

Petitionary Prayer and the Difference It Makes

July 24, 2016

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time**By Rev. Peter Ryan, S.J. and Janis Clarke**Readings: Genesis 18.20-32;
Colossians 2.12-14;
Luke 11.1-13

Theology, according to St. Anselm, is faith seeking understanding. If well done, it is a great gift, for when we grasp the significance of our faith we tend to treasure it more and live it with greater zeal. Poor theology, however, has the toxic effect of distorting and even undermining faith. This is evident when we consider the theological objections some have raised against the idea of petitionary prayer. A skeptic might object, for example, “Why should we ask God for what we need? If God knows everything, he doesn’t need us to tell him what we need.” A skeptic might further object, “If God is all-loving and all-powerful, he wants and is able to give us what we need whether we ask for it or not. So, what’s the point of asking?”

This “skeptic” could be another person or our own thoughts proposed by the enemy to keep us from reaping the blessings that come from persevering in prayer for what we need. The Evil One, well aware of the importance of petitionary prayer to help us grow closer to the Triune God, works through bad theology to sow seeds of doubt. By contrast, God works through good theology to ground us in truth, expose the lie of the enemy, and confirm our faith.

Whoever Asks, Receives

Before we answer the skeptic’s questions, let’s consider scripture. Today’s gospel tells us that “Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’” Picture the scene. Jesus is absorbed in prayer, and his friends are deeply moved at the sight. The Master himself, the miracle worker and teacher, is pouring out his heart to his Father, and his disciples are deeply impressed. Jesus clearly recognizes that to accomplish his mission, he must call on the Father from the depths of his human heart, and he teaches his disciples to do the same. He reveals that his Father is their Father by inviting them to call God “Our Father,” and he encourages them to pray that petition-filled prayer.

Jesus goes on to assure his disciples – and us – that whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; and to whoever knocks, the door shall be opened. This assurance is an invitation to call on God for what we need and to expect results. Jesus also emphasizes the importance of persevering in prayer by noting that if a man not motivated by friendship will respond to the persistent requests of his friend, then surely the Lord, our truest friend, will respond when we beseech him persistently in prayer.

History confirms the importance of asking God for what we need by showing us time and again how things that had been going in a very bad direction changed when people stood in the gap and prayed with faith for divine help. The battle of Lepanto, which took place on October 7, 1571, is a classic example. The Islamic world had been growing ever stronger, and at Lepanto the naval forces of the Ottoman Turks greatly outnumbered those of the Christians aligned against them. Realizing that a Muslim victory would mean the demise of Christendom, Pope Pius V called on the whole Christian world to pray the rosary, and those prayers were answered with a stunning victory. The pope established October 7 as the Feast of Our Lady of Victory, which was later changed to the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary.

God works miracles in answer to prayer. This is evident not only in the Acts of the Apostles but throughout history, and it continues today. One of the more jaw-dropping examples is that of Brother André Bessette of Montreal – now St. André – the humble porter who knew how to call upon the Lord with living faith when those who came to him were in need of healing. At the Oratory of St. Joseph, which was built by his faith and the donations of grateful pilgrims, several walls are covered with crutches left behind by the beneficiaries of St. André's prayers for healing.

Many healings have also taken place at Lourdes, where rigorous requirements must be met before a healing is declared miraculous. This is also the case with the miracles attributed to the intercession of saints before they are beatified and before they are canonized. And, of course, many people and perhaps we ourselves have had the experience, whether miraculous or not, of receiving clear answers to prayer.

So, scripture, history, and experience all attest to the truth that we should not be daunted by the skeptic's questions, but present our petitions to the Father with confidence that he will hear and answer. But we also can and should respond confidently to the skeptic's objections, for if we don't grasp the significance of our faith, we won't be motivated to live it as we should, and we'll even find it easy to abandon faith when trials come our way. So too, unless we answer the skeptic's questions, we may find ourselves adopting his skepticism when it seems that God is not answering our prayers.

The First Objection

Recall the skeptic's first objection: "God knows everything, so he doesn't need us to tell him what we need." It's true that God already knows what we need, but he nevertheless wants us to communicate our needs since he calls us into a relationship with himself, and communication is essential to any true relationship. St. Augustine adds this insight: God wants us "to exercise our desire through our prayers, so that we may be able to receive what he is preparing to give us. His gift is very great indeed, but our capacity is too small and limited to receive it. That is why we are told: Enlarge your desires." St. Catherine of Siena reaffirms that insight: "God does not always give us what we ask when we wish it, in order to increase the hunger of our desire."

Today's first reading tells us something about the relationship the Father wants us to have with him. We are presented with a conversation between God and Abraham, who doesn't understand how it could be that God would destroy Sodom and Gomorra. Abraham voices his concern: "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike!"

God does not object to Abraham's boldness in speaking with him as he does. The lesson is clear: If you don't understand, tell God about it. Talk it over with him. Give voice to your objections!

God answers every one of Abraham's questions: If there are just forty-five, or forty, or thirty, or twenty – or even only ten good men, "I will not destroy Sodom." Notice that God does not suggest that he is unwilling to go even lower. He does not tell Abraham to stop asking. It is Abraham himself who fails to see how merciful God is. Pope Francis makes a similar point that is of particular importance for us to remember during this Year of Mercy: "The Lord never gets tired of forgiving us. It is we who get tired of asking for forgiveness."

We might wonder how God could allow even one just man to die with the unjust. The New Testament, however, makes it clear that the issue is not that some are just and others unjust. Rather, all of us are in need of redemption, and the Father offers it to us through the death of Jesus, the one man who is just. St. Paul underlines this truth in his letter to the Colossians by recalling that we were buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through our baptismal faith. That is, we were dead and were brought to life in Jesus. And we are called to share his resurrection life.

The point, then, is not that there aren't enough good people. The point is that we need Jesus to *become* good. He's always ready to show us his mercy – all we have to do is ask. We'll ask more readily if we bear in mind that we are in a real relationship with the Triune God who wants to answer our prayers.

The Second Objection

Now consider the skeptic's other objection: "God is all-loving and all-powerful, so he wants and is able to give us what we need whether we ask for it or not. So, what's the point of asking?" This is easily answered. God loves us and delights in lavishing gifts upon us. It's true that he gives some gifts – most obviously, the gift of life itself – before we are able to ask for them. But because he calls us to a relationship with himself, he also wants to give us gifts in answer to our prayers, and he can't do that if we don't ask.

Moreover, God gives and withholds gifts according to what is truly good for us – according to whether giving or withholding will foster our relationship with him. For example, he may give John, a newly converted Christian, what he asks for right away in order to encourage him to continue along the path of faith. But God may not give Judy, a seasoned Christian, what she asks for – at least not right away – in order to deter her from taking him for granted and preferring the gift to the giver, and to teach her to trust him even without the gift. St. Paul tells us that when he begged the Lord three times to remove the "thorn in the flesh" that caused him great suffering, the Lord did not remove it. Instead, he answered by inviting Paul to trust in his grace through this trial, knowing that doing so would draw Paul into a deeper relationship with his Lord.

The dynamic of petitionary prayer – request, response, thanksgiving and praise, renewed request – deepens our relationship with the Triune God like nothing else, even as it draws forth many other blessings. Knowing this, Jesus is eager for us to turn to the Father for what we need, and to experience for ourselves the life-transforming difference that petitionary prayer makes.

About the Authors

Fr. Peter Ryan, S.J. is executive director of the Secretariat of Doctrine and Canonical Affairs of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Janis Clarke is a professional singer and composer with a BMus from McGill University and an MA in theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville. She is president and founder of Word for Life Rosary Mission: <http://www.rosarymission.org>.

FOR FURTHER READING

David Arias, "Does Prayer Change God's Mind?" available at: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library>

Benedict XVI, General Audiences: On Prayer, available at:
<http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/b16chrstpryr.htm>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##2629-2633, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p4s1c1a3.htm

Gary Zimak, "Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?" available at:
<http://catholicexchange.com/why-doesn%E2%80%99t-god-answer-my-prayers>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Jesus clearly recognizes that to accomplish his mission, he must call on the Father from the depths of his human heart, and he teaches his disciples to do the same.***
- ***History confirms the importance of asking God for what we need by showing us time and again that things changed when people prayed for divine help.***
- ***God already knows what we need, but he wants us to communicate our needs since he calls us into a relationship with himself.***
- ***God wants us "to exercise our desire through our prayers, so that we may be able to receive what he is preparing to give us."***
- ***God gives and withholds gifts according to what is truly good for us – according to whether giving or withholding will foster our relationship with him.***