Lenten Series 2022: Collects of the Church Year

The source material for these sessions has been taken from   
*Commentary on the American Prayer Book* by Marion J. Hatchett

Published in New York by the Seabury Press in 1980

SESSION 1: A bit of history, background, and structure of a collect, with a couple of examples

Some important sources for the Book of Common Prayer generally, and specifically the collects are Sacramentaries of the Western Church, which were books of prayers used by the celebrant, specifically those of:

ROMAN RITE (Western North Africa, Roman missionary outposts, and the city of Rome)   
 Leonine (also called Verona)— MS dated about 600  
 Gelasian—8th C MS  
 Gregorian—late 8th-C MS

GALLICAN RITE of Western Europe, eventually replaced by Roman Rite  
 *Missale Gallicanum vetus*  
 *Missale Gothicum  
 Bobbio Missal 7th or 8th century  
 Missale Francorum*

The Western Church used various prayers at various points within the Eucharist. Eventually, one type of prayer came to be used in the place we encounter it today,   
just before the first reading.

Marion Hatchett: “The ﬁrst of the variable prayers . . . , the opening prayer, was later designated the “collect,” a word which may signify the summing up of the prayers of the individuals who have been called to pray. Or it may designate the prayer said at the collecting of the people at the start of the Mass. . . . and. . . came to be applied to a particular form of prayer which is as rigid in structure as a sonnet or haiku.”

The Collects, Proper Prefaces and appointed Psalms and Lessons, form the Proper of the Church Year. These are the fixed elements which vary with the day and occasion.

The structure of the collect in its simplest form is this:

* a preamble (address, invocation)
* a petition
* a conclusion (mediation)

A more complex form adds to the preamble a descriptive phrase or attribution and to the petition a result or consequence clause, so you get:

* Address
* Attribution
* Petition
* Result
* Conclusion

Hatchett offers the collect for the Second Sunday or Advent as an example of the most commonly used regular form:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

* Address—"Merciful God,”
* Attribution (description)—"who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation:”
* Petition—"Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins,”
* Result (consequence)—"that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer;”
* Conclusion—"who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.”

Not every prayer in the prayer book is a collect with this form, and not every collect follows it so neatly as that for the Second Sunday in Advent.

Hatchett notes that the collect for the Second Sunday of Advent comes from the Book of Common Worship of the Church of South India and is similar to the collect for 3 Advent in the 1662 BCP, with one important distinction. In the 1662 book, this petition appears: “Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just . . .” and so on. He notes, “The essential difference between [the 1662] collect and that in the present revision lies in the placing of responsibility not only upon the ministers and stewards but upon all of us to be prepared for Christ’s coming again.”

Hatchett then offers examples of exceptions of elements and sequence among the collects, such as a changing the order of petition and address, yet “all collects display a certain succinct rhythm and symmetry.”

Another note on history from the author: “The 1549 Prayer Book contained new collects for several of the Sundays and major holy days, and new collects for a number of saints’ days. Many of the medieval collects which it retained were revised in order to eliminate the intercession of saints and doctrine of merit, and to stress the initiative and liberality of God’s grace. The new saints’ day collects do not ask for the prayers of the person, but tell something about the saint being commemorated and pray for grace to follow the example so set for us.”

Revision of the collects began as soon as the first BCP was published in 1549. By the time of the third version in 1662, a number of new collects were provided and some others were revised. That has been so in each of the American revisions also, starting in 1789.

About half the collects in our present (1979) prayer book, came from the 1928 Book. Fewer than 30 of the 1928 collects were dropped, though a number have been moved to different days or occasions.

In this series our primary concern will be to look at the language in terms of its literal meaning and particularly the way in which it moves each of us when we pray. The structure is there in the background, and we will undoubtedly note that as we go along, but it is not our primary focus.

We will consider at least one collect per season and some that are simply appealing becaue of language or theology or matters of faith they present. We will also look at any collects brought to the session by participants..

The Collects for the Church Year are on pages 159 through 261 in the prayer book, first in traditional, then in contemporary language. There are many others scattered throughout the book.

This is the collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, one which we regularly use (or some paraphrase of it) before our procession into the church on Sunday mornings:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation,  
that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a  
mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Here the Petition is moved before the Address:

* Petition—Purify our conscience . . . by your daily visitation
* Address—Almighty God
* Result—that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself;
* Conclusion—who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Or four out of five elements, lacking only the attribution.

Again, our interest is not so much the mechanical putting together of things, but the meaning, even the feelings evoked, by the collect. Here we have the idea that inside of each of us—and, notably, all of us together—there is a mansion whose doors we will open wide to welcome Christ at his Second Coming. And that opening can take place only with God’s help, purification and visitation.

At the end of the first session we looked at the third of the three options of collects for Christmas Day:

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature   
upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who   
have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace,   
may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ,   
to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever.