



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 4, 2013 C

Reflections

Prayer of Petition - Part 2

The Problem of Unanswered Prayer

The following is another chapter from my book, *Prayer—A Handbook for Today's Catholic*.

*O Lord, hear my prayer;
hearken to my pleading in your faithfulness;
in your justice answer me.* (Psalm 143:1)

“Jesus Christ has promised that whatever we ask the Father in his name, the Father will give us. But he does so, always with the understanding that we ask under the proper conditions.” (St. Alphonsus Liguori)

A very definite cause of alienation from and frustration with God is that we sometimes perceive him as uncaring because he doesn't answer our prayers. This is particularly true when our requests are very close to our heart—such as holding a marriage together, healing a parent of cancer, and similar problems. There does not seem to be a definite or perfect answer to the problem of unanswered prayer, but it is possible to offer some insights on this difficult question. Barbara Gawle, in her book, *How to Pray*, describes the conditions that interfere with our prayers. She maintains that some of our prayers remain unanswered because the spiritual circuit between God and us somehow becomes broken. This can be seen from our viewpoint (the way we block communication with God) and from God's viewpoint (the way God in his wisdom views the situation). (Much of what follows has been gleaned from Barbara Gawle's book.)

Four reasons why our prayers go unanswered

There are countless reasons why—from the human viewpoint—our prayers go unanswered. Here are four of them:

We pray with an unforgiving heart. The little boy who prayed, “Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put their trash in our baskets,” had the wrong words but the right idea. When we put our trash in other people's baskets, we not only alienate ourselves from them but also from God who loves them very much. In Mark, Jesus proclaims: *“When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance”* (Mark 11:25), and again: *“If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall*

that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). These sayings of Jesus clearly point out how important it is to go to God with a forgiving heart, or at least with a heart that desires to forgive.

We ask wrongly. *“You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly”* (James 4:3). What are some examples of asking wrongly? We might pray for a job and not get it. The reason is not God but the simple fact that we don't have the skills for the job. Again, we might ask God to get us through a particular exam. We fail the exam and get upset with God. The reason we failed was because we didn't sufficiently study for it. When our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears, we might ask ourselves if our action—or lack thereof—is to be blamed.

We lack faith and persistence. Deep down we may not really believe that God is interested in our request and that he wants to help us. Or perhaps we ask for something one time and fail to persevere in prayer. St. Monica had to pray many years before her son, Augustine, turned to God.

We fail to do our part. Failure to do our part is another reason why our prayers go unanswered. We might pray for a resolution of some personal conflict but are unwilling to admit our own wrong in the relationship. We might ask God to bless our worship service but we do little or nothing to prepare for it by creating the kind of conditions that facilitate God's action. While God sometimes helps us when we can't help ourselves, he certainly expects us to help ourselves (and others) when possible. As the old saying goes, *“We must pray as if all depended on God and act as if all depended on ourselves.”*

Two reasons why God may not answer our prayers

Besides the four *human* reasons for unanswered prayers, there are also *divine* reasons, two of which are given below:

God's ways are not always our ways. In the Book of Isaiah, God tells us: *“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways”* (Isaiah 55:8). In the ebb and flow of our lives, God sometimes *“writes straight with crooked lines”* or works in strange ways. What might seem to be a ‘No’ to us might be a ‘Yes’ from God. God

may deny our literal request but actually grant us the deeper, perhaps unconscious desires of our heart. We might have a particular goal and our own ideas on how to attain it. God may help us to reach our goal but in ways we have never thought of.

Father Basil Pennington, in his *Ways of Prayer*, writes:

God will give us whatever we want, asking in prayer—what we truly want, not what we say we want or even think we want. God listens to the heart, not to the lips. He knows, too, how limited is our understanding and knowledge. He sees our truest desires and knows how they can best be fulfilled. And this is what he grants. We may not see it at the moment, but we will in time.... If God seems to be saying “No” to some prayers, it is because he is saying “Yes” to the deepest prayer of our hearts.

When St. Paul asked God to take away his thorn in the flesh, God said ‘No’ but only in order that he could say ‘Yes’ to a deeper desire of Paul, namely, to experience the power of God in his being (see 2Corinthians 12:7-10). Another example of how God sometimes says ‘No’ to one’s prayer in order to grant a deeper desire, is found in the prayer of a man whose wife was killed in an accident. Although his daughter also died and he himself went blind, he was still able to address God in this magnificent way:

I asked for health,
so that I could do great things for you.
You gave me sickness,
so that I could do greater things.
I asked for riches,
so that I could be happy.
You gave me poverty,
so that I could be really wise.
I asked for strength,
so that I could fight for you.
You gave me weakness,
so that I could rely on you.
I got none of the things I asked for,
but all the things I hoped for.
(Author Unknown)

God’s timing differs from our timing. When God’s timing does not jibe with ours, we may think he is refusing our prayer. Eventually, however, we realize that God knew best after all.

A few years ago, I had a personal experience of the wisdom and giftedness of God’s timing in contrast to mine. In October 1985, I applied to become a pastor of another parish. Once I had made my formal request, I became anxious, for various reasons, to move as soon as possible. According to the normal way that personnel changes happen in our diocese, I should already have been

installed in my new parish by the end of October. But due to certain circumstances, my appointment was not formalized until the middle of December. The waiting was agonizing for me. It was very difficult to continue functioning in one place when my mind and emotions were already someplace else.

During these same weeks, I was engaged in writing the first draft of this book—a stage that demanded much time and concentration as I tried to collect materials from many different sources. So, while I waited for my new appointment, I had more time than usual to write. As each week went by, I found myself in the paradoxical and humorous position of feeling frustrated with God for not making my transfer happen faster, but also feeling very grateful to him for giving me the time to collect resource materials for each new section of the book.

I was particularly thankful when I realized that I would have much less time to write as I became more and more involved in my new parish. If God had moved according to my schedule, I might never have completed this book, or I certainly would not have finished it as soon as I did. The bottom line is that everything involves growing in the ability to trust in Divine Providence and to have faith that God is working out all things for the best (see Romans 8:28). “The Weaver” beautifully sums up all that has been said here about God’s ways and our ways:

My life is but a weaving
between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.
Ofttimes He weaveth sorrow,
and I in foolish pride
forget He sees the upper,
and I, the underside.
Not till the loom is silent
and the shuttles cease to fly,
shall God unroll the canvas
and explain the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful
in the Weaver’s skillful hand
as the threads of gold and silver
in the pattern He has planned.
(Author Unknown)

Reflection questions

1. What insight in these pages made the greatest impression on you?
2. Have you ever had the experience of realizing that “God’s timing” was better than your own?
3. What helps you to deal with the problem of unanswered prayer?
4. Recall a recent example of God answering your prayer. Was it answered in the exact way you asked?
5. Did you disagree with or have trouble understanding any part of this section?

Some of my favorite prayers

A couple of years ago, I assembled together a Book of Prayers by saints and other holy people. The following are some of my favorite ones.

Prayer for Guidance

Grant me, Lord,
to know what I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to praise what delights you most,
to value what is precious in your sight,
to hate what is offensive to you.
Do not allow me to judge according to
appearances, nor to pass sentence following
the judgment of the ignorant,
but to discern with true judgment between things
visible and spiritual,
and, above all things, to seek to know what is
the good pleasure of your will. Amen.
Thomas à Kempis

Prayer to Radiate Christ

Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere
I go today;
Flood my soul with your spirit and life;
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that
all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I
come in contact with may feel your presence
in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me, but only
Jesus! Amen.
Blessed John Newman

When Feeling Spiritually Dry

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and
restlessness, there is a consoling thought:
maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot
yet feel, experience or understand.
My mind is not able to concentrate on you; my
heart is not able to remain centered, and it
seems as if you are absent and have left me
alone.
But in faith I cling to you.
I believe that your Spirit reaches deeper and
further than my mind or heart, and that
profound movements are not the first to be
noticed.
Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not
give up, not stop praying, even when it all
seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time
and effort.

I want to let you know that I love you even though I
do not feel loved by you, and that I hope in you
even though I often experience despair;
let this be a little dying I can do with you and for
you as a way of experiencing some solidarity
with the millions in this world
who suffer far more than I do. Amen.
Fr. Henri Nouwen

Prayer before Meditation

Give me a candle of your Spirit, O God,
as I go down into the depth of my own being.
Show me the hidden things.
Take me down to the spring of my life, and tell me
my nature and my name.
Give me freedom to grow so that I may become
my true self—the fulfillment of the seed which
you planted in me at my making.
Out of the deep I cry unto thee, O God. Amen.
George Appleton

Openness to God's Will

Lord, I do not know what to ask of you.
You alone know what are my true needs.
You love me more than I myself know how to love.
Help me to see my real needs which are concealed
from me.
I do not ask for either a cross or a consolation;
I can only wait for you.
My heart is open to you.
Visit and help me; cast me down and raise me up.
I worship in silence your holy will and your
inscrutable ways.
I offer myself as a sacrifice to you.
I put all my trust in you.
I have no desire other than to fulfill your will.
Teach me how to pray.
Pray you yourself in me. Amen.
Philaret of Moscow

The above book of Treasury of Prayers is available on
this website.

Have a prayerful week,

