



## Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 28, 2013 C

### Reflections

#### Prayer of Petition - Part 1

In our first reading and Gospel today, we have people petitioning God for help. The following is a chapter from a book on prayer that I wrote in the mid-80's. With humility, I say that I found it helpful to reread this chapter on a topic that is mysterious in its very nature. I hope you find this reflection helpful as well.

*The power of prayer to obtain graces does not depend on our merits but on the mercy of God. But the graces that we ask for must be graces related to our eternal welfare. We may ask for temporal goods, but they must be asked for only on the condition that they will be of benefit to our souls. (Saint Alphonsus Liguori)*

While we may never understand *how* the *Prayer of Petition* works, it is legitimate for the curious-minded among us to probe the mystery of *petitionary prayer* so that we can live with it a little more intelligently and a little less anxiously. One helpful insight comes from an article by William Whalen in the September 1983 issue of U.S. Catholic.

*The prayer of petition is part of God's plan for his people. When we say that God answers prayers we do not mean that prayer can cause God to change his mind. God has made the whole world and governs it with his providence. Everything that occurs in the world takes place according to his plan. But it is part of God's plan that certain gifts will be given to people only in answer to prayer. We pray not to change God's plans, but in order to receive from God those things which he has planned to give us in answer to our prayers.*

Our daily experiences seem to bear out the basic truth of this statement. There are some gifts we give to others without their asking. Other gifts we give only when we are asked. In waiting to act in response to our prayers or until we petition him, God is allowing us to participate in our own salvation and the salvation of others. Also, the purpose of *petitionary prayer* is not to inform God of our needs but rather to inform ourselves. *Petitionary prayer* deepens our awareness of how much we need God at every moment of our lives. When we pray in this way, we

can always expect some change in ourselves if not in the external circumstances which prompted our prayers. We can always expect God to give us the strength to deal with the circumstances of our lives even if he does not change them. This seemingly was the experience of the authors of the following Psalms:

*When I called, you answered me;  
you built up strength within me. (Psalm 138:3)*

*When I call out to the Lord,  
he answers me from his holy mountain. (Psalm 3:5)*

We should never become so sophisticated in our spiritual life to feel that *petitionary prayer* is beneath us. To believe this is to imply that we have outgrown our need for God. We will always need the *prayer of petition* because it behooves us to express our dependence on God. Of course, as we mature in prayer and learn to trust more in God's inscrutable ways, our attitude toward *petitionary prayer* will change. It will become more God-centered and less self-centered.

#### Proper attitudes for petitionary prayer

There are two important attitudes to bring to the *prayer of petition*. First, we must believe that God is certainly interested in our prayer and, second, we must realize that the *primary* purpose of the *prayer of petition* is to deepen our relationship with God.

**Awareness of God's interest.** When we petition God in prayer, we are not trying to contact someone who already has a full "case load" and is therefore not interested in "another case." God is present, active, and intensely interested in all of his creation. He is the Origin (and the Sustainer) of all things, drawing and guiding all to their Omega point. Creation—of which we are part—is God's big project. God is passionately concerned that it evolves and develops according to his plan. About this plan, Saint Paul tells us:

*He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ.... He has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth. (Ephesians 1:4-5, 9:10)*

In our vulnerable and weak moments, we may doubt and even disbelieve God's interest in creation. Often, it may seem to us that God is on a "long vacation," or "off duty," or frequently "out to lunch." When we think such human thoughts, we should reinforce our faith with the knowledge that God has already proven his passionate interest in us in the most radical way possible—through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Perhaps the best proof of God's love for us is that "while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Hence, the burden is not on God to prove his interest in us; the burden is on us to believe in a truth that has already been proven in no uncertain way. The truth is very important for us to believe when it comes to prayer. It should help us to relax and gently make known our needs to God, trusting in his interest just as we would trust in the interest of a good friend.

**Realization of our primary purpose.** A closer relationship with God is the primary purpose of our *petitionary prayer*. The Garden of Gethsemane was the scene of Jesus' prayer of petition. In Mark 14:36, Jesus asked his Father to preserve his life, to "take this cup away from me" —a very legitimate request. Yet, one thing was of greater priority for Jesus: his relationship with his Father. He came to do his Father's will: "Not what I will but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

Behind every prayer should be the sincere hope that we will, above all else, deepen our relationship with God. When we view the *prayer of petition* in this way, we can say that no prayer goes unanswered. Every *prayer of petition* should be invoked in the context of our overall relationship with God. The implication is that our *prayers of petition* ought to be viewed in terms of how they will affect our relationship with God.

For example, if we seek a better salary—a legitimate desire—we should be concerned that extra funds will not diminish our relationship with God or make us less sensitive to the poor. If we pray for career advancement, we need to keep in mind that in God's design, any such change may not help our relationship with him or be good for our family life. While it is legitimate to ask God for what is good in life, we should always see such benefits in the larger context of how they will affect our relationship with him—the greatest Good of all. **On the spiritual journey, the only absolute good is God and his will;** all else, even health, is relative to our relationship with him. As we become more mature, we should seek and praise God's holy will and submit to it unconditionally. Such attitude will be our greatest help in dealing with so-called unanswered prayers.

In contrast, there are those whose only motivation is to get what *they* want—with little or no concern that their desires might get in the way of their relationship with God. This attitude is evident in some people whose petition for physical healing may have been answered, yet their spiritual relationship with God remains unchanged. Their main focus is on the gift they expect to receive and not on God, the great Giver. There is interest in the Giver only insofar as the Giver has the capacity to grant the seeker's wish. In short, when we take our supplications to God, our overriding concern should be how the granting or denial of our requests might affect our relationship with the Lord.

### What to pray for

**First,** we should pray that our primary concern is God and our *fidelity to his will*. All else is relative and need not be our concern. "Include my heart according to your will, O Lord" is a prayer that should frequently be on our lips. In this *prayer of petition*, we are asking God to draw our whole being into line with his plan for us.

**Second,** we should ask God to help each of us to become the *unique and original person we were created to be*—a wondrous manifestation of God's truth, goodness, and beauty in the world. Our deepest and most authentic fulfillment in life is discovering and becoming that unique person. Here, our prayer should be something like this: "Lord, help me to discover and become what you created me to be, and help me to resist any temptation to try to be a carbon copy of anyone else."

**Third,** since all of us have a particular vocation in life (married, religious, single) and a particular calling with duties and responsibilities, we should pray frequently that God will help us to be faithful to our particular vocation and duties in life. This means responding to the daily challenges of our life situation in a creative and positive way, despite the temptation to resist or withdraw.

Finally, it is interesting to note that our prayer requests can reveal much about our image of God, of self, and our relationship with God. For example, if we don't dare pray for the seemingly impossible things in life, is it because we think that God can't handle such requests? If we rarely make small requests such as, "Lord, help me to find a parking space," is it because we think God is too busy for such petty stuff? If we rarely pray for ourselves because we think it is selfish, does this reveal poor self-image? Do we think that we don't deserve God's attention? If our prayer is primarily dominated by *petitionary prayer*, what might this say about our relationship with God?

Have a prayerful week,

*Le Saran*