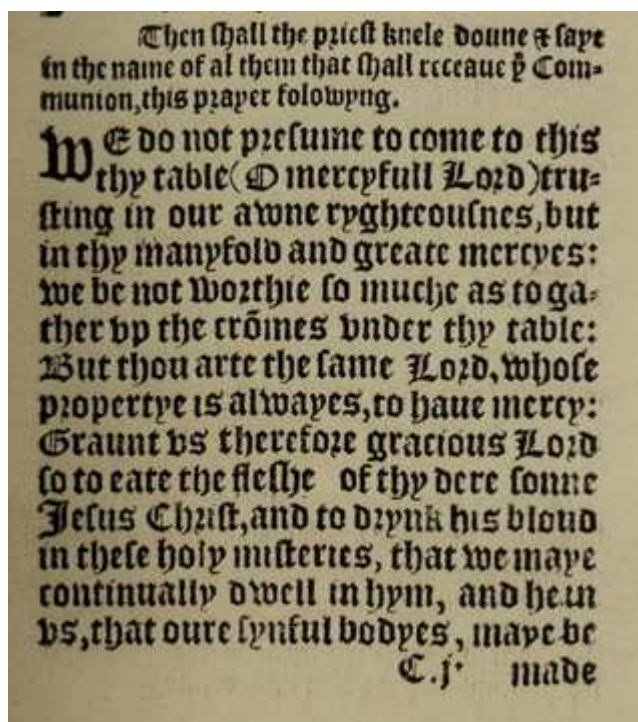


Can you tell us the "rules", if indeed rules there be, that govern the use of the prayer for humble access? I like the prayer. I believe that humility to be a virtue and yet the prayer seems to be included in the Eucharist infrequently.

This month's question is timely as we are in the season of Lent, one of the two periods of the church's year when we use this prayer at almost all of our services of Holy Communion, the other season being Advent.

Some parts of our order of service for Holy Communion date back to the very earliest known such services but this prayer was a new addition to the form of service by Cramner first appearing in the 1548 'Order of the Communion'. At the point in the service just before receiving Communion there was a prayer said quietly by the priest, in Latin, which translates as 'May the sacrament of your body and blood, O Lord Jesus Christ, that unworthy as I am, I receive, be not for my judgement and condemnation but for the salvation of my body and soul'. Cramner's new prayer, the last words to be said by the congregation before receiving Communion, provided the congregation with a prayer that echoed that said by the priest before making his Communion. Cramner's new prayer draws on ancient sources (the Sarum Missal, the Liturgy of St Basil) and on scripture (Daniel 9.18, Mark 7.24-30, John 6.47-58, Hebrews 10.22, John 6.56) in a new creative way to form a prayer to which many have become deeply attached.

The shape of the 1549 Order of Communion would feel a little strange to us today: The rubric [rule] said that '*The time of the Communion shall be immediately after that the Priest himself hath received the Sacrament.... And ... shall thus exhort them as followeth*', and then after the Exhortation '*Here the Priest shall pause a while, to see if any man will withdraw himself : and if he perceiue any so to do, then let him common with him prively at convenient leisure, and see whether he can with good exhortation bring him to grace.*'



The Confession and Absolution then followed, which is a completely different place in the service from our modern order. Next came the 'Comfortable Words' after which the rubric states that '*Then shall the Priest kneel down and say, in the name of all them that shall receive the Communion, this prayer following:*', which is the prayer we know as the Prayer of Humble Access. Note that it was only said by the priest, in the people's name, and not by the people themselves. The act of Communion followed immediately after which there was a prayer of blessing and the people departed.

.By 1549 the Order had been revised so that the Confession, Absolution, Comfortable Words were not after the priest had received Communion but rather he waited until after the Prayer of Humble Access where the new rubric provided that *'Then shall the Prieste firste receive the Communion in both kindes himselfe, and next deliver it to other Ministers, if any be there present, (that they may bee ready to helpe the chiefe Minister,) and after to the people.'* The Prayer of Humble Access thus effectively replacing the priest's previous private prayer in Latin but still being only spoken by him.

In the 1552 and subsequent 1604 revisions of the Book of Common Prayer the words of the Prayer of Humble Access were moved into the middle of the Eucharistic Prayer, spoken only by the priest immediately after the Sanctus (the *'Holy, Holy, Holy Lord..')* in a place vacated by the Intercessions which had been moved to a separate earlier place in the 1552 revision. In this revision a number of prayers and the Gloria followed the receiving of Communion before the Blessing. In 1604 the reading of the Ten Commandments was the one item in the place where in our modern order the Confession, Absolution and Gloria all fit before the Collect and Readings.

Looking at Cramner's changes between 1548, 1549 and 1552 it is clear that he saw the prayer not as part of the Confession and Absolution, a form of Prayer of Penitence, but rather as a prayer of humble thankfulness and for 'worthy reception'. The prayer is intended as a joyful approach to the reception of the sacrament.

In the 1662 Book of Common Prayer the Prayer of Humble Access remains within the Eucharistic Prayer spoken only by the priest: *"Then shall the Priest, kneeling down at the Lord's Table, say in the name of all them that shall receive the Communion, this Prayer following.*

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. *Amen.*

¶ *When the Priest, standing before the Table, hath so ordered the Bread and Wine, that he may with the more readiness and decency break the Bread before the people, and take the Cup into his hands, he shall say the Prayer of Consecration, as followeth."*

In the 1928 revision the Confession, Absolution, Comfortable Words and Prayer of Humble Access are reunited, contrary to Cramner's intent, before the Prayer of Consecration. The Prayer of Humble Access is still said by the priest alone. The ASB in 1980 continued this association but the rubric changed so that it now read "All may say" and the word 'property' was replaced by the word 'nature'.

For the first time the rubric allowed the Prayer to be said by the people, and the ASB also provided the modern alternative wording, inspired by George Herbert's poem, 'Love bade me welcome':

Most merciful Lord, your love compels us to come in. Our hands were unclean, our hearts were unprepared; we were not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table. But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners. So cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your Son, that he may live in us and we in him; and that we, with the whole company of Christ, may sit and eat in your kingdom. Amen.

The contemporary rules or rubrics make no provision as to when the prayer should or should not be used. We have evolved a tradition of using it in Advent and Lent as well as on some other occasions, but I believe we should all be glad that the rules eventually made this a prayer of the people rather than the priest and that we should always see it as a joyful prayer and not as penitential.