THE LIBERTY OF THE BISHOP TO IMPROVISE PRAYER IN THE EUCHARIST

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The earliest clear indication that in the eucharist of the early church the bishop was at liberty to improvise in making the long prayer (later to be called the anaphora) after the offerings of bread and wine had been brought to him is perhaps to be found in Justin Martyr’s First Apology (67.5). Here, in his description of the normal Sunday eucharist, Justin says: καὶ ὁ προστός εὐχάς ὁμολογεῖ, καὶ εὐχαριστίας, ὡσε δύναμις αὐτῷ, ἀναπέμπει, καὶ ὁ λαὸς ἐπενεφημεῖ λόγον τὸ Ἄμιν. Here the phrase ὡσε δύναμις αὐτῷ suggests that the contents and expression of the prayer of the “president” (who is clearly the bishop) are determined by his ability. Next, Irenaeus in his Adversus Haereses (1.7.2) tells us that in his juggling pseudo-eucharist the heretic Marcus ἑκραμένα προσποιούμενος εὐχαριστεῖν, καὶ ἐπὶ πλέον ἐκτείνων τὸν λόγον τῆς ἑπικλήσεως. This suggests that the celebrant could decide the length of the great prayer, unless Marcus arrogated to himself the right of improvising prayer as well as the right of producing faked miracles during the eucharist. Not much later Tertullian says that Christians pray manibus expansis, quia innocuis, capite nudo, quia non erubescimus, denique sine monitore, quia de pectore oramus (“with hands outstretched because they are innocent, with head uncovered, because we are not ashamed, finally without a prompter because we pray from the heart”). In official ceremonies of the Roman religion, a prompter would be employed on public occasions to ensure that the proper formulae were correctly repeated. Tertullian is speaking of praying for the Emperor, and it seems likely that he is referring to Christian public prayer, i.e. the celebration of the eucharist, because nobody could imagine that a monitor would be required in private prayer (Apologeticus 30.4). The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus provides very clear evidence on this point (ed. and tr. G. Dix, 10.4, 5). It tells us:
"It is not altogether necessary for him (i.e. the bishop) to recite the very same words which we gave before as though studying to say them by heart (ἀπὸ στήθος) in his thanksgiving to God, but let each one pray according to his own ability. If indeed he is able to pray suitably with a grand and elevated prayer, this is a good thing. But if on the other hand he should pray and recite a prayer according to a fixed form, no one should prevent him. Only let his prayer be correct and right (ἀφθάρτα).

Perhaps thirty years later Origen gives us a particularly interesting piece of evidence. In the Conversation with Heracleides, which is the report by an eyewitness of a conference between Origen and some bishops in a town in Arabia, about the year 246, Origen is reported as describing the right formula for making the offering to God in the eucharist: δέι προσφορά γίνεται Θεῷ παντοκράτωρι διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὥς προσφόρον τῷ Πατρὶ τὴν θεότητα αὐτοῦ μὴ δίς ἄλλα Θεῷ διὰ Θεοῦ προσφορά γινέσθω. τολμηρῶν δόξω λέγειν, εὐχόμενον ἐμμένει ταῖς συνθήκαις; εἶν μὴ γένηται, οὔ μὴ λήμμη πρόσωπον ἀνθρώπου οὐδὲ θαυμάσεις πρόσωπον δυνάστου (Lev. 19.15). The text then becomes so corrupt as to be incapable of restoration (ed. J. Scherer, pp. 126 and 128). But it is clear enough that Origen is pleading with the bishops present, whose eccentric, if not heretical, views, had caused Origen’s presence at the conference, not to introduce their own peculiar ideas into the prayer which they make at the eucharist. It is also clear that there were "conventions" (σύνθηκαι) which the bishop was expected, but was not compelled, to use in composing his prayer.

About ten years later, in his De Unitate Ecclesiae (17), Cyprian denounces schismatics in general and Novatianists in particular because among them the bishop constitue ut aedet alius altare, precem alteram Illicitis vocibus facere, dominicae hostiae veritatem per falsa sacrificia profanare. Prex with Cyprian very often means the anaphora prayer. Illicitis vocibus is not likely to mean that the schismatic introduces improvised prayer where fixed liturgical prayer was proper, but rather it suggests that he introduces into his prayer as he celebrates his own peculiar views. The letter of Firmilian, bishop of Cappadocian Caesarea, to Cyprian, a Latin translation of which appears as no. 75 among the letters of Cyprian, gives interesting details about a woman in his part of the world