

Clergy, Nobility, Commoners, the Dead and Henry VIII's Second Decree on Bidding Prayers (1536)

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Introduction

In 1534 king Henry VIII decreed that the bidding prayers used in Sunday worship should no longer refer to the pope but should name the king both as sovereign and also as supreme head of the church in England. (See the separate document, *Sovereign and pope in English bidding prayers before and after 1534*.) Several other types of changes took place in these prayers as well, however. Among these were changes in the status of women; this is considered in the separate documents: *Queens, nuns, pregnant women and mothers: consequences for women of Henry VIII's 1534 decree on bidding prayers*. Other changes were made in the status of clergy, nobility, commoners and the dead. It is this story that is told here.

In considering what post-1534 bidding prayers had to say about clergy, nobility, commons and the dead, I have come to realize that Henry made not one but two decrees

prescribing the content of bidding prayers for Sunday worship. The second, made in 1536, while generally along the same lines as the 1534 decree, shows significant changes in detail. In fact, Henry appears to have changed his mind on several points. This story is told here as well.

Bidding Prayers (General Intercessions)

Medieval general intercessions – in England they were known as bidding prayers – were wide-ranging in scope and prayed for church and society at large as well as for all ranks of clergy from pope to local vicar; members of religious orders; royalty, nobility and cities. In the context of the Sunday parish mass, a large part of the prayers was directed to naming members of the local parish community; deceased relatives, friends, parishioners and others were prayed for at some length as well.

The bidding prayers were intended to be relevant to each time and place, hence they were composed locally and varied in content, wording and order; each surviving text is distinct in content – though they all followed the same general pattern. They were never written or printed in place in the missal but might be found on end pages, in margins, at the end of sermons, or simply on separate sheets.

Medieval general intercessions from across Europe are identified in my *Medieval General Intercessions: Bibliography of Texts and Sources*. Ways in which individual local church communities adapted the contents of these intercessions are considered in my *Women and Medieval General Intercessions: Introduction*.

It is this tradition that changed in the time of Henry VIII, and the story will be told in part through excerpts of bidding prayers composed before and after 1534. The source of each excerpt before 1534 is identified and linked to the *Bibliography* through the use of a unique designator; full bibliographic information is therefore given only in the *Bibliography*. These designators have four elements; (1) a code for the country of origin or equivalent, in this always EN=England (2) Within each of these groups the general intercessions are numbered consecutively, in approximate chronological order. (3) The name of a place or person with whom each text is associated is given next. (4) Finally, the approximate date of composition is provided.

Sources for prayers composed in 1534 and afterwards are given in the following references:

David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, ab anno MCCCL ad annum MDXLV, vol 3. London: R. Gosling et al. 1737; reprint Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation 1964

H. O. Coxe, *Forms of Bidding Prayer*. Oxford: John Henry Parker 1840

F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2 vol. London: Rivingtons, 1921

Edgar Hoskins, *Horae Beatae Mariae Virginis* or Sarum and York Primers... London: Longmans, Green 1901

Prayers for Clergy, Nobility and Commons

I will first consider prayers for clergy, nobility and commons before 1534 and then following the decrees of Henry VIII that regulated such texts. Prayers for the dead will be dealt with subsequently.

Prayers for the Clergy prior to 1534

Prior to the 1534 decree, English bidding prayers named bishops right after the pope – and before the king. Parish and other clergy were also named, as were members of religious orders.

Several examples are given here.

For clergy:

and for the person of this kirke
that has your saules to kepe
and for all the prestes and clerkes
that has serued or serues in this kirk or in any other.

EN-23 York 1405

Also ye shall praye for all them that haue charge and cure
of Chrystens mennys soules,
as curates and parsones, vycares, preestes and clerkes.
in especyall for mynsteres that serue therin, or haue served therin.
And for all them that haue taken ony ordre
that almyghty god give them grace to contynuaunce
well for to kepe and obserue it,
to the honour and helth of their soules.

EN-36 Wynchen de Worde 1483

For religious:

Ye shall bydde for abbotis, for prioris, for moonks, for chanons, for freris, for aneris, for heremytes, and for all religious

EN-5. Worchester 1349

also ye shall praie for abbottes and priours abbatis and prioris, for monkes, chanons, frers and nonnys, and all other men and women of religion

EN-13. London 15th c

For all men and women of religion
EN-10. Cranbone (and others)

Prayers for the Nobility and Commoners prior to 1534

Prior to the 1534 decree, English bidding prayers named nobility and commoners right after the king, queen and royal children. Several examples are presented here.

Also ye shall pray hertily... for dukes, erles, barons, knyghtes, squyres, and for alle gude commouners of this lond, that God yeue hem alle grace so to do and orden so, that it be so soveraynly pleasing to hym and profyt and salvacion of his londe.

EN-13 :London 15th c

And for alle the grete of this land. For the lord of this toun and for the levody and for alle here childore.

EN-17 York 1400-1413

Ye schall py for the state of the tempally of all crystendom and in espycally of thys lond ...and of the kyng councell that god of hys infynyte mcye will give hem se grace so to [missing] ther trewth to the kyng as may be to the pleasur of god the fame of our sayd sovereign lord the kyng and welthe of the realme. Also all the commens of thys lond

EN-22 Butley 1401

We shall pray specially for ... all the peers and lords and all the good commoners of this lond, and speycally for all those that hathe the good counsaile of the lond to gouerne; that God gyue them grace, such counsil to take and ordaine, and so for to worke thereafter that it may be louinge to god almighty and profite and welfare to the roylme, and gaynstanding and refrayngs of our enmyes power and malice

EN-42. York 1509

Henry VIII's 1534 Decree

Henry VIII's decree said that clergy should continue to be included in the Sunday bidding prayer (so long as the king and queen themselves were not physically present). The exact words to be used were not specified, but left to the "devotion" and discretion of the one composing or leading the prayer. The actual wording of the decree is as follows:

...adding thereunto in the second part for all archbishops and bishops
and for the whole Clergy of this realm,
and specially such as the preacher shall name of his devotion.

Wilkins 3, 783; Coxe 56

Henry's decree also said that the nobility should continue to be included in the Sunday bidding prayer (so long as the king and queen themselves were not physically present). The exact words to be used were not specified, but left to the "devotion" and discretion of the one composing or leading the prayer. The actual wording of the decree is as follows:

and thirdly for all dukes, earles, marquesses
and for all the whole temporality of this realm,
and specially for such as the preacher shall name for devotion.

Wilkins 3, 783; Coxe 56

Note that the decree did not mention "commoners" except very indirectly through the term "temporality".

Henry VIII's 1536 Decree

In 1536 Henry issued a "Letter to Archbishop Cranmer concerning Preachers (Wilkins, *Concilia* 3, 807). This includes a bidding prayer that was to be used thereafter. Of particular interest here is the portion of this text that deals with clergy, nobility, and commons. Instead of placing intentions for clergy and for nobility and commoners in separate sections, these are now placed in a single section. In addition, and of especial note, the invitation to local prayer leaders (preachers) to expand on these texts and name specific individuals "specially such as the preacher shall name of his devotion" was withdrawn. The preacher was not permitted to make any changes or additions. These directives were followed faithfully in prayers composed thereafter.

Prayers for Clergy, Nobility and Commoners after 1534

Thus the wording of prayers that survive from the remainder of Henry's reign is virtually identical.

1536

Second, ye shall pray for the Clergy, the Lords temporal, and the Commons of this realm, beseeching Almighty God to give evey of them in his degree grace to use themselves in such wise as may be to his contention, the King's honour, and the weal of the realm.

Coxe 58

1539

Secondly ye sholl praye for the clergy, the Lordes temporal and commons of this realme beseechyinig almighty God to give every one of them in his degre grace to use themselves in such wyse as maye be to his contentacion, the kynges honner, and wealth

of the realme.
Coxe 64

1541
Secondly ye shall pray for the clergy the Lord's temporal and commons of this realm beseeching almighty God to give everyone of them in his degree grace to use themselves in such wise as may be to his contentation, the king's honour and the weal of this realm.
Hoskins 155

1544
Secondly ye shall pray for the clergy, the Lords temporal and the commons of this realm .
Hoskins 156

1546
secondly, you shall pray for the King's Majesties Council, for all the Lords of this realm, and for the Clergy and the Commons of the same; beseeching Almighty God to give every of them in his degree grace to use themselves in such wise, as may be to God's glory, the King's honour, and the weal of this realm
Coxe 72

Prayers during the reign of Edward VI went their own way:

1550
secondly, for the King's most honourable Counsell
Coxe 80

1550
with all others of your most honourable Council, the spirituality and temporality.
Coxe 83

temp Edward VI
the privy councill, the rulers ecclesiasticall and politicall, and all the people of England
Coxe 85

Bishops, clergy and nobility received greater attention in bidding prayers from the reign of Elizabeth I.

1559
You shall also pray for the ministers of God's holy word and sacrament as well archebishops, bisshops, as other pastours and curates.
You shall also pray for the Quenes most honorable counsaill and for all the nobilitie of this realm, that all and every of those in their callying may serve truly and paynfully, to the glorie of God and edifying of his people, remembre the accompt that they must make.

Also you shall pray for the whole comons of this realm, that they may live in true fayth and fear of God in humble obedience and brotherly love and charitie one to other.

Coxe 94

1581

Let us also remember in our praiers the honourable privy counsell, the clergie, the nobilitie, with the whole people of this realme, that God may grant every one grace in his calling sincerely to serve him.

Coxe 96, Coxe 121

temp Elizabeth

the Quenes most honourable counsaill, with the residue of the nobilitie; ... the bisshoppes and preachers, that the number of thym may be increased.

Coxe 129

temp Elizabeth

Let us commend also unto God, the several estates of the land, for the right honorable of the nobilite and of her Highenes privie Councill,
For the estate of the cleargie, the right reverend Fathers in God, in whose hand the government of the Church is, and all other inferior ministers,
For the estate of magistracy and namely for the Governors of this honorable citie,
For the estate of the Commons.

Coxe 136-7

Prayers after the Reign of Elizabeth I

The following excerpts show how the practice of praying for clergy, nobility and commoners developed over the next several centuries.

1603 [James I]

Ye shall also pray for the ministers of Gods holy word and Sacraments, aswel archbishops and bishops as other pastours and curates.

Ye shall also pray for the King's most honourable Council, and for all the nobility and magistrates of this realm....

Also ye shall pray for the whole Commons of this realm.

Coxe 141

1633 [Charles I]

for the Lords spirituall and temporall, and the rest of his Majesties most honourable privie council, ...for the nobilitie, magistracie, gentrie, and commonality of the land

Coxe 161

temp Charles II

Further let us pray for the ministers of God's holy word and sacraments, as well
archbishops and bishops as other pastrous and curates,
for the Lords and others of his Majesties most honourable council, and for all the nobility
and magistrates of the realm
Let us pray for the whole commons of this realm
Coxe 173-4

1662 [Charles]

Pro utroque domo Parliamenti, pro regni proceribus nobilissimis, praesertim iis, qui Regi
sunt a secretioribus conciliis,
Speciatim vero preces apud patrem coelestem sunt effundendae pro universo clero
Anglicano in utramque domum Convocationis mox deinde coituro, pro reverendissimi
sarchiepiscopis, episcopis etiam reverendis, aliis que quibuscunque inferioris subselli
clericis
Coxe 176

1688 [James II]

ffor the whole Clergy of these Realms by what names or Titles so ever dignifyd or
distinguished whether they be the Most reverend ffathers in God the Lord's Archhishops
the Right Reverend the Bishops [particularly Lord Bishop of this diocese or any other]
dispensers of God's holy word & Sacraments.
Let us pray for his majestys most Honorable Privy Council for the nobility & magistrates
of these Realms [Particularly for the right worshipfull the mayor of this Corporation
together with the Aldermen &c]
Pray we likewise for the whole commons of these Realms that they may live in true faith
& feare of God in humble obedience to the King & in brotherly love & Charity one
toward another.
Brightman 2, 1051, 1053

1840 Victoria

for the Lords and others of her Majesty's most honorable Privy Council;
[for the Great Council of the nation now assembled in Parliament;
for the nobility, gentry and commonality of this land;
for the magistrates and others who are in authority;
Coxe 180

Prayers for the Dead

Prayers for the dead were prominent in medieval general intercessions, but play only a
small role in those composed following Henry VIII's decrees.

Prayers for the Dead before 1534

Prior to 1534, English bidding prayers concluded with prayers for the dead, which could be lengthy. Two examples are given here.

Ye shulle kneelen down and bydde for fader sowl, for moder sawle, for God-fader sawle, for God-moder sawle, for children sawles, and for alle the sawlys of our brethryn and soosters sawles, and all thee sawlys that we bet in dette for the bydde for, and for all the sawles that beet in purgatory, that God ham brenge the radyr out of har peynys there byseechying of our bone. Ye shulle bydde for alle the sawles hwos bonys rest in this place, oder eny oder holy place, for alle sawlys hwos mendedays beet yholde in this Cherch oder eny oder by the year.

EN-5 Worchester 1349

Ferthermore ye shall praye for all chrysten soules, for archebysshoppes and bysshoppes soules, and in especyall for all that haue ben bysshoppes of this diocese, and for all curates, parsones and vycares soules, and in especyall for them that haue ben curates in thys chyrche, and for the soules that haue serued in this chyrche.

Also ye shall praye for the soules of all chrysten kynges and quenes and in especial for the soules of them that haue ben kynges of this noble realme of Englonde.

Also for al those soules that to this chyrche haue gyuen boke, bell, chalyce, or vestement, or ony other thyng, by the whiche the seruyce of god is the better done, and holy chyrche worshypped.

Ye shall also praye for your fathers soule, for your mothers soule, for your godfathers soule, and for your godmothers soule, for your bretherne and systers soule, and for the soules of all your kynnes folke, and for your frendes souels, and for all the soules that we be bounde to praye for. And for all the soules that be in the paynes of purgatory, there abydyng the mercy of almighty God. And in especiall for them that haue moost nede and least helpe, that god of his endles mercy lesse and mynsshe theyr paynes by the meane of our prayers and bryng them to his euerlastyng blysse of heuen.

Also of the soule of N or of them that vpon suche a daye this weke we shall haue the annyuersary, and for all chrysten soules....

EN-36 Wynchen de Worde 1483

Henry VIII's 1534 and 1536 Decrees

In the 1534 decree, intentions for the dead are describe in the following manner:

And finally for the souls of all them that be dead,

and specially for such as it shall please the preacher to name.
Wilkins 3, 783; Coxe 55-56

In the 1536 decree and model text, there is both an expansion and a contraction. The words

“abiding the mercy of Almighty God, that it may please Him the rather, at the contemplation of our pryayers, to grant them the fruition of his presence.”

This in fact is open to a more “catholic” interpretation, whereas the 1534 text is open to a more “protestant” interpretation – though it is perhaps too early in the development of reformed thought in England for such views to be much distinguished.

The 1536 text omits the invitation to the preacher to name individual persons: “specially for such as it shall please the preacher to name.”

Prayers for the Dead after 1534

Prayers composed until the end of Henry’s reign are worded as follows:

1536

Thirdly, ye shall pray for the souls that be departed, abiding the mercy of Almighty God, that it may please Him the rather, at the contemplation of our prayers, to grant them the fruition of his presence.

Coxe 58

1546

thirdly, ye shall pray for all them that be departed out of this world in the faith of Christ, that they with us and we with them at the day of judgment, may rest both in body and soul with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven

Coxe 72

1550,

thirdly, I commend unto you the soules departed this life in the faythe of Chryste, that ye remember to geve laudes, praise, and thanks to Almighty God for his greate goodnesse and mercye shewed unto them in that greate nede and conflicte ageynste the devil and synne, to gyve them at the houre of deathe faythe in his sonnes deathe and passion, wherby they might conquere and overcome and get the vycторыe.

Coxe 74

1550

And I desire you to commend unto God with your prayers the souls departed unto God in Christ’s faith, and among these most especially for our late Sovereign Lord King Henry VIII, your Majesties most noble father

Coxe 83

After this time, theological considerations led to changes in this section of the bidding prayer. First, there was a shift from praying for the dead to praising God for their lives. Second, the idea that the dead might or should be examples for the living was added. Finally, one text shifts the object of prayer from the dead to troubled and distressed living persons. Several texts are given below, but a number of bidding prayers simply did not include an intention for the dead.

temp Edward VI

yee shall give thanks unto God almighty, for King Hnery the Seventh, and King Henry the Eighth

Coxe 85-6

1559 [Elizabeth I]

Finally, let us prayse God for all those, which are departed out of this life in the fayth of Christ, and pray unto God that we may have grace soe to direct our lives after their good example, and that after this life we with them may be made partakers of the glorious resurrection in the life everlasting.

Coxe 95

1603 [James I]

Finally, let us praise God for all those which are departed out of this life in the Faith of Christ, and pray unto God that we may have grace to direct our lives after their good example, that this life ended, we may be made partakers with them of the glorious resurrection in the life everlasting.

Coxe 142

temp Charles II [1633]

Finally, let us praise god for all those that are already departed out of this life in the faith of Christ...

Coxe 173

1688 [James II]

Finally, let us beseech Almighty God of his infinite goodneses & mercy to comfort & succour all them who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity.

Brightman 2, 1053

1840 [Victoria]

Finally, let us praise god for all his servants departed this life in his faith and fear; beseeching Him to give us grace to follow their good examples, that this life ended, we may dwell with them in life everlasting...

Coxe 182

Discussion

Two years after Henry VIII's first (1534) decree on bidding prayers, the king issued what was in essence a second decree having to do with this part of Sunday worship. This 1536 decree was entitled "Literae dom. regis archiepiscopo Cantuar. Contra concionatores" (Wilkins 3, 807-808) or "The King's Letter to Archbishop Cranmer regarding Preachers" (Coxe xxx). Its intention was to regulate sermons, make provision for licensing preachers and for the appointment only of trusted persons to preach. Toward the end it went on to say:

And to the intent that all diversity in the manner of teaching and preaching may be avoided and eschewed, ... we will that ye shall give commandment to all the curates, and others ... from henceforth every Sunday to make their prayer in form following: that is to say:

[the text of the prayer, already given above, followed]

While the text given was similar to that published in 1534, it also included a number of small differences, as follows.

A

1534 Pray for the whole Catholick church of Christ, as well quick as dead, and especially for the church of this realm

1536 pray for the whole congregation of Christ's Church and specially for the/this Church of England

B

1534 for our Sovereign head Henry the Eighth

1536 the king's most excellent Majesty

C

1534 being immediately next under God the only supreme head of this Catholick church of England

1536 supreme head immediately under God of the spirituality and temporality of the same Church

[Neither version included the phrases "by the grace of God" nor "defender of the faith."]

D

1534 separate intention for bishops and clergy and for the nobility

1536 a single intention for bishops, clergy, and nobility

E

1534 preachers were invited to add the names of bishops and clergy, or nobility and of the dead at their discretion and “devotion”

1536 no such invitation was included

F

1534 only the first part of the prayer was to be said in the physical presence of the king and queen, while the whole things was to be said in their absence

1536 no such distinction was made.

Some of the differences between the 1534 and 1536 texts and directions for the bidding prayer might be merely stylistic. Others, however, might indicate that the king’s relationships with and estimation of bishops and clergy had deteriorated during this two year span.

Taking away the provision for preachers to add names “of their devotion” indicates that they were not trusted and that Henry wanted to control them closely. After all, the freedom to name persons – living and dead – could be a powerful indication of preachers’ views on the political-religious developments of the day. Political views could be expressed, for example, by naming persons who were out of favor with the king or by naming those executed by the king.

In addition, putting bishops and nobility together in a single intention represented a “lowering” or “leveling” of hierarchical relations; the status of bishops was diminished. This may have been based on a theological perspective that minimized any special status of the clergy vis-à-vis- the laity. Combining the two intentions also meant that less was said about bishops and clergy, and about nobility, than if there were two separate prayers.

Finally, omission of persons’ names – bishops and clergy, nobility, the dead – meant that these sections of the bidding prayer remained general, indefinite and “faceless”. This reinforced the royal and national character of the new bidding prayer, as the king and royal family were given names and extensive prominence.

As already mentioned, bishops and clergy, nobility and the dead were mentioned, but little was said about them; they remained categories, not actual persons.

“Commoners” had often been included in pre-1534 bidding prayers in the section for civil society and governance, sometimes together with intentions for cities and their leaders.

These commoners acquired more of a “face” and received greater attention in the section of the traditional bidding prayer that referred to local society and to the local parish community. These were important parts of the Sunday bidding prayer. After 1534, however, this part of the prayer was omitted and all these people disappeared; this remained the case in 1536.