

**The Priest's Personal Collect:
A Prayer to Renew the Pastor, BCP 562**

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At the height of the induction ceremony in the *Celebration of a New Ministry* the priest who is called to lead the congregation kneels in the midst of the church and offers a personal prayer to God, witnessed by the people. It is at once an humble submission to the call of priestly leadership and a personal cry for divine assistance in fulfilling that call. The prayer given for this on pages 562-563 in the *Book of Common Prayer* is, regrettably, rarely heard and rarely recalled beyond that heightened, liturgical moment. Given that induction ceremonies are only done once in a clergy's tenure and that, these days, new rites of institution are often being employed it's no surprise that this little gem is easily far from a priest's mind. This collect, however, provides a particularly personal and pastoral prayer for the priest that, with more regular use, properly reorients and renews the pastoral call.

Admittedly, this prayer does not flow as well as other long-lived, Anglican standards. The richer, more well known *Prayer of Self Dedication*, (“..so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds...” BCP 832) flows better and can absorb the intentions of the heart with greater ease. Yet, while that prayer asks for similar spiritual gifts with more fluidity than the prayer said by the priest in *New Ministry*, it is not unique to the presbyteral office. No other personal, liturgical prayer in our Anglican tradition is. The prayer said by the priest in *New Ministry* is the only prayer with such long, liturgical use that is specifically said by the priest on behalf of his or her priestly ministry.

This prayer originated with William Smith in 1799 who composed it for use in the then newly written Connecticut liturgies. Previous Anglican rites of parish rector induction had been mostly legalistic ceremonies that reflected the medieval history of feudal land ownership. The new American church gave the older rituals of induction a more personal, even emotional life, reflective of the effusive American spirituality. This prayer, written to be prayed by the clergy leader to God for others to hear, uses the personal, first person pronouns “I” “me” and “my” no less than fourteen times. It begins “with an allusion to Matthew 8:8, [and] centers on the primary duties of the priest as a minister of the word and sacraments, as a teacher, and as a person of prayer.” (Marion J. Hatchett: *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, 538)

In such personal use, those "primary duties of the priest" form a litany of eleven, self referencing pleas that, when read with all humility, reveal the fragile nature of what it means to be a human being called to do the work of ordained leadership. Behind these pleas we can hear the concern of a very human pastor who hopes to be able to recall scripture stories as needed when tending to the flock and to have a holy sensitivity to be able to apply them well. We can also hear the desire for having the right words to preach for sermons and the lively attitude for prayers so that people will be moved to see God more clearly. In contemporary English the priest prays this prayer:

O Lord my God, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; yet you have called your servant to stand in your house, and to serve at your altar. To you and to your service I devote myself, body, soul, and spirit. Fill my memory with the record of your mighty works; enlighten my understanding with the light of your Holy Spirit; and may all the desires of my heart and will center in what you would have me do. Make me an instrument of your salvation for the people entrusted to my care, and grant that I may faithfully administer your holy Sacraments, and by my life and teaching set forth your true and living Word. Be always with me in carrying out the duties of my ministry. In prayer, quicken my devotion; in praises, heighten my love and gratitude; in preaching, give me readiness of thought and expression; and grant that, by the clearness and brightness of your holy Word, all the world may be drawn into your blessed kingdom. All this I ask for the sake of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen (BCP 562-563)

It is true that a priest is fully dependent on God for these gifts. It is also true that a busy pastor, especially a rector or priest in charge of a congregation, often forgets that these gifts are the "primary duties" to which he or she is called. The holy gifts of relevant, scripture storytelling, providing quickening prayer, inspired speech and faithful administration of the sacraments are often considered secondary gifts of priestly leadership particularly when the church needs a new roof, the conflict in the kitchen is calling for managerial change and the budget is crying for more money for ministries.

The gifts and benefits asked for in this prayer are not as easily calculated as much as a well run church committee or social service ministry project. A member of the flock more readily notices an error in the bulletin than an inferior sermon. An adequate recitation of a familiar prayer is more normative for clergy than an

attempt to inspire renewed piety through study and rehearsal other authorized prayers. Pastors are tempted to spend more time in preparing the vestry agenda with the wardens than looking to see where the vestry's current stories will have parallels in scripture.

The great gift of this collect is that it reminds the priest of the primary work of the pastor. This prayer offers a corrective for the over busy priest who may have forgotten the purpose for which she or he is ordained. It must needs be recollected and prayed more often than at the institution of new ministry. Used regularly, perhaps at the start of a priest's work week, this collect can assist in prioritizing the list of tasks in front of the clergy leader. It provides a significant, liturgical reminder to the priest to the more subtle yet primary work of prayer, preaching, study and teaching, sacramental administration and pastoral care. This collect also reminds the priest that these holy gifts arise out of the pastor's humble dependence on God. Prayed regularly, this collect from *New Ministry* in the American Anglican tradition properly renews the pastoral call.