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Lord, hear our prayer: Prayer, Social Support, and Well-Being in a Catholic Convent

This article examines intercessory prayer, specifically, petitions to the divine as they are performed in Mass and in prayer groups at a Catholic convent in the midwestern United States. It demonstrates that these petitions function on multiple levels. Petitions are designed primarily as a form of communication with the divine, intended to elicit divine aid. In addition to functioning as requests to the divine, the petitions function on a number of socio-communicative levels: first, as an index of the presence of the divine; second, as a means for individuals to communicate social support to copresent participants; and third, as a mode of peer socialization. Finally, these multiple functions of prayer provide spiritual and social support that may contribute, in the context of the convent, to the inhabitant nuns' documented success in achieving physical and mental well-being throughout their lives. [prayer, religious language, social support, well-being]

At least two to three times each day, the Catholic nuns of the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent¹ in the midwestern United States stop what they are doing and gather to pray. During each prayer gathering, the nuns pray *petitions*—intercessory prayers in which they solicit the divine² to assist in everyday affairs: to help those who are ill to endure their illnesses, to comfort those who are at the end of life, and to watch over those who are in need. The nuns believe that the divine listens to these prayers and answers them, providing comfort for the ill, guidance for those who are lost, and relief for those who are suffering.

Prayer, a communicative practice, has been said to have remarkable benefits for those who routinely engage in it, contributing to both physical and psychological well-being (Carlson et al. 1988; Koenig 2003; Lim and Putman 2010; Salsman et al. 2005). Catholic nuns, who devote much of their lives to prayer, have been found to age more “successfully” than their lay counterparts, reporting less anxiety, pain, and depression at the end of life (Butler and Snowdon 1996; Snowdon 2001). A number of possible contributing factors that emerge from the nuns’ daily practices, including education, nutrition, physical activity, spiritual and social support, and prayer, have been identified through surveys and medical examinations. The connection between the nuns’ everyday practices and their sense of social support, spiritual support, and well-being has not yet been fully explored. This article examines the multiple pragmatic functions of prayer in the aforementioned convent in order to consider how

prayer may generate a sense of both social and spiritual support, possibly contributing to the nuns' reported sense of well-being.

This article examines a corpus of 144 petitions, or prayers asking the divine to intercede in the world, that I collected over a period of four years, 2008–2012, in order to examine the spiritual, communicative, and social functions of these prayers. As I explain below, the petitions display layered functionality in which the primary communicative act, a request for intercession from the divine, is embedded within a complex meta-communicative framework. In addition to their primary spiritual and communicative function as requests to the divine, the petitions: (1) index the presence of the divine, which contributes to spiritual support in the community; (2) communicate a desire for sociability (see Urban 1988), specifically, by conveying needs, desires, and social support to copresent human interlocutors; and (3) serve as a form of peer socialization, conveying how to be a good individual and community member.

In his work on ritual wailing in Amerindian Brazil, Urban (1988) proposes that it functions on two planes. Ritual wailing functions primarily as an "overt expression of emotion, in this case sadness at separation or death"; and it functions secondarily as a "covert expression for the desire for sociability" (Urban 1988:385). Through this second function, ritual wailing communicates a desire for sociability and social acceptance, and conveys that the individual is an appropriate social actor in that context. Briggs (1993), in his work on Warao ritual wailing, similarly proposes that it has multiple functions, noting that "degrees of closeness are *constructed and performed* through wailing" (Briggs 1993:931, emphasis in original). As an often emotionally laden, publicly performed form of ritual speech, intercessory prayer can likewise be regarded as functioning on multiple levels. This article builds on Urban's and Briggs's approaches to ritual communication through an examination of the layered functionality of intercessory prayer, understood here as public ritual communication with the divine.

Prayer as Spiritual Support

Despite the importance of religion for anthropology throughout the field's history, and despite the ubiquity of prayer across religious practices, there has been little analytical attention to prayer in anthropology and in the social sciences (Baquedano-López 2001:198; as exceptions, see Samarin 1972, 1976 and Kilson 1978). Mauss's incomplete manuscript on prayer (first published in 1909, but largely unknown; translated into English in 2003) was the first anthropological inquiry into prayer. He argued that prayers, even silent, personal prayers, are religious rites and must therefore be social acts (Mauss 2003:54). He understood prayer to be embedded in the environment in which it is performed, inseparable from social context. Linguistic and sociocultural anthropologists in the past few decades have furthered Mauss's study of prayer, treating it as a form of religious language that is embedded in specific socio-historical contexts, often involving institutional and colonial encounters (Besnier 1995; Hanks 2010; Keane 2007; Robbins 2001; Schieffelin 1981). Prayer has also been examined as a speech genre with particular constraints on form, content, and mode of delivery (e.g., Bauman 1983; Borke 1986; Bruder 1998; Capps and Ochs 2002; Kroskrity 1998; Ochs and Capps 2001; Shoaps 2002, 2009). In addition, Duranti and Black (2011) have shown that prayer is realized in different ways across cultural contexts, ranging from an activity marked by strict conformity to tradition (Kroskrity 1993, 2009; Moore 2006) to a genre that embraces individual creativity (Capps and Ochs 2002; Luhrmann 2012).

Almost all religions involve prayer in some form (Baquedano-López 2001), and petitions to the divine to intercede in worldly affairs are ubiquitous across cultural contexts, although they vary in subject and form. Even within Christianity, there is significant variation. For example, among Pentecostals, petitions for material things such as cars or money are not uncommon (see, e.g., Coleman 2000 and Comaroff and

Comaroff 2003), while they are extremely rare in most Catholic contexts. Among the Catholic nuns considered in this article, petitions focus most commonly on prayers to alleviate suffering in the world. Prayers for those enduring suffering, including illness, and for the deceased and those mourning them made up over 46% of the prayer corpus (66/144). The remainder of the prayers focused on the community (both within the convent and in the greater rural area), guidance for Church and world leaders, the safety and protection of individuals (especially children and travelers), and the cultivation of subjective states, such as peace, acceptance, humility, and faithfulness.³

Petitions are a community activity in which people come together to ask the divine to intercede in worldly affairs. In this way, petitions publicly perform the divine's enduring presence, as will be examined more closely later in this article. Maton (1989) found that spiritual support, defined as the experience of a divine presence that is available and loving, correlates with increased reported well-being. Individuals who report high spiritual engagement also report experiencing less depression, anxiety, and hopelessness than their peers (McClain et al. 2003). An increasing number of studies suggest that religious practices, including prayer, meditation, and participation in religious services, aid the mental and physical health of the practitioner, promoting physical well-being, imparting a sense of meaning in life, and protecting against depression (Brown 2012; Koenig 2003; Maton 1989; Meraviglia 1999; Newberg 2006; Strawbridge et al. 1997). Group prayer, in particular, has been associated with physical and psychological well-being (Koenig 2003; Poloma and Pendleton 1991). For example, in a study of religious-service participation across a number of religious groups, Lim and Putnam (2010:927) found that "for life satisfaction, praying together seems to be better than either bowling together or praying alone."

In the convent, prayer is seen as a significant contribution to the community and to the world. The nuns believe that they are doing something extremely important when they pray. They believe that prayer impacts the world in positive ways and that the divine hears and responds to their prayers. This feature of petitions is especially important for the very elderly or infirm. Individuals who are not physically able to contribute in other ways to the community are understood to be able to serve the community and the world through prayer. Even those who suffer from extreme forms of dementia and aphasia and who can no longer speak are asked to pray for their family and for those in need. When caregivers and friends visit the very elderly, including those who can no longer speak or move on their own, they are often thanked for their prayers. These tasks frame even the most infirm sisters as contributors in the community.

Setting and Methods

As an ethnographic study of prayer, this article is not intended to demonstrate a connection between prayer practices and well-being. Rather, through the linguistic analysis of ethnographic data drawn from a community that has been documented to report relatively high levels of physical and psychological well-being, it aims to illuminate how petitions, as a religious practice and as a form of prayer, may constitute a form of social support and may contribute to the social lives of participants.

The Franciscan Sisters of the Heart Convent, located in the midwestern United States, is home to approximately 250 nuns. About 100 of them are elderly, having retired after a lifetime of hard work to live in the assisted-living or infirmary wings of the convent. The remaining 150 or so nuns serve on "missions," working either outside of the central convent as teachers, nurses, or missionaries, or within the convent as administrators or caring for the elderly sisters. The convent, like many in the United States, has had few young women join as novices in the past few decades. The majority of the nuns in the community are over 55 years old. Most of the nuns joined the convent when they were 16 to 19 years old, working until retirement as teachers, missionaries, nurses, ministers of pastoral care, or administrators in the local

parishes. The majority of the nuns grew up in the Midwest; many came from local farming families and attended Catholic schools. As Franciscans, the nuns see themselves as the “heart of the Church,” emphasizing St. Francis and St. Clare’s teachings of contemplation, peacemaking, poverty, care for the poor, and care for the earth.

During the summers of 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012, as well as during a five-month period in 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork focusing on the prayer lives of, and social interactions among, the nuns in the convent. Throughout the ten months in which I was at the convent, I participated in all daily activities, ate with the nuns, attended Mass and prayer meetings, and accompanied them on work and volunteer activities. As a non-Catholic, the one activity in which I could not engage was Holy Communion during Mass. During the research period, I collected a corpus of video and audio recordings comprising more than 100 hours of naturally occurring interactions, including formal and informal prayers as well as nonprayer social interaction. The corpus includes 144 instances of petitions, which are the focus of this article.

Throughout the day, the nuns engage in both private and group prayer. Each morning and evening, they gather in small groups in the chapel or in small sitting rooms throughout the convent to pray the Divine Office,⁴ using a Franciscan Breviary (The Franciscan Federation 2009). The Breviary includes prayers and readings for each day. The text echoes the themes of the Catholic calendar, for example, by means of readings on suffering and redemption during Lent and Easter. Each morning, the nuns also attend Mass, gathering in the ornate marble and wood-pillared convent chapel, where they participate in group prayer including the Eucharist,⁵ considered the most holy of Catholic prayer activities. Mass is led by a priest assigned to the community. The priest is the only man with whom many of the nuns have regular contact. The gendered hierarchy of the Church, which bans the ordination of women, has been a subject of considerable controversy among American nuns, who, in turn, have been investigated by the Church (Goodstein 2013; Hunt 2012). Some of the nuns in the convent embrace the hierarchy, while many others express a desire for the Church to create room for gender equity.⁶ Likewise, some of the nuns report praying to a nongendered or feminine God (Corwin 2012), while many others were comfortable with the traditionally masculine God of the Catholic Church.

First Function: Requesting Divine Help

The first and most basic function of a petition is to make a request to the divine. This primary function needs little explanation. The following example, taken from a Mass in July 2008, is a request to the divine in behalf of farmers.

On this humid day, the nuns were gathered for mid-morning Mass. The chapel was a cool respite from the muggy weather. Following the homily, Sister Irene, dressed in a long skirt and comfortable black shoes, moved slowly, slightly bent over with age, as she climbed to a plain wooden podium at the altar. The large silver cross that signifies her membership in the convent, now that the sisters no longer wear the habit, was pinned to a light blue blouse. She read the following petition from a list that she had hand-written the week before. (Transcription conventions are shown in the appendix.)

Example 1: Petition for good weather

Participants:

SI: Sister Irene

ALL: Congregants in chapel during Mass

01 SI: For good? weather and good crops this season.

02 (0.3) we pray.

03 (0.2)

04 ALL: Lord hear our prayer.

In this petition, the prayer topic is followed by the performative phrase “we pray.” The performative aspect of this phrase renders the topic a request to the divine, asking for good weather and good crops for the summer season. In these two words (“we pray”), Sr. Irene also implies that a collective subject, the congregation as a whole, not just herself as an individual, is engaged in the act of prayer. In so doing, Sr. Irene invokes the deontic rights (Heritage 2013; Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012) of the congregation, obligating the community to respond or confirm her assertion that the group is collectively engaged in prayer. The phrase “we pray” cues the choral coproduction of the refrain “Lord hear our prayer” (line 4) and invites collective action as the community joins in prayer.

Within the cultural framework of the convent, a context in which participants believe that the divine hears and answers their requests, this primary function contributes to the nuns’ sense of spiritual support. The nuns report that they feel heard when they pray; they feel that a loving God who can intercede in the world in their behalf addresses their needs.

Petitions performed in prayer groups are often more structurally complex, and, because of their structural complexity, may appear at first to be merely conversational. However, they invariably contain a request to the divine. In the following example of an evening prayer gathering, the speaker provides a far more detailed topic introduction, followed by the request to the divine. Seven nuns gathered for a regular evening prayer meeting in a small room off a dormitory-like wing of the convent populated mostly with personal rooms with shared bathrooms, showers, and a communal kitchen. The prayer room was decorated with a cross, a painting of St. Francis, a record player in the corner for playing hymns, and a rug on the floor. The late-summer-evening sun streamed into the room as the nuns, ranging from their fifties (some of the youngest in the convent) to their seventies and early eighties sat on easy chairs and two couches.

Example 2: Petition for Sr. Laura Mantle

Participants:

SM: Sister Marie

ALL: Group of seven nuns and the author

01 SM: and (then prayer uh) special for Sister Laura Mantle who’s back

02 Up in the third floor a’ Saint Anthony Ha:ll (.)

03 Um, her blood pressure

04 Spiked right after lunch an’ (1.5)

05 They wouldn’t even tell ‘er what it wa:s (1.0) u:m (2.0)

06 thank God, (.)

07 God who would give her um (1.0) grace, (2.0)

08 and she asks- asked for the grace to accept what (3.0)

09 she i:s dealing with.

10 For Sister Laura we pray=

11 ALL: =Lord hear our prayer

In this example, the speaker, Sr. Marie, requests that God give Sr. Laura Mantle, who is ill, “grace” (line 7), and then, more specifically, “the grace to accept what she is dealing with” (lines 8–9). Here, the topic of the prayer (grace for Sr. Laura) appears more than halfway through the petition. In these prayers, the request is made through a performative utterance (“we pray”). In addition, a relative clause depicts God as one

who “would give her um (1.0) grace.” Bestowing grace becomes within the realm of possible acts of which God is capable. In this formulation, the modal verb “would give” (line 7) indirectly conveys the illocutionary force of a request. Sr. Marie’s final utterance, “For Sister Laura we pray” (line 10), is both a metapragmatic cue signaling the end of the prayer and an invitation for the group to collaborate with her by praying on Sr. Laura’s behalf.

The primary function of all of the petitions is a request to the divine to intercede in the world. However, as quickly becomes clear from structurally complex petitions like Example 2, many of the petitions contain more than simple requests of the divine. These more complex petitions are examined in further detail below.

This article analyzes both types of petitions: those performed in chapel at Mass and those performed in smaller-group prayer settings. The structures of these two types of petitions differ in two ways: the petitions performed during Mass are authored and performed by one predetermined speaker,⁷ and this speaker has had the opportunity before Mass to commit them to writing. Because of the temporal distance between the authorship and performance of the prayers, and because they are performed in a formal ritual setting with a large audience, the petitions performed at Mass are often more formal and more structurally constrained than the petitions performed in small-group settings. By contrast, each petition performed in small-group settings, also called “prayer meetings” or “prayer groups,” is performed by a self-selected speaker, with each participant in the group usually contributing one or two petitions at each prayer meeting. These petitions are spontaneous, are not written, and are often less formally structured.

The examples below illustrate the difference in formality. Example 3 was performed at Mass, and Example 4 was performed in a small prayer group. Both prayers focus on the alleviation of suffering in the world.

Example 3: Petition for those suffering (Mass)

Participants:

SB: Sister Bernette

ALL: Congregants in chapel during Mass.

- 05 SB: For people in all parts of the world who are
 06 (.) suffering as a result of natural? disasters
 07 (.) and (.) acts of violence.
 08 We pray to the Lord.
 09 ALL: Lord hear our prayer.

Example 4: Petition for those suffering (prayer group)

Participants:

SL: Sister Laurina

ALL: Five nuns and author

- 10 SL: For all? the trouble spots. in the world
 11 they’re struggling for (1.4)
 12 just to have some
 13 (0.8) peace of mind,
 14 we pray.
 15 ALL: Lord hear our prayer.

Example 4, from the small-group prayer setting, is less smoothly delivered; Sr. Laurina’s long pauses (1.4 and 0.8 seconds) contrast with Sr. Bernette’s micro-pauses. Example 4 is also less formally rendered, using the less formal “we pray”

rather than the more formal “we pray to the Lord” that is used in Mass. The informality is reflected in the setting. Here, the five sisters and I sat in a small room with prayer books spread across our laps. Some of the sisters sat upright, with the prayer books balanced on their knees, while others sat back, holding the text in their hands. At the beginning of the prayer meeting, one of the sisters stood up to move a curtain so that the sunlight did not shine so directly onto another nun’s face. The petitions performed at Mass are marked as more formal through greater structuring and predictability as well as reduced spontaneity (Irvine 1979). In the more formal context of Mass, the audience sat more uniformly, filling the wooden pews, sitting up if they were able, and fixing their attention on Sr. Bernette as she spoke from the altar.

Petitions are embedded in a particular ritual sequence. Below is a synopsis of the sequence observed in the convent:

1. *Opening*

The petitions are cued either by the text, as in prayer groups, or by the priest, at Mass. In a prayer group, the cue is a series of scripted petitions in the Breviary that are read aloud by the group. This series of scripted, read-aloud petitions marks the opening of nonscripted petitions. Although there is no overt cue in the text, individuals participating in the prayer group begin their own petitions after reading the Breviary petitions. At Mass, the priest cues the opening of petitions by introducing the sister who will perform them. After the introduction, the nun rises to the podium to address the congregation.

2. *Petition*

In prayer groups, a self-selected speaker performs the first petition. The petition is usually preceded by a pause, 2.0 to 5.0 seconds in length, during which speaker selection is negotiated. During Mass, the speaker has been pre-selected and begins after the opening cue with little delay.

3. *Closure of intercessory prayer*

Each speaker closes each petition with the metapragmatic statement “We pray” or “For this we pray.”

4. *Scripted communal response (“Lord, hear our prayer”)*

Each petition is followed by a choral coproduction of “Lord, hear our prayer.” As Lerner (2002) notes, in order for coproduction of speech to occur, participants must be able to predict the future speech with some accuracy. Here, the structured closure of the intercessory prayer cues the choral coproduction of the words “Lord, hear our prayer.” Ritual repetition allows choral coproduction of this line with a relatively high degree of accuracy. On occasion, speakers at Mass introduce a different communal response. In these relatively rare instances, the speaker of the petition explicitly introduces the new response before the petitions begin, saying, for example, “The response will be: . . .”

5. *Repetition of parts 2–4*

As each new petition is performed, the participants follow the sequence outlined in parts 2–4.

6. *Petition for specific persons*

At Mass, the final petition is for those to whom the Mass has been dedicated. In prayer groups, the final petition is for members of the community who will be celebrating a birthday or feast day on the following day. It is almost always initiated after an extended silence, usually 5.0 to 10.0 seconds long, during which no one else in the prayer group has volunteered a petition. In both cases (Mass and prayer groups), these final petitions are guided by a list and are read by a pre-designated person.

7. *Closing*

During Mass, the petition sequence closes as the priest takes up the role of designated speaker. His contribution at this stage varies. On occasion, he contributes a few spontaneous petitions or leads the group in a blessing or prayer. In prayer groups, the closing consists of a choral coproduction of the

divine intervention lies in the context, the positioning of the utterance in the prayer sequence. It is also the kind of conventional announcement that triggers a petition.

Indirect petitions to the divine using a *for*-prefaced noun phrase, e.g. “for those who are unemployed,” are the most common form of petition in the convent. These *for*-prefaced speech acts are slightly more direct than off-record requests in that they refer to an intended recipient and are often followed by details of what the recipient might need. Still, in these petitions, the need for action from the divine is implied; it is not directly requested.

Petitions using modal verbs convey deference to the divine, as the modal verbs encode epistemic possibility (Quirk et al. 2010). By forming the petition with the modal auxiliary verb *may*, for example, the nuns imply that they are asking that the petition be answered. This format softens the request and acknowledges that the power to grant the request is in the hands of the divine.

The most direct petitions in the convent corpus are *we*- or *you*-based imperatives or directives to the divine, directly asking for divine intercession in worldly affairs. Deference displayed in the nuns’ petitions is integral to their relationship with the divine. The nuns treat the divine as omniscient, all-powerful, and infinitely loving. The indirectness of the petitions performed in the convent indexes the power differential between the nuns and the divine.

In other societies, direct petitions may be more common. In Yoruba prayer, for example, petitions are often framed as commands to the divine (Harrison 2008; Olájubú 2001). Further examination of cross-cultural variation in this regard will be necessary in order to understand the relationship between religious ideologies and prayer.

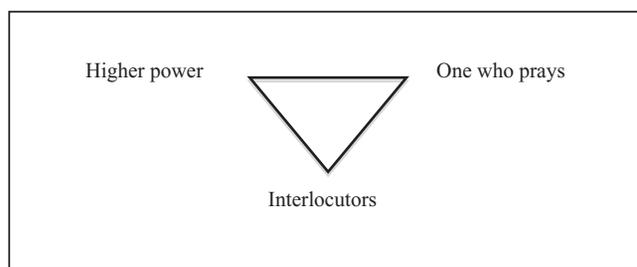
Second Function: Indexing Divine Presence

When speaking to the divine, speakers are engaged with an invisible interlocutor. The primary recipient, the divine, is not present in an embodied capacity and does not engage in the standard patterns of uptake (for example, embodied communication through eye gaze or nods, or spoken discourse markers such as “oh” or “mmm”). While many nuns reported that they believe or even sense that the divine is present in the room, there are nonetheless no publicly evident signs of a divine interlocutor’s presence. As Luhrmann (2012:xi) notes, “God gives none of the ordinary signs of existence.” Elsewhere, Luhrmann (2004:141) describes a learning process among evangelical Christians through which they cultivate the experience of dialogic interactions with a divine interlocutor—sitting down with God for tea, for example—and learn to “attend to the stream of their own consciousness like eager fishermen” for evidence of divine communication. Such experiences of dialogic interaction depend on an individual speaker and her subjective experience of the divine (see also Csordas 1994).

When nuns pray together, the participant structure includes not only the speaker and the divine interlocutor, but also copresent overhearers and participants (Goffman 1979; Ochs and Capps 2001:230). As Ochs and Capps (2001) note, when communication with the divine occurs in the presence of others, it is a multiparty interaction: even silent overhearers must be included in the participant structure as relevant interlocutors (see Figure 1).

Overhearers are audience to a performative act in which the speaker presupposes the existence of her interlocutor. The presence of the divine interlocutor is indexed by the speaker’s embodied petition. Prayers include frequent reference to the divine through address terms. In the corpus, 65% of the petitions address the divine by name: “Lord,” “God,” or “Christ.” The address term serves to call on the divine and to publicly present the divine addressee to an overhearing audience, as if reminding everyone that the divine is present as an interlocutor.

In group prayer, the frequent assertion of deontic authority (“We pray”), which predicts and asserts community action, employs those copresent in the act of



(Ochs and Capps 2001:230)

Figure 1
Prayer as Multiparty Interaction

engaging the divine through prayer. The affirmation of the action (through the response “For this we pray”) confirms the collective will and collective desire to engage in the prayer. Petitions thus involve two acts: the petition to the divine and the response from copresent interlocutors. Both of these performative acts imply the existence of the divine. First, the speaker performs the petition, addressing the Lord as the recipient. During this act, the copresent interlocutors are an audience for a speech act that establishes the existence of a divine interlocutor. In the second act, the copresent interlocutors, the audience to the petition, become speakers, participating through a choral response with the words “Lord, hear our prayer.” The repetitive use of the plural (“*We pray*” and “*Hear our prayer*”), ubiquitous in the petitions, reinforces the audience’s involvement in the speech act both as listeners and as speakers of the choral response.

In these ways, petitions are performative acts that engage both the speaker and the audience in evocations of the divine’s presence. The nuns believe that the divine is present to them at all times; public petitions reinforce this belief in the course of their everyday lives.

Third Function: Social Support and Socialization

Many of the petitions were introduced with supplementary information, and some contained detailed narratives concerning the request. This supplementary speech was not extraneous; it revealed a secondary function of the petitions, moving them beyond simple requests to the divine.

To illustrate, let us return to Example 2. In this prayer, Sr. Marie’s petition to the divine occurs after she provides a narrative about the person for whom the prayer is designed. This narrative contains a tremendous amount of information—the who, what, when, where, and why—all of which is provided as background information for why Sr. Laura Mantle needs to be granted the grace to accept her current condition.

The nuns, as Catholics, believe that the divine is omniscient. The divine already knows what has happened concerning the health condition of Sr. Laura, including her needs and her current location on the third floor of St. Anthony Hall. Sr. Rita, a nun in her eighties who has lived in the convent for 60 years, confirmed this understanding of the divine. When I asked whether the nuns believe that the divine knows worldly details such as which room a person is in, Sr. Rita laughed, responding, “If He doesn’t, we’re in a bad way.”

Grice’s (1989:26) conversational maxim of quantity states that interlocutors are expected to “make [their] contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)” and “not make [their] contribution more informative than is required.” If the nuns’ petitions were directed solely to the divine, they would be violating Grice’s maxim of quantity, providing more information than was required.

In other words, petitions like Sr. Marie's would be redundant, as the divine is presumed already to have the knowledge of Sr. Laura's health status and location.

There are two ways to interpret the abundance of detailed petitions: either the nuns are consistently flouting Grice's maxim of quantity or the petitions are also directed to recipients other than the divine. I argue for the second interpretation. Not only is it rare for individuals to consistently flout maxims, risking impoliteness, but there are also relevant motivations for the nuns to design the petitions in this way. Although the petition portion of the prayers may be directed to the divine, much of the speech is directed to copresent interlocutors (in this case, the other nuns in the room), as is made explicit by "Let us [verb]" forms such as "Let us pray" and "We pray."

Returning to Sr. Marie's petition in Example 2, if we interpret the petition as designed for the copresent interlocutors, the narrative becomes relevant news to the present group. The group of nuns lives at the convent, but in a separate building from the infirmary. The majority of them probably had not yet heard that their community member, Sr. Laura, had had a health problem that day. In addition, the information detailing where in the infirmary she is located (the third floor of St. Anthony Hall, a three-floor infirmary in the main building) will enable them to visit Sr. Laura and to provide comfort and tangible assistance for her.

As I discussed with Sr. Rita, the variation in petitions and the details included in some of the petitions, she suggested that the petitions "might be a new way of getting your needs known." She went on to say, "I think also . . . we're trying to alert others to conditions that exist and need to be prayed for and often don't get prayed for." Petitions thus appear to be designed for multiple recipients. The primary recipient is the divine, to whom the request is directed. But petitions are also oriented toward copresent interlocutors who can also act in the world in response to the prayer requests. Requests for social support are usually similar to Example 3 (above) in that the speaker is requesting support for a third party who is in need. These petitions usually draw attention to an individual in the community who has recently fallen ill or become injured, and they typically include detailed information about what happened and where the individual is currently located (e.g., to which hospital she has been admitted, or where in the convent infirmary she has been placed). Prayers for individuals who are ill make up nearly 10% of the petitions examined (14/144).

In addition to requesting social support for others, speakers occasionally request social support for themselves. These requests are usually indirect and are often positioned after a number of other petitions for others. Below is an example in which Sr. Peter, a novice who has just returned "home" to the motherhouse after a year of instruction at a separate convent, prays for her fellow novices, including herself, and the transition that they are all going through. The petition for herself follows a petition for others in transition.

Example 5: Petition for those in transition

Participants:

SP: Sister Peter

AUDIENCE: Five nuns and author

- 01 SP: (We) pray for people in transition
 02 So many (um) high school students and college students
 03 who are (.) in this month finishing a part of their life an'
 04 (.) may be in a great deal of consternation 'bout what comes next
 05 we pray that you would give the:m
 06 (.) peace? (.)
 07 that you would surround them with wise people who would
 08 (.) help them as
 09 they (.) walk forward in their journey

10 (.) and pray also fo:r my fellow novices who are in a
 11 (.) period of transition back in their home communiti:es
 12 and trying to adjust to a new living situations an'
 13 new novice directors
 14 (1.0)
 15 just pray that you would give them the grace each day to
 16 walk- walk out their journey

This contribution contains several sequential petitions. First, Sr. Peter prays for "people in transition" (line 1) and then, more specifically, for high school and college students (lines 2–4). In line 6, she prays that the divine grant the students peace and guidance from wise people. In line 10, she offers a third prayer, one for her class of novices. The portion of the prayer, near its conclusion, in which Sr. Peter indirectly prays for herself is an example of indirect request. She mentions only her "fellow novices," but, as a novice herself, she can be understood to be included in this group. The structure of this prayer, which only indirectly includes Sr. Peter herself, exemplifies the community ethos of humility, which involves avoidance of self-praise as well as avoidance of praying for oneself.

When examining the prayer in the context of subsequent conversation, we see that Sr. Peter's indirect prayer for herself has the capacity to function as an effective request for social support. At the conclusion of the prayer meeting, the five participants filed into the hall. One of the sisters turned to Sr. Peter and asked, "Who's transitioning to a new leadership director?" A leadership director guides the "formation" of new novices as they enter the community. Sr. Peter responded, "Well, I am." She clarified that, while she was away, she was under the guidance of a different director; now that she is back in the convent, she has a new leadership director, a member of the convent community. The conversation continued as the two sisters discussed the transition and Sr. Peter's experience. This uptake, after the close of the prayer group, shows that Sr. Peter's petition functioned as a mode of sharing information that she had not previously conveyed to the members of the group. It functioned as a successful mode of eliciting social support during Sr. Peter's time of transition.

In addition to encoding requests for social support, petitions often contain offers of social support to others in the community. Sometimes such petitions are for individuals and sometimes for groups of people: that is, sometimes they are for types, e.g. for those who are ill, and sometimes for tokens of those types, e.g. for Sr. Laura, who is ill. Petitions for people in the community made up almost 16% of the petitions (23/144). Half of these were for individuals and half were for the community at large. If petitions for the deceased and mourners of the deceased are included with the petitions for other community members, the total rises to almost 33% (47/144) of the petitions.

The following example is a petition for the author. At the time of this prayer meeting, I was six months pregnant with my second child, a girl. My son was one and a half years old.

Example 6: Petition for the researcher

Participants:

SI: Sister Irma

AUDIENCE: Four nuns and researcher

01 SI: For little baby girl, cradled in her mother's womb,
 02 that she can come to be healthy and happy as, as one of us.
 03 For her mommy and her dad and her little brother,
 04 her big brother.
 05 ALL: For this we pray

In this example, Sr. Irma prays for the health and happiness of my unborn child. This prayer functions both as a direct request to the divine and as a mode of communicating to me that Sr. Irma and the community are thinking about the health of my unborn baby and the health and happiness of my entire family, each of whom is named in the prayer. This communicates care and consideration for me and my family on the part of Sr. Irma and the whole group as they repeat the prayer with the words "Lord, hear our prayer." As I am present in the room and a participant, Sr. Irma is able to communicate to me directly both that she is thinking of me and wishing me well, and that she is acting in my behalf to solicit health and happiness from God for my child and family.

The following petition offers support by way of thanksgiving and appreciation to a portion of the community. It was delivered in a Mass in honor of the convent's "jubilarians," those sisters who were celebrating the anniversary of the day when they made their vow and joined the convent. The jubilarians celebrated included those who had been in the convent for 15, 25, 50, 60, 70, and 80 years.

Example 7: Petition for jubilarians

Participants:

SJ: Sister Josephine

AUDIENCE: Congregants in chapel during Mass

- 01 SJ: We rejoice and give thanks for our jubilarians
 02 for their faithful commitment in service within the Catholic
 03 community and beyond.
 04 ALL: For this we pray

This petition, spoken in front of a chapel filled with the jubilarians, their families, and the other nuns, is a prayer to the divine in behalf of the jubilarians. It is also a public recognition of the work that they have engaged in all of their adult lives, and a communication of appreciation for them and gratitude to them. The petition thus functions simultaneously as a request to the divine and as a public form of thanksgiving and support directed to the jubilarians.

In his book *Ordinary Ethics*, Lambek (2010:1) notes that "ethics is intrinsic to speech and action." He asserts that everyday language must be seen as action and that this action is embedded in an ordinary ethics. In an examination of narratives in *doctrina* (Catholic religious education) classes, Baquedano-López (2000:430,441) shows that narrative activity can be used to socialize children into shared history, shared identity, and "community moral order." Through *doctrina* socialization, "individual and collective identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed vis-à-vis positionings within a web of moral expectations" (Baquedano-López 2000:443). Petitions are similarly embedded in an ethical framework. The performance of each petition encodes morally valenced guidance as to how to act, to feel, and to be as a "good" person in the convent community (for example, by offering prayers for "acceptance" or "serenity" for those who are ill).

Socialization occurs throughout the life course (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Jacoby and Gonzales 1991; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). It has been shown to influence, at the end of life, how individuals age and die. For example, Prigerson (1992) found that, if a patient's caregiver was unaccepting of death, the patient was unlikely to come to terms with her own death. Over 12% of the petitions in my corpus encode direction, in various forms and with various levels of force, on how to behave in the world. As public performances of direction on how to be in the world, these petitions function as a form of ongoing peer socialization for the nuns. Capps and Ochs (2002:39,45) found that, for Euro-American children,

modeling of behavior by parents, teachers, and other elders was a key form of socialization involved in the cultivation of a “prayerful attitude” and “a quiet way of being” through prayer at home and in Sunday school. Capps and Ochs (2001:54) regard prayer as an “endeavor to formulate and publicly instantiate understandings of self-in-the-world,” one that “relies on the recruitment of conventional moral frameworks.” Although many of the petitions in my corpus do not involve explicit forms of socialization such as bald directives or assessments, by providing models for how to be in the world, embedded in the institutionally authenticating ritual space of Mass or group prayer meetings, the petitions constitute a key form of peer socialization in the convent.

As over half of the sisters in the convent are approaching the end of life, much of the socialization in the convent focuses on illness, death, and dying. The petitions offer models for how to talk about and how to approach aging and death with acceptance, peace, and optimism, aiming to assuage fear and anxiety about the end of life. The following petition, for healing and acceptance for those who are ill, contains both the requisite request to the divine and gentle guidance on how to deal with being ill:

Example 8: Petition for healing and acceptance

Participants:

SB: Sister Bernadette

AUDIENCE: Congregants in chapel during Mass

01 SB: For healing and acceptance for our sisters
02 in Saint Anthony Hall.
03 (1.3)
04 we pray.

This petition has three functions. First, it is a request to the divine for intervention in the lives of the sisters in the convent infirmary who are suffering from illness. Second, it is a form of social support; the petition communicates to the ill sisters (all of whom can see and hear the Mass, by means of the closed-circuit televisions installed in each room) that they are being thought of and prayed for by the entire congregation. Finally, the petition is a mode of socialization for these sisters and for anyone who might become ill. The prayer is not exclusively for healing; it is also for a state of “acceptance” that is to be assumed by the sisters in St. Anthony Hall. This message echoes that in the prayer for Sr. Laura Mantle (Example 2), which asks for “grace to accept what she is dealing with.” Acceptance is a strong theme in Catholic spirituality generally, and in the convent specifically. The theologian Rebecca Norris writes that, in the Catholic Church, suffering is understood to be redemptive. Acceptance of suffering can help a person become “one with Christ” and can act to “save the world” (Norris 2009:30). For Catholics, illness and suffering can offer a path toward spiritual unity with the divine and can be “offered up” to the divine to help others. The nuns believe that suffering is an unavoidable part of life that must be endured, ideally, with the acceptance and serenity with which Jesus endured his suffering on the cross. Thus, rather than focusing on acts of physical healing, prayers for the ill usually include prayers for acceptance, grace, and serenity in the face of illness and suffering (see also Corwin 2012).

As the community as a whole is aging, with an average of five to ten persons dying each year, and only one new novice entering every two years, the topic of death and dying is often included in prayers. Not surprisingly, petitions contain comforting and positive messages that promote acceptance of death, as in the following example:

Example 9: Petition for the dying*Participants:*

SC: Sister Christine

AUDIENCE: Congregants in chapel during Mass

- 01 SC: For those near death,
 02 that the promise and hope of eternal life may bring them
 03 comfort and consolation
 04 we pray to the Lord

Here, the petition provides social support by offering consolation for those who are dying and, in so doing, reinforces a particular approach to death and dying. The dying are reminded that the community is supporting them. They are also instructed that death offers eternal life and comfort in heaven.

Petitions offer an example of how the socialization of morality, as “the social sanctioning or rejection of actions” (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002:352), can transpire through the modeling of “right” behaviors, states, or practices (Capps and Ochs 2001; Duranti et al. 2011; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). The abundance of prayers for the ill, for those who are suffering, and for the deceased and their mourners makes known that concern for such persons is expected of “good” subjects through on-the-ground acts as well as through appeals to divine intervention. In addition, the persistently outward-pointing character of the prayers demonstrates the community ethos of humility and concern for others.

Conclusion

The multiple functions of religious petitions performed by Catholic nuns contribute to their sense of spiritual and social support. At their most basic level, petitions are a way to seek help in matters that are beyond the power of the individual. By asking the divine, an entity that the nuns believe is all-powerful and infinitely loving, to intercede in worldly affairs, the petitions provide hope and reassurance in situations that might otherwise give rise to a sense of helplessness. In addition, the fact that the petitions are a shared activity adds to the nuns’ sense of community and social support and may thereby decrease the potential for a sense of loneliness in old age.

Beyond seeking help, the petitions evoke the very *presence* of the divine interlocutor. By directly indexing a participation framework that includes the divine, the performance of petitions creates the sense not only that one is not alone, but also that the divine is among those present. In this way, petitions provide the experience of spiritual and social support from the divine. The public performance of petitions supports the nuns’ belief that the divine is an ever-present, ever-available interlocutor. Even the elderly and infirm nuns who participate from their rooms via closed-circuit television benefit from this aspect of the petitions. They are among the nuns who report that they feel that the divine is present and is listening to their prayers.

Finally, petitions function as requests for, and offers of, social support within the community, and also as a means of socialization. Petitions allow the nuns both to voice their needs to, and to provide social support to, others in their community. They are a vehicle for disseminating information about who is in need and how best to help them. As a form of socialization, they inform community members of what is expected of them and of the community as a whole, especially when others are encountering difficult circumstances. Prayers allow aging nuns to know that they are not alone and provide guidance on how to endure illness and the approach of the end of life. Petitions include tangible advice on how to endure illness (aim for acceptance and endurance rather than physical healing); how to be a valuable member of the

community (care for others, strive for humility, kindness, and generosity); and how to mourn those who have died (celebrate the fact that the deceased is experiencing eternal life in heaven).

Petitions are a remarkable example of the power of language to impact individuals' experiences in the world. As a form of prayer, petitions function on multiple levels to contribute to the nuns' sense that they are integrated into a supportive, loving community; that they have the means to approach life's difficult moments with peace, equanimity, and acceptance; and that they can contribute to the well-being of others in their community and in the world.

Notes

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1. All names of persons and places are pseudonyms.
2. I use the term "divine" (rather than "God") because it indexes a more broadly defined higher power and therefore more accurately represents the beliefs and interactions of the women at my fieldsite. Although many of the participants in the study refer to the divine as "God," many believe in a divine or "God" who is present in larger, less anthropomorphic embodiments, such as "all of nature" or a "oneness with the world." For this reason, I use the broader term "the divine."
3. Significantly, none of the prayers in my corpus focus on intervention in the material world, with one exception: a single prayer requesting shelter for the homeless.
4. Also called the Liturgy of the Hours.
5. The Eucharistic prayer, performed by a priest, involves the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ. This ritual is performed at each Mass and is followed by an embodied prayer activity in which participants take the host (considered the body of Christ) in their mouths as an act that joins them with the body of Christ.
6. For an exploration of the gendered self in a Catholic convent, see Rebecca Lester's 2005 ethnography *Jesus in Our Wombs*.
7. On occasion, the priest will contribute a spontaneous petition following the closing of these petitions.

Appendix: Transcription key

:::	Colons indicate elongation or stretching of the sound that immediately precedes them.
,	A comma indicates continuing intonation.
.	A period indicates falling intonation.
=	An equal sign indicates that there is no break or pause between words.
—	A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates interrupted speech.
(0.4)	Numbers in parentheses indicates the length of a pause in tenths of a second.
(.)	A period within parentheses indicates a micro-pause, usually less than 0.2 second.
?	A question mark indicates rising intonation.
<u>word</u>	Underlining indicates emphatic speech.
(word)	Single parentheses indicate that the utterance is not clearly audible and that this is the transcriber's best guess.

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