmas party several years earlier. I knew our doctors came from Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and no-faith traditions. I composed a reflection using the theme of light and enlightenment, tying together the winter solstice, Advent, Christmas, Hanukkah and Ramadan, which was being celebrated in December that year. I hoped this reflection would help everyone recognize our common humanity as children of one Father who all are trying to be more enlightened so we might be true to whom we were created to be.

Afterward, a Jewish physician came up to me and said, “I know what you were trying to do in your reflection, and I appreciate you being sensitive to the faiths of the various doctors. But I miss that this gathering is no longer called a Christmas party and that we do not sing Christmas songs. Everything has been reduced to the least common denominator, and in the end, this celebration no longer has anything to do with Jesus and belonging to the medical staff of a Catholic hospital. This gathering feels like any of the other holiday parties I will attend this month.”

Ouch!

I would like to raise some theological, pastoral and practical questions I keep hearing throughout the ministry about public prayer offered in Catholic organizations that employ and care for diverse groups of people. By asking these questions, I hope to invite reflection and dialogue.

Can Catholic organizations hold interreligious or ecumenical prayer services for their staff?

We need only look at the example of the last three popes to see how coming together in prayer

with other Christians and non-Christians expresses a desire for unity and charity among all people. On Oct. 4, 1986, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, St. John Paul II invited religious leaders across the world to pray with him in Assisi for peace and harmony. Pope Benedict continued the tradition of praying with other religious leaders of the world and entering into mosques and synagogues to pray.

In addition to adopting these practices of his predecessors, Pope Francis invited Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the Vatican on Pentecost Sunday, 2014, to pray with him for peace in the Middle East. The most recent popes have given witness to the importance of people of different faiths coming together to declare what we hold in common and yearn for in prayer. Our institutions are in good company when we host interreligious prayer services that foster unity, fellowship and prayer for common causes. So the simple answer to this question is a resounding “Yes.”

What are the practical considerations to remember when planning an interreligious prayer service?

Interreligious prayer services and ceremonies need to respect the traditions of all the participants. A mission leader or chaplain alone cannot cover all of the relevant points of view, so the planning committee should consist of members of the faith traditions that will be involved, ideally clergy or others professionally trained in the rituals and rubrics of those religions. For example, some traditions find it offensive when their prayers or sacred texts are spoken or handled by those who are not of their faith. A planning committee can attend to such issues when selecting prayers and sacred texts or deciding who will read them.

Another important aspect of planning is where the prayer service will be held. While an interreligious service can be held in a consecrated chapel, planning committees need to be attentive to the presence of religious symbols, especially if there will be members of traditions present who avoid images, statues or crosses.

Using other traditions’ symbols requires careful thought. Symbols and images convey deep religious truths and the faith of different groups of people. Displaying and mixing symbols from

different traditions may indicate a unity that does not truly exist and cause confusion around our Catholic identity.

In addition, we should not presume that because we have associates and patients from other traditions, we have a right to display their religious symbols. It is best to consult the other traditions’ clergy and leaders.

Who should attend the celebration of the sacraments and “sacramentals” in our Catholic facilities?

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Catholic health care should be the regular celebration of the sacraments. Eucharist (both Mass and the distribution of Holy Communion to the sick), Anointing of the Sick and Reconciliation should be available to the Catholic patients/residents and the staff of our facilities.

Our organizations also commonly celebrate the patronal feast day, holy days, a major anniversary of the institution, etc., that call for the Eucharist, the highest form of worship in our Catholic faith. We certainly are not going to say only Catholic associates, physicians and community members are invited to attend such celebrations; nor are we going to invite everyone attending to receive Holy Communion, which would imply a unity in faith which does not yet exist. Participation in the liturgy, however, even without receiving Holy Communion, is an opportunity for everyone to obtain grace. The pastoral response is to invite all to attend and participate to the level they are able.

Let’s look at another example, one that happens regularly in our institutions. A priest arrives to anoint a Catholic patient, and one of the health care clinicians caring for the patient is present. The priest does not ask the caregiver if he or she is Catholic in order to stay in the room. It is entirely appropriate for the caregiver to remain in the room, as well as to pray with and for the patient, if the caregiver wishes. The patient will receive the grace of the sacrament, and the caregiver most

likely will receive spiritual benefit from listening to the prayers and Scripture readings and draw closer to the patient.

Of special note is what the church calls “sacramentals.” These are Catholic prayer services that are not the sacraments, but involve prayers, Scripture, symbols and rituals that convey God’s presence and our connection to the Divine at key moments. One of the most popular sacramentals is the distribution of ashes on Ash Wednesday. While this may be celebrated in the context of Mass, the practical reality is that most patients and staff cannot attend Mass but still wish to receive ashes as a sign of repentance and conversion. So chaplains and designated “ministers” are sent to the units to bring ashes to the people who desire to receive them.

While a purist might argue that we should not distribute ashes to people of other faiths, the pastoral response is to recognize there is a shared belief in the need for humans to ask forgiveness of God, repent and grow in conversion of heart. I always have found Jewish and Muslim associates want to receive ashes, because repentance and ongoing conversion is part of their faith traditions.

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Similarly, most Catholic health ministries celebrate blessing ceremonies ranging from the blessing of associates’ hands (such as during orientation of new hires, or during Nurses’ Week) to the blessing of a new building or piece of equipment, to the commissioning of a new CEO or board members. These blessings are considered sacramentals, and it is appropriate to invite everyone to participate in these types of prayer services.

What kinds of prayers and reflections should we offer at the beginning of a meeting?

Many Catholic health facilities have adopted the practice of beginning all meetings with a short prayer or reflection. These are not sacramentals or interreligious prayer services, rather they are moments to pause throughout the day and remember we work in a faith-based organization. It is perfectly acceptable to mention the persons of

the Trinity, Mary, the angels and saints in these types of prayers. But it also is a wonderful opportunity to share the richness of truth found in all faith traditions. We can invite associates or board members to share the prayers and scriptures of their faiths that will show the unity we all experience as humans engaged in compassionate healing. I have seen people moved to tears hearing a Buddhist physician or Jewish board member offer the wisdom of his or her faith tradition.

Should we include cultural, geographical, ethnic and other considerations when we develop liturgies and prayer services?

I think a story best demonstrates this point.

Immediately after St. John Paul II addressed the CHA Assembly in Phoenix on Sept. 14, 1987, he delivered an address to 10,000 Native Americans. During the occasion he was presented with several religious symbols, including a peace pipe and a feather headdress. The pope told Native American Catholics: “Keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and customs which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future.” The Catholic faith, he added, can “thrive” in any culture.

People express themselves through culture, and they should be able to express their Catholicism through that culture as well. It is appropriate in regions of the country where there are large Hispanic, Native American and other ethnic populations to use bilingual prayers, Scripture passages and music. The use of cultural art and ritual (such as meditative movement and dance) consistent with Catholic and Christian beliefs also is encouraged. There are some wonderful examples of public art in Catholic health care organizations throughout the ministry that incorporate the rich cultural traditions of the region and people they serve.

Should Catholic organizations celebrate Catholic and Christian holy days?

Celebrating the liturgical seasons, holy days and other special days of prayer such as World Day of the Sick is part of the fabric of Catholic culture. Many times these celebrations will be in the context of a Mass; however, if the celebration is one in which other associates and patients would want to be included, consider adding an interreligious prayer service. In one ministry where

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I served, we celebrated with a Mass the patronal feast day of St. Ann, after whom the hospital was named. Later in the day, we also held a prayer service followed by healthy snacks so that everyone could share the sense of belonging and a unity of purpose.

Should Catholic organizations celebrate the holy days of other faith traditions?

It is good to acknowledge when colleagues and patients of different faiths are celebrating special, holy days throughout the year. It is easy to give this recognition — not to mention explain the day's background and meaning — through educational articles in the organization's newsletter. However, celebrating the faith of other traditions by using their rituals and symbols may cause confusion or even give offense. There is an easy and respectful solution. If, for example, there is a large Jewish population among the staff, or the facility is one to which the Jewish community comes for health care, invite a rabbi to lead a service for patients, their families and associates to mark a holy day.

Should our organizations offer a space for prayer and reflection for members of traditions who wish to avoid crucifixes, statues and other Catholic symbols in our chapels?

More and more Catholic health facilities, especially ones constructed in the last 20 years, are

including “prayer rooms” or “meditation rooms” for those who feel more comfortable praying in a space not adorned with Catholic symbols and art. Some institutions have kept these environments very neutral, others, in consultation with local clergy, rabbis and imams, have included symbols of all major religions. Some organizations mark the eastern wall of the prayer rooms, so Muslim associates, patients and visitors know which way to face in order to pray towards Mecca. This kind of sensitivity shows a respect for other faiths and their traditions without becoming inappropriate.

So, how “Catholic” should our prayers be?

We must balance the need for preserving our Catholic culture and the richness of its sacraments, sacramentals and private and public devotional prayer, with the need to be respectful towards people of other faiths who work and receive care in our institutions. Sometimes the occasion will call for prayer that comes from the Catholic tradition. Other times the occasion and audience will require an interreligious prayer service that has been planned by a representative group familiar with the various faith traditions represented in our organization.

When attention is given to the details of prayer texts, Scripture passages, who will lead or read the various parts of the service, environment, symbols and ritual, we can celebrate what unifies us as brothers and sisters. We are created by the same one, true God, and we are all called to work and care for one another. We can all pray together for unity and harmony.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, May - June 2015
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