

Litany of the Saints

Reviewed March 2019

The litany (from the Greek *lite* meaning “prayer or supplication”) has been part of the prayer life of the Church for many centuries. There are currently six litanies approved for public prayer in the Catholic Church: the Litany of the Saints, the Litany of Loreto (Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary), the Litany of St. Joseph, the Litany of the Holy Name of Jesus, the Litany of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. When used liturgically, the litany typically involves a cantor, who provides the first half of the intercession, and the members of the congregation, who complete it.

The Litany of the Saints is used during the Easter Vigil, at ordinations and religious professions, during the consecration of a church or altar, or during public processions. There is a long form and a short form of the Litany of the Saints; when the Litany is used in rites that take place during Mass, the short form is used.

When singing the Litany of the Saints at the Easter Vigil, it is recommended that the patron saints of those to be baptised be included. Many people do not know that there is a ‘set’ form or structure to the Litany, and add the names in at random.

Here we will look at the way the Liturgy of the Saints is built up, so that the patron saints of those to be baptised will be added in the correct manner.

1. Introduction. We call on God’s mercy: “Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.”
2. We then call upon all the saints to intercede for us, in the following order:

Mary, the angels and St Joseph; the Apostles, Evangelists and disciples; the martyrs, Bishops and Doctors of the Church; holy priests and monks, holy virgins and widows, all holy men and women.
3. The next part of the litany begins with another call for mercy and delivery from various evils, followed by a list of the ways in which this delivery to be realised (e.g. by Christ’s incarnation, by his cross and suffering, by the coming of the Holy Spirit).
4. Finally, we pray for the Church and for particular needs – at the Easter Vigil it is for those who are being baptised; at an ordination or religious profession it is for the one being ordained or professed; at the Dedication of a Church it is for those who will worship in the church.

So how do we know where to place ‘extra’ saints. Let us look at a few examples:

- If St. Patrick (died c.460) were to be added, he would be placed among the bishops and doctors, after St. Martin (died c.316) and before St. Benedict (d. 543), because he died after St. Martin but before St. Benedict.



- If St. Elizabeth of Hungary (died 1231) were to be added, she would be placed among the religious, after St. John Vianney (died 1869), but before Catherine of Sienna (died 1380) because female saints come after male saints.
- If St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop were to be added, she would come after St. Teresa of Jesus, since St. Mary died only in 1909.

Sometimes, those who are to be baptised have a name which we think is not a saint's name, but a little research will show that it is. For example, Brian is a Celtic form of Bernard; Barry is the English form of the Irish name Finbar; Emma is a form of Amelia. However, there is so far no St. Chloe, or St. Amber or St. Brad.... If the person to be baptised does not have the name of a saint, then add in the saint whose name they are taking for Confirmation.

Other Litanies

Besides the six litanies named at the beginning of this article as being approved for public prayer in the Catholic Church, there are many other litanies used in private devotion (e.g. Litany of the Holy Spirit, Litany of Divine Mercy, Litany of Humility etc.)