

Inscape July 2016

© Stillpoint Contemplative Ministries

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and communion with the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

PRAYER OF PETITION

Father George Maloney was interviewed on a radio talk-program by a long distance telephone connection. After a brief explanation by Father George with the interviewer asking some broad questions about prayer, the telephone lines were open to the listening audience who could ask direct questions about prayer. Father was surprised how often the questions kept returning to the basic question of faith in God's willingness to answer our prayers and why, if He truly loves us, He does not always answer all that we ask Him for.

For many interested in contemplative prayer there can develop a faulty understanding of such wordless, loving gaze upon God by deep faith, hope and love, without the medium of images and discursive dialogue with God. We might think that contemplative prayer is focused solely upon God. Therefore, according to such thinking, there should be no longer any room in a contemplative's prayer-life for a loving, concerning, petitional type of prayer for one's own needs or toward the needs of others.

We have been taught a doctrine that was formulated by Origen of the 3rd century in Alexandria, Egypt. Prayer can focus upon four aims: there is the prayer of petition; prayer of thanksgiving; prayer of contrition or expiation; and prayer of adoration and worship. We could erroneously conceive such types of prayer as steps on a ladder leading to the highest form of communion with God, contemplation. Thus we might think that we are going backward to a "lower" level of prayer if we were to ask God for anything for ourselves or for others.

This is to mistake contemplation as though it is more perfectly centered upon God that automatically demands no concern about others. It is true that petitional prayer is the most basic form of prayer we all learned from our mothers. It is found taught frequently in the New Testament, even by Jesus. He taught us to ask the Father anything in His name and it would be granted (Matthew 21:22). He gave several parables of the insistent neighbor asking for some bread in the middle of the night, of a widow plaguing a judge until he granted her petition, etc. In the *Our Father* He taught us that we should turn to our Heavenly Father as He did during His earthly life and ask for our daily bread.

And it is true that many times we could ask God for things, both for ourselves and for others, in a way that is self-centered and not a petition which is centered upon the Glory of God by praying with the mind of Christ. True petitional prayer is not prayer to ask God to change His mind when all our human efforts have failed.

It is more an attitude of total dependence upon God for everything. We read in the letter of Saint James: "it is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with Him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change. By His own choice He made us His children by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruit of all that He had created" (James 1:16-18).

"O Lord, Who blesses those who bless You and sanctifies those who put their trust in You, save Your people and bless Your inheritance, preserve the fullness of Your Church, sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house, glorify them by Your divine might, and forsake us not who put our hope in You. Grant peace to Your world, to Your Church, to Your priests, to the

government of our country, our armed forces and to all Your people. For every GOOD and PERFECT GIFT is from above, coming down from You, the Father of Light, and to You we give glory and thanksgiving and worship, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, always now and unto the ages of ages. Amen.” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom)

GOD’S CREATIVE LOVE

Many of our difficulties about prayer being answered by God or not stem from a faulty idea of God, in His love for us. Emmanuel Kant, the German philosopher, expressed the skepticism so commonly found against petitionary prayer. “It is said at once to be absurd and presumptuous delusion to try by the insistent importunity of prayer, whether God might not be deflected from the plan of his wisdom to provide some momentary advantage for us.”

Prayer is so often a cry of a human being in total weakness. “O God, come to my assistance!” God’s plan of wisdom presupposes that He has given us freedom, not only to pray and to believe in His protective love, but to cooperate as we pray to do all we can do to bring about the fulfillment of the prayer. God is a Person, three Persons in a loving community of triune love that wants to hear His children ask and thus reach a new awareness of knowledge of being in God’s reality where He is truly God and we are His dependent children.

To dismiss petitionary prayer as useless if God already is All-Wise and All-Knowing? Why does He need to hear it from us? Why not begin already to thank Him and short-cut bothering God? God surely does not need to hear our needs expressed; surely He is not deaf and therefore we need to shout with insistence! But such prayer presupposes that God is God and everything comes to us from Him. To be human is to recognize that one is not independent from God and others and can exist in total self-dependency. Prayer is not a call for help as much as the acknowledgment of the reality that we receive everything from God, our being, life and meaning, freedom and strength. We exist by God’s Grace. God’s gift of Himself freely given to all humanity!

We need petitionary prayer to express to ourselves and to others that we are, in the words of Saint Irenaeus of the 2nd century, an empty receptacle to be filled by God’s goodness and love.

God’s creative love is forever unfolding within the context of our daily lives. It pleases God to give us His Kingdom. He is now bringing about our happiness, our meaningfulness, enriching us with His participated goods. This is the dynamic vision Jesus had of His Father moving always into His daily life and creatively working out of love for Him. “My Father goes on working, and so do I” (John 5:17).

God’s uncreated energies of love invade your daily life at each moment. The world, from God’s view point, is a “ONE.” All creatures, through the creative inventiveness and cooperation of man working with God, were meant to be inter-related in a harmonious wholeness. Each part has its proper place within the whole universe. Each creature depends on and gives support to all the others in one great body, all of which has been created in and through God’s Word (Logos). We remember, as we reflect on the all-encompassing Divine Liturgy, that all of God’s creation is being transformed and restored...united together in His love.

This wonderful, creating God is not only the powerful, transcendent Creator who stands above and outside of all His creation, but He is the immanent force that lives inside of every creature. “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He fills the heavens and the underworld. It is impossible to escape from His creative, sustaining Spirit (Psalms 139:7).

A WORLD GROANING IN BONDAGE

However, it is not easy for us to offer petitions according to the mind of God so that our will is always one with the will of God. It is revelation through Holy Scripture that teaches us what happened to God's creation which He saw was very good (Genesis 1:31). The harmony in all things gave way to chaos and dissension, filling human beings with a bias toward self-will and self-love. "I shall fly by the power of my own will. I am no longer man. I am god." (From Hollywood Movie; Ben Hur; 1959). We find resistance in our prayers to pray for God's will to be done as we strive to receive from God only what we think is for our own good or the good of others.

But God condemned sin in the flesh through Jesus Christ, through His death and resurrection. Now you can be assured that you have an Almighty High-Priest who intercedes before the Father's throne on your behalf. You can now offer petitions in His name and believe, as Jesus teaches us, that the Father will answer such prayers. For we no longer pray out of a "carnal mind" but a Spirit filled mind.

You offer your God-given talents to work in a oneness, a synergy of two wills become one. You surrender to God's immanent and active presence in all creatures as you strive to put yourself "inside" of God's holy will by placing yourself in complete disposal of God who weaves new patterns of existence into a most perfect possible work of beautiful art (Cosmos). What is impossible with man becomes possible with God. We go to prayer to touch the trembling hands of God to become one will with His will of supreme creativity. It does not mean that you are adding your power to God's power; it is to enter into a universe bursting with an infinity of possibilities as we seek to surrender to live for God's glory.

It stretches out of the darkness of egotistic death to embrace God's ever fresh, vibrant and abundant life (John 10:10), always to live in the spring of His loving activity; never in the winter of our frigid selfishness.

DISCERNING PRINCIPLES

Let us look at some principles as to how to pray as we ought. 1) First, there is required in all prayer a discernment of our desires and needs, of whether it is the good Spirit of God's love directing us in any given form of prayer or a spirit of worldliness and self-centeredness. 2) Immaturity in the spiritual life is seen primarily as a self-absorption on what we need, especially focusing almost exclusively on our physical and psychological needs, the needs that are very evident and satisfying to ourselves so we do not have to endure much suffering. 3) As we mature in the spiritual life and enter into deeper prayer, the true sign can be measured by how we offer God our petitions after we have discerned what to ask for.

I used to think that in true contemplative prayer I had no need to petition God for anything for this, I reasoned, was to go backward to a "lower" level of prayer. If we were to ask God for "things" in a stage of prayer where our faith, hope and love have developed through years of mental prayer, would this be not believing that God already knows all my needs and all I had to do, therefore, was to begin to thank Him for arranging all things so "sweetly." I see now that petitional prayer is a vital part of a contemplative's life. By allowing God to touch us more deeply, we are able to stand aside and watch our false ego operate in contrast to God's Allness in our lives. Our discernment of whether we pray or not to God for fulfillment of a need is not followed by a petitional attitude that we want God to do what we discern He must do. What follows discernment of asking God to fulfill our petitions is a surrendering of our every desire to embrace in lively true-faith, abandoning trust and childlike love of God's will.

4) In such a stance we can see how it is proper and right to ask God for things for ourselves and for others. We can see that petitional prayer also embraces thanksgiving, confession of our unworthiness before God and, above all, adoration and worship, the essence of contemplative prayer.

This step in petitional prayer requires an integration of our whole self under God's supreme dominion. Your inner eye, as Jesus said, becomes a single eye. You are "single-minded." Your magnificent obsession, as that of Jesus in His prayer to the Father, is not your will but His be done unto His glory.

5) Grounded in such a holistic perspective of prayer, you can then move to the element found so often in the Gospel as taught by Jesus. You storm Heaven with persistence. You soak yourself or the one you are praying for with prayer, "fiery" prayer, as Saint John Cassian of the 4th century called it. You accompany your continued prayer with a further discernment and testing of what you initially judged as a need. You clarify that need.

6) In petitional prayer to avoid seeking your own selfish desires or convenience keep in check on your inner and external concentration upon God and His glory to avoid dispersion. Nepsis (vigilance, watchfulness) is necessary, therefore required at all times. Fasting can often give our petitions a "bite," a real dying to selfishness. Fasting can move into any moderate control over thoughts, desires and sense appetites that are being directed by your false ego, rather than by God's Spirit of Love.

7) As you continue to pray for certain needs, be ready to act on what you already discern God is asking you to do. For example, to see a certain physician; to stop smoking; to eat and drink in moderation; exercise more, etc.

8) The most important element that links petitional prayer to true contemplation is your continued praying in a child-like abandonment to embrace God's Holy Will. God truly answers your prayers when you pray in the NAME and the PRESENCE of Jesus Christ and His Spirit, as you put on His mind of oneness with the Father.

Pray, but also surrender your petition to God in a deep faith that the good you are praying for is being granted as Jesus tells us. "Everything you ask and pray for, believe that you have it already, and it will be yours" (Mark 11:24); also (Matthew 9:23). Your faith in God's goodness and infinite loving merciful kindness for you becomes greater than your desired need. You believe God is answering your prayer.

Glenn Clark writes: "The faith that shuts the mouths of lions is more than a pious hope that they will not bite." You pray with child-like confidence that God, our Father, will grant what is best for you. No longer are you asking for this or that. You now stand in confidence to receive from God's loving hands what He knows will be best for you. Priest prayer at the bowing of the heads unto the Lord; "...Therefore, O Master, distribute equally these Gifts in a manner beneficial to each according to his need..." (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom)

As you focus totally on God and His deep and penetrating fatherly love for you, picture yourself receiving from Him all His gifts of love. You see from God's loving perspective. You become full of peace (a condition where nothing is lacking), joy and love as your praise rises to God, even in silent worship of total surrender to God's providential control over your life and all your needs. You are seeking first the Kingdom of God and literally all other things will be given (total gift) to you (Luke 12:31).

You can see that true petitional prayer is not inferior to contemplative prayer. It need not be selfish nor the prayer of only a beginner in the spiritual life. In it all forms of prayer coalesce and lead to true contemplation which is wordless surrender and worship in Spirit and Truth—

the essence of authentic love and the sign of our being divinized (theosis) into children of God through the Spirit of the risen Jesus.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

It remains to discuss the peak of petitional prayer, i.e. intercessory prayer. As you contemplate God's amazing love in your life and in His designs for others, you are moved by the Spirit to be concerned for the salvation and needs of all persons who somehow or other enter into your life. Loving concern and merciful compassion toward the needy are signs that you live "in truth and love." It is a faulty understanding of prayer that ignores interceding for the needs of others. This is where CHURCH (Body of Christ) is formed, especially around the Eucharistic table, and meets in loving outreach toward any member of the human race in need. It is to unite your heart with the heart of Jesus Christ, who, as our High-Priest, alone can intercede for all before the throne of the Father. "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, Who desires all men to be saved and to return to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

You have been born in Baptism to be a sharer in the high-priesthood of Christ (1 Peter 2:4,9). Being a part in Christ, possessing a "place" within the Body of Christ, you share in the responsibility of being a mediator or co-presence of God to others. God has need of you to make Himself present to others, as you intercede for them in their needs that you are privileged to know and to be concerned about them.

Saint Paul exhorts to the Apostle Timothy and to us such intercession: "My advice is that, first of all, there should be prayers offered for everyone—petitions, intercession and thanksgiving—and especially for kings and others in authority. So that we may be able to live religious and reverent lives in peace and quiet. To do this is right, and will please God our Saviour: He wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-5).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Here are some guiding principles for your intercessory prayer:

1. Guided by love. You intercede on behalf of another or others out of compassionate love.
2. You are ready also to do more than merely voice a prayer to God. Real intercessory prayer is an act of love, ready to sacrifice oneself for the good of another.
3. Grounded in faith. You need to believe in the unconditional love of God who wishes to give His children all they need for their well being. God is loving, at all times, it is God's NATURE, and knows what each and every person needs, even before they ask or are aware of it.
4. Pray for the whole person and all that is best for his/her spiritual development and happiness.
5. Be persistent in your pleading before God, the Trinitarian Community of Three Persons in One Nature of Love.

EXERCISES IN INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Take this exercise in intercessory prayer. Place before your mind three persons for whom you wish to pray. One is your loved one; second is an indifferent person, perhaps some world leader or person of influence; and, lastly, a person who considers you an enemy or at least shows animosity and hostility toward you.

Cover each person with God's infinite merciful love for him/her. See that person gathered lovingly into the Father's arms. Know that for that person Jesus has truly died. This person is your brother/sister and meant to be one with you in the Body of Christ... "unite all of us to one

another" (Saint Basil Divine Liturgy). Send positive suggestions of God's love and yours also to that person. See and experience intercessory prayer as a continued widening circle of burning love where you put on the mind of Christ and seek to be all things to all persons to win them to Christ.

In Christ Jesus our Lord,

Father John Michael Zboyovski