

# The Importance of Intercessory Prayer in the Christian Life

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## Introduction

Good morning and welcome to our Day of Prayer. I wish to express my profound appreciation to the Adult Faith Formation of St. Michael's Church for organizing this Day of Prayer. This is our fourth annual Day of Prayer. I thank Margarita and all the members of AFF for ensuring that we have this Day of Prayer despite the current transition at St. Michael's. I want to thank all of you for taking time to participate in this Day of Prayer.

Intercessory prayer is to the Christian life what air is to human life. Intercession is an integral part of Christian prayer. There is hardly any Christian prayer that does not include intercession. The highest prayer of the Church, namely, the Holy Mass, is laced with varied intercessions from the beginning to the end. This paper briefly underscores the place of prayer in the Christian life. It then illustrates the meaning of intercessory prayer. It further highlights the prayers of intercession/petition and calls for perseverance in intercessory prayer. This paper also shows the Blessed Virgin Mary as a model of intercession and the saints as our fervent intercessors.

## Prayer in the Christian Life

Prayer is the live-wire of the Christian life; it is the gateway to the spiritual life; it is the best way to communicate with God. Prayer is our best weapon in the spiritual life; prayer is a well-oiled machine of the Christian life. It is inconceivable to think of the Christian life without prayer. It is through prayer that the Christian deepens his or her relationship with God. Just as the Word of God has tremendous impact in the spiritual life of a Christian, so is prayer; prayer is inexhaustible. We pray every day and yet we cannot say we have prayed enough. Prayer is the hunger and desire to be with God, stay with God, communicate with God, and be attuned to God's presence in one's life. It is through a consistent prayer life that we become at peace with ourselves and God.

## The meaning of intercessory prayer

Intercessory prayer means to ask a favour from God on behalf of others. It is very important to pray beyond oneself for others. Oftentimes, we promise people of our prayers, and at other times we pray for people without their knowledge. At times, we ask people to pray for us. In fact, we are moved daily to intercede for the varied material and spiritual needs of people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has aptly illustrated the indispensable nature of intercessory prayer: 'In intercession, he who prays looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others," even to the point of praying for those who do him harm' (CCC 2635).

## The prayer of petition and intercession

The prayer of petition or supplication is closely linked to intercessory prayer. The prayer of petition is to ask for favour from God for self. Oftentimes, we pray for our individual needs. Intercession and petition are intertwined, and are like two sides of a coin. We see both in the Old Testament and New Testament the expressions of the prayers of petition and intercession. For example,

Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33). Moses repeatedly interceded for the people of Israel and God answered him. King David asked God to forgive him his sins. The Psalms are primarily hymns to praise of God, but they are also filled with countless intercessory prayers.

In the New Testament, there are several instances of intercessory prayers when individuals sought favour from Jesus for other people. It is worth pointing out that the majority of the healings of Jesus Christ in the scriptures were as a result of the intercession of other people. People came to Jesus and pleaded with him to heal their sick and afflicted. For example, the centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant who was ill (Mt 8:5-13); the Canaanite woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter (Mt 15:21-28); Jairus, who was the president of the synagogue, pleaded with Jesus to come to heal his daughter (Lk 8:40, 49-56); the paralytic was carried by four men to Jesus for healing (Mk 2:1-12), etc. Other times, individuals asked Jesus directly for one favour or the other. For example, Bartimeus the blind beggar shouted at Jesus calling him 'Son of David,' and requested Jesus to restore his sight (Mk 10:46-52). Bartimeus' request is a prayer of petition or supplication.

Evidently, the prayer of petition/intercession is very necessary because it is through prayer that we channel our needs to God. After all, Jesus invites us: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Mt 7:7). Many persons say that Mt 7:7 is their favourite scripture passage. It should be noted that as important as intercessory prayer, it is not the only form of prayer. Other forms of prayer include adoration, thanksgiving, blessing, praise, offering, etc.

As I pointed out in my book, DEEPENING OUR FAITH JOURNEY: A Resource for Ongoing Spiritual Renewal, p. 6:

- "While, it is absolutely necessary to pray for our needs, *prayer must not and should not be reduced to only the prayer of petition*. If in a human relationship, you go to your loved one only when you need something, then it is evident that such a relationship is not a healthy one. Similarly, if we come to God only when we need something, then something is not right in our relationship with God.... Thus, praying should be a pattern of life for Christians. The importance of prayer in the spiritual life should be perceived in the same way as the importance of food, water, clothing, shelter, and the air we breathe for our bodily sustenance."

### **Praying continually and the prayer of petition/intercession**

Our Lord enjoins us to pray continually and never lose heart (Lk 18:1). How does this injunction of our Lord apply to the prayer of petition and intercession? Does it mean that we should keep asking God for our needs until God grants them? Does it mean we should pester God until he grants us what we want? Some persons have used Jesus' parable of the widow and unjust judge (Lk 18:1-8) to illustrate the need to keep asking God for a favour until God grants it. They say that they constantly challenged God until God granted them their request. They conclude that because they never relented in their prayer of petition/intercession, God became faithful, and granted them their need. It is worth asking: Can we really challenge God to grant us our need? Can we bend God to grant us our need? Can we bend God's will to our human will?

It should be stated that there is no unanswered prayer of petition/intercession. God answers all prayers. Sometimes, the answer is positive, negative, or delayed. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, says: “For, as the rain and snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth....so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do” (Isaiah 55:10-11). Similarly, there is no prayer of petition/intercession to God that returns unanswered. All intercessory prayers are answered according to God’s will and plan.

To pray constantly with regard to the prayer of petition /intercession requires presenting our needs before God and leaving them with God. An intention should be prayed for as regularly as one can. Even if it appears the prayer has not yet been answered, one should continue to repeat it to God. But one becomes more at peace with self if one can add to the prayer, ‘Lord, let your will be done.’ There are some prayers that we can say have been answered in the affirmative while for others we just have to keep praying. For example, the prayer of a single person for a life partner is answered when the person gets married. Also, one who prays before a job interview knows his prayer is answered based on the result of the interview. Furthermore, one who embarks on a journey and prays for safe travel thanks God on arrival at his or her final destination for answered prayer.

However, does it mean one’s prayer is not answered when one does not get the job one applied for? Some persons are angry at God, and even stop praying altogether, when their request is not granted by God. It should not be so. Our faith requires us to persevere in prayer. For our part, there are times that we might have prayed and our prayers were seemingly not answered. For example, prayer for the healing of sick person and the person dies instead; also, praying for a particular favour such as employment or promotion or success in an interview/examination and it did not happen. Despite those bitter experiences in intercessory prayer, we should never give up in our prayers of intercession and petition. God knows best our future and would make our future even much better than what we had originally asked for.

### **Perseverance in intercessory prayer**

Our Lord uses the parable of *The importunate friend* (Lk 11:5-8) to illustrate perseverance in prayer. This perseverance has to do specifically with intercessory prayer. Oftentimes the meaning of a parable is in the similarity. But in this instance, the meaning of this parable is in the *contrast*. This parable shows that if persistence could make this man to grant the request of his friend for bread at night, despite the obvious inconvenience, how much more will God grant the request of those who cried to him? Jesus said: “If you then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Lk 11:13).

Similarly, the parable of *the unscrupulous judge and the importunate widow* (Lk 18:1-8), commonly referred to as the parable of the unjust judge, illustrates perseverance in prayer. During the time of our Lord, there were paid magistrates appointed by either Herod or the Romans. These judges had a tendency to be corrupt and pervert justice. People bribed them to get justice in their favour. The widow in this parable represents the poor and defenseless in society who could not afford to bribe a judge. The widow who was poor, had no chance of getting justice from such a corrupt judge. But this widow had a great weapon in persistence. The widow’s persistence finally paid off when the judge granted her justice for fear of being subjected to violence.

The meaning of both parables lies in the *contrast*. The unjust judge certainly does not represent God; instead, it portrays the contrast between God and the judge. As William Barclay puts it: ‘Jesus was saying, “If, in the end, an unjust and rapacious judge can be wearied into giving a widow justice, how much more will God, who is a loving Father, give his children what they need”’ (THE DAILY STUDY BIBLE: the GOSPEL of Luke, p. 222).

The two parables above do not mean that we should pester God until God grants our request. Our prayer of intercession does not change God but it changes us. Through our prayer of intercession and petition, we come to accept God’s will and learn to let go; we learn to hand over everything to God and be ready to accept any outcome to our prayer as God’s will. Our Lord enjoins us, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Lk 11:9). This injunction of Jesus Christ encourages us to pray continually without being discouraged. Although God always answers us, it does not mean that God will grant us everything we ask for. As noted earlier, there is no unanswered prayer. The answer given may not be what we desired or expected. Even if nothing has changed after our prayer of intercession and petition, the prayer is still answered in the sense that our minds and hearts would have changed. We may have come to accept it as God’s will. Our eyes open up and we look at things differently after spending time in prayer. Hence, we should strive to seek God’s will in prayer and God will grant our prayers beyond our imagination.

Perseverance in prayer can be likened to depositing money in the Bank. Such deposit will be helpful some day in the future. God is like a father or mother who refuses what a child asks for, because they know it will hurt the child. We do not know the future but God does. Thus, it is only God who knows what is good for us in the long run. That is why the Lord Jesus asks us to pray continually and never lose heart (Lk 18:1). We should never grow weary in our prayer of intercession and petition. Hence, after we have offered all our prayers and requests to God, we should add that may God’s will be done. As long as we seek the face of God, God will grant us our intercessory prayers. If God is first in our lives, we are sure that God will always answer our prayers, even if things do not turn out exactly as we had hoped for. We should find solace in the words of our Lord: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well” (Mt 6:33).

Pope emeritus, Benedict XVI, echoes the need for us not to be discouraged in prayer since God answers all prayers:

- “Many times we ask God to deliver us from physical and spiritual evil ... however, we often have the impression that He doesn’t hear us and we run the risk of becoming discouraged and of not persevering. In reality, there is no human cry that God does not hear. ... God the Father’s answer to His Son was not the immediate freedom from suffering, from the cross, or from death: through the cross and His death, God answered with the Resurrection” (VATICAN CITY, MAY 30, 2012, VIS).

## The Blessed Virgin Mary as our intercessor

Our Blessed Mother is our great intercessor. A classic example was our Blessed Mother's intercession at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. As I noted in my book UNDERSTANDING AND PRAYING THE HOLY ROSARY: With Other Reflections on the Blessed Virgin Mary, p.33:

- “Mary asks for this singular favour on behalf of some friends in need. Mary is sensitive to their needs. She is the first to notice that the wine has finished. She sees that they need more wine. She decides to ask her Son a favour on their behalf. ... She intercedes for us regularly. She hands our needs over to Jesus her Son. Mary is very affectionate and as our mother, she is not only aware of our needs, but she presents them to her Son. She notices our needs and hands them over to her Son. She trusts and believes that the response of her Son will always be what is good for us. Hence Mary continues to exhort us as she did at Cana: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). If Mary interceded for people at the wedding in Cana who did not ask for her intercession, how much more will she intercede for us who constantly ask for her intercession in our prayers.”

In addition, the saints are also our intercessors. In our prayers, we continually invoke the intercession of the saints.

## Conclusion

Prayer is our greatest weapon as Christians. Hence, we should be tireless in our intercessory prayers. There are times when some people are incapable of praying for themselves. Our intercessory prayers become invaluable when offered for such people. We should continually intensify our intercession for others in our prayers. Invariably, we have at some point in our lives benefitted immensely from the intercession of others. By and large, we should persevere in our intercessory prayers. Let us not give up when our prayers are apparently not answered favourably by God. Undoubtedly, God knows best. Through prayer, we place ourselves in God's hands and we believe that God will always take care of us through *thick and thin*. Through prayer, we trust that God will hold us in the palm of his hands.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary intercede for us and our families, both now and forever! Amen.

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