

WHAT
SHOULD WE
REALLY
PRAY FOR?

A Catholic Guide
to Prayer of Petition

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INTRODUCTION

“Our Thoughts and Prayers”

A Serious Commitment

WE OFTEN TELL PEOPLE THAT WE WILL PRAY FOR THEM or that they will be in our thoughts and prayers. This can mean several different things. When we are truly sincere, it almost always means we have come to a sense of our helplessness and mortality. We are turning to God for assistance. At the other end of the spectrum, this is a polite way to exit a scene when our concern is minimal. In between, there are various degrees of discomfort that reflect our true feelings.

When we make a commitment to pray for someone or some cause or issue, we are taking on a serious responsibility. We seldom think about it in those terms.

What exactly are we doing when we are engaging in the prayer of petition? Are we trying to give an all-knowing God a 9-1-1 call? Of course, God is aware of the specific situation with an infinitely deeper clarity and depth than we could ever have. Are we trying to get God to raise the intensity of divine love and compassion? God's love for every human being is already without limits. There is no thermostat on God's love that allows us to turn up the intensity. Are we trying to change God's mind to be more open to our point of view? That, of course, puts us in charge. God is seen as a butler waiting for our summons. This caricature of prayer is too often the common practice. Then there are the times where our continual pleading seems to be based on a strong hope that we will wear God down with our persistence. Our strong resolution in prayer needs to be based on God's faithfulness and mercy.

Exploring Prayer of Petition

I would like to share a personal story as an example of the teachings on prayer.

From my earliest moment of consciousness prayer was part of my life. My Irish immigrant mother filled the house with phrases like “Sweet Jesus,” “Holy Mother of God,” “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” and the like. Mass on Sunday was as normal as breakfast in the morning. The same prayerful atmosphere permeated my school, St. Laurence, on the South Side of Chicago.

Then, in fourth grade, I came to the first of many crises

with prayer. I was beginning a journey of growth that continues to this day. Prayer may appear simple and beautiful. Over time I came to learn that it is also complex and demanding.

It was 1944 in the fall. Our fourth-grade teacher, Sister Julia Anne, had us pray three Hail Marys each day of that week for Notre Dame to defeat Army on Saturday. Since we believed God was Catholic, we supposed that this great Catholic university was also God's favorite team. When they lost 59-0 I had a serious problem. What kind of God would let our prayer for his team go unanswered, and at 59-0? That was just too much for my fourth-grade mind and heart to handle. It was going to take a great deal of life's journey for me to learn that I had the problem and not God.

Slowly, I got over the immediate crisis. However, the seeds of doubt and confusion were planted. Nevertheless, I continued to pray but with a little more wariness about an easy fix from on high.

Eight years later I had a more mature experience of the complexity of prayer. My passion in life was football. I was quarterback and co-captain on the Mt. Carmel team. My prayer was to beat St. Leo, the great obstacle to a fourth consecutive city championship. Each day for more than six months, I prayed three Hail Marys for victory over the Leo Lions.

On the day of the game in early November, not only did we win, but I threw the winning TD pass in the final minutes.

However, there was a small problem in my heavenly scenario. Earlier we had lost to De LaSalle, the only loss to this school in what was to turn out to be a forty-year span. This meant we had to play St. Leo again to break the tie and go on to the championship game. In the playoff game against Leo, we lost in the last minute.

I went into a deep desolation for several months. In the eighth grade I had thought about the seminary. This was quickly buried in my heart by my dreams of glory in football. Then one day walking home from school, in this period of darkness, God gave me the real answer to my prayers. The idea of the seminary was not buried deep enough. A small light at the end of the tunnel finally broke through my gloom. I decided to join the Carmelites. I entered the seminary the following fall. This proved to be one of the most significant decisions in my life. This was my invitation into “the Jesus game,” where you often win by losing when it comes to prayer: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will save it” (Lk 14:35).

These two incidents help us see that prayer is not an easy topic to discern. When I was in fourth grade, we were in the midst of the Second World War, in which fifty million people lost their lives. I am sure we prayed for peace in our classroom, but I do not remember it. Likewise, at that time, my brother John, just four months out of Mt. Carmel High

School, was in very dangerous circumstances in the Pacific. It would seem God had different priorities than my excitement for Notre Dame. My life's journey would teach me that as our prayer matures, we have to get in touch with God's priorities.

With the perspective of time, the message of this prayer story is the growth from seeing prayer as magical to real prayer. There is a transition from myself as the center to the lifelong struggle to put God at the center. There always seems to be an encounter with the darkness of confusion and pain that slowly opens up to light as we mature in prayer.

As we move forward to try to delve into the complexity of the prayer of petition, we would do well to first consider how our culture is a major hindrance to all kinds of prayer.

Our Culture as an Obstacle to Prayer

As a newly arrived and poorly informed immigrant in the exploding world of social media, I am going to use a more comfortable source, the evening news, as a vehicle for looking into our culture and the prayer of petition. There are two points I want to make. First of all, the evening news portrays prayer as shallow and truly inconsequential. Second, the evening news portrays success in our society quite forcefully. Prayer has a minimal role in this obvious and powerful lesson.

When the news encounters true experiences of our mortality, there never is any depth in the coverage. The mass shootings, the gang violence, the ravaging fires, the hurri-

canes and tornadoes all fall into a shallow ritual of coverage. The deeper issues are not addressed. There is never any sense that we are being exposed to the mystery of good and evil that clearly points out our mutual mortality.

The sense of prayer is almost always in some memorial of flowers and candles with the names of the victims. The survivors are presented in their anguish but very seldom in the true reality of their coming face to face with the deepest human reality, good and evil. They never address death as an integral part of life. Most often, there seems to be a rush to get to the weather and sports.

On a second level, the evening news carries a message of success. This dimension of the news is a much more powerful impediment to prayer. This norm of success pervades the news, the programs, and especially the advertising. True success involves the person who is in control, one who is able to acquire an endless amount of goods and products. The successful person achieves their goal. They amass an ever-expanding condition of independence. This relentless proclamation seeks to drive away any sense of morality and human frailty. The good guys never lose and never die. True happiness is right around the corner with the next purchase, which will guarantee a happiness almost without end. Prayer has little consequence in this authoritative and constant call to the good life.

The gospel message presents a radical alternative to the consumer society's good life. Simplicity, openness, acceptance,

humility, compassion, and boundaries of inclusion that do not seem to end are some of the evangelical values that stand in harsh contrast to the success story that dominates our culture.

Prayer of Petition and Spiritual Maturity

The promise to pray for someone is a serious responsibility. We are entering a mystery where we recognize our helplessness in the hands of an all-loving and merciful God. Too often, our promise to pray is a shallow commitment. Much more often than not, the depth of our relationship to the person or situation we are addressing in our prayer determines the intensity and consistency of our prayer. The closer they are to us, the more authentic the prayer. The gospel is always about expanding the horizons of our concern. This is especially relevant in the object of our prayer.

God is patient with us. God's presence in life has a way of drawing us into a developing relationship with God. As our awareness of God grows, so too does the awareness of our self. Both our sinfulness and God's mercy slowly surface in our consciousness as we mature spiritually. This, in turn, enlightens us to the seriousness of prayer in contrast to our frequently casual approach to it. Prayer is a serious venture. It demands a committed faith. It requires a serious personal concern on our part to avoid making it trivial. The foundation of our prayer of petition to an all-knowing and all-loving God starts out with these prerequisites:

1. We are sinful and need to be aware that all healing and freedom flow from God's mercy.
2. All prayer begins with God's initiative.
3. Our request, whether spiritual or material, worldly or heavenly, must be in accord with God's plan, the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus.
4. We must come to prayer in loving and trusting submission as creature to a compassionate Creator.
5. We must seek the attitude of Jesus in his final prayer: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

These five insights lead to a prayer that is rooted in faith and nurtured by hope and love. As we grow in our awareness of God and of ourselves—true spiritual maturity—a fundamental insight slowly rises to the surface. Whatever we ask for in our prayer of petition must find its true meaning as part of God's overall plan of salvation. Our petitions have to fit into God's design, which is based on love and mercy without limit. God's providence is well beyond the confines of our human comprehension. This is why even the simplest of petitions in our prayer is rooted in the sacred and transcendent. Prayer is a serious activity.

These five elements help our prayer make sense in light of

an all-knowing and all-loving God. Ultimately, all true prayer has to fit into God's plans, and then, into our plans. In this context, we can begin to address the mystery of our suffering and loss in our unanswered petitions for very good things such as health, security, reconciliation, freedom from addiction, and so many others. Here we find ourselves in the great mystery of life: suffering and death and a continual experience of all the consequences of the original sin. This is the stuff of the crisis of the emergency room, the disturbing news in the doctor's office, and the meeting in the funeral parlor, where the limits of our broken human condition are raw and naked. Death is not only a remote possibility; it is staring us in the face. These are the circumstances where the magical god of our superficial wants and wishes gives way to the God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. When our prayer of petition is not rooted in faith in this God, our prayer gradually slips more toward the magical. This gradual shift, which leads us to put ourselves at the center, will come up empty when the inevitable reality of our mortality rises to the fore.

It is also critical to remember that we come to God in prayer as we are: broken and sinful. We do not need to be saints or theologians to pray. God has a way of connecting to our sincerity no matter how simple or confused it may be. Pope Francis has this insight on God's availability to our prayer: "God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, and

in a vague and haphazard manner” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 71).

The only way we can pray is from the concrete and historical situation that is our daily experience. True prayer, emerging from our bewilderment and ignorance, is a simple and beautiful expression of our dependence on God. We are recognizing our limits. We are standing face to face with the deepest truth of our being: a humble sinner accepted and loved by a gracious God. It truly does not matter if our prayer is answered in our terms. More important is a deeper truth: God is God and we are the sinful creature both loved and forgiven. In our prayer, we come to know ourselves as truly in the need of God’s mercy and providential care.

In the next section I am going to delve into both the complexity and beauty of the prayer of petition. Then, in section three, I will present the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father, as the most fitting model of the prayer of petition.

FOR PRAYERFUL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. *Why is saying, “I will pray for you” taking on a serious responsibility? How might we put our prayer into action?*
2. *What is the difference between a magical approach to prayer and a mature approach to prayer?*
3. *What is the most challenging of the five elements of prayer of petition? What is the most freeing?*