

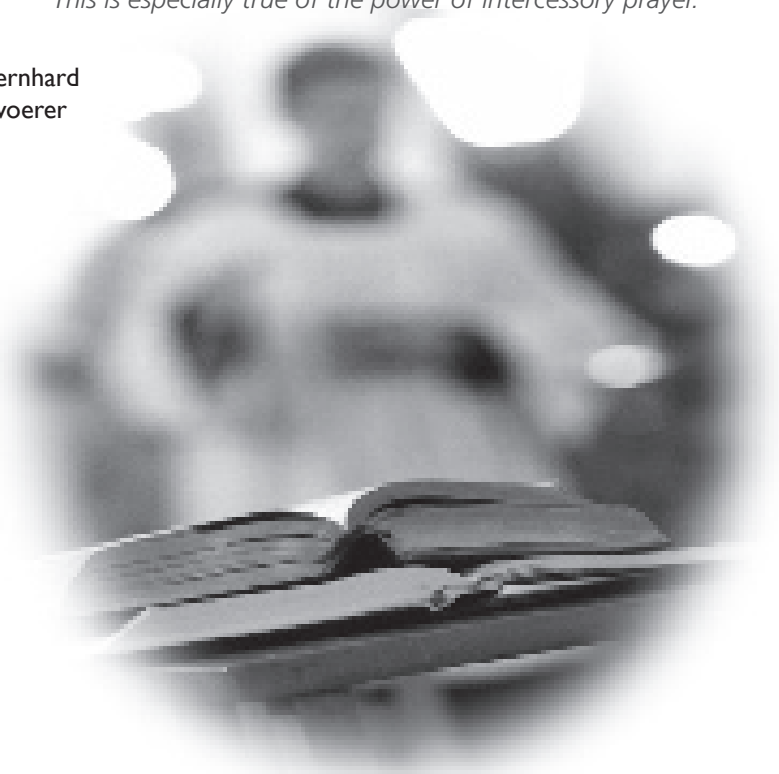
Prayer: a mission we all have

"Father, say a prayer for me!" "Sister, please pray for me!"

Probably every Catholic priest and religious has heard these words countless times. Sometimes people just make a general prayer request: "Please pray for me!" At other times, they have very specific intentions. Whatever the need, people are sure to ask for prayers of petition because they are convinced of their power. After all, Our Lord assures us: "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10).

This is especially true of the power of intercessory prayer.

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Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for others

In His humanity, Jesus is our High Priest before the Father. This means that He is a mediator between the Father and all of mankind. Part of His role is to intercede for us in prayer. He presents our needs to the Father and pleads for mercy for our sins. No doubt the most outstanding example of Jesus interceding for the Father's mercy came when He prayed upon the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He pleaded for mercy,

not only for those who were actually carrying out His crucifixion, but also for all of us because He was dying to take away all of our sins. They were the real cause of His death. We must imitate this example of Our Lord and be ready to pray for those who cause us difficulties or who may even harm us in some way. This would fulfill what Our Lord Himself taught us not only by His example here, but also by His words. In the Sermon on the Mount He told us: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to

you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Heavenly Father, for He makes His sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Matt. 5:43-45).

We have another powerful example of Jesus' intercessory prayer found during the Last Supper account. Jesus turned to Peter whom He had made the leader among the Apostles, and said to him, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32). The Lord prayed for strength for Peter both for himself and as an instrument of strength for the other Apostles. Do we ever imitate this prayer by praying for others in their special needs? We may learn of someone going through a trial; it is then that our prayers can support them to have courage and go on. We may learn of another person who is tempted to give up their faith or to fall into a sinful situation. In the face of the weakness of the flesh our prayers can be a great source of moral strength for others. If our love is to grow, it is necessary to expand the focus of our prayers to include the concerns we have for those who are in trial and tribulation.

Our Blessed Lady intercedes as well

Our Lady was no doubt the closest imitator of Jesus. As He prayed for others, we find evidence of Mary bringing the needs of others to her Divine Son as well. For example, at the wedding feast of Cana, Our Lady makes known to Jesus the needs of the young couple whose wedding celebration they were attending. Her prayer of concern was simple yet powerful, "They have no wine" (John 2:3). Our Lady's concern was for the young couple not to be embarrassed by a lack of wine for their guests. This would probably have forced them to cut short their weeklong wedding celebration. She was not asked to do something; she spontaneously saw the need and offered her words of intercession. They must have been very powerful because they moved Jesus to work His first miracle. And this happened despite the fact that He had indicated that it was not the time for Him to reveal Himself: "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). Because of this miracle Jesus worked at her request, He "revealed His glory, and His disciples began to believe in Him" (John

2:11). The marvel of Jesus' first miracle was the result of a humble but trusting plea of intercession by His mother. In our own lives, let us imitate Mary's spirit of spontaneously interceding for those who are in genuine need.

We see Our Lady again in an intercessory role springing from her spiritual motherhood of the Church. For nine days prior to the great feast of Pentecost, she was surrounded by the apostles and that first band of Jesus' disciples gathered together in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. They were prayerfully awaiting the promised gift of the Holy Spirit: "All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers" (Acts 1:14). Mary is joining her prayers to that of the first members of the Church, praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come. And, how powerful her intercession must have been to move the Holy Spirit to come! After all, He had already come upon her at Nazareth. At the precise moment she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, the Second Divine Person of the Blessed Trinity became Man in her womb. At Pentecost another great event would take place, namely, the Church was born when the Spirit came. Our prayers of intercession imitate the example Mary gives us in praying for the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In a special way we should pray often for the many needs of the Church in our times. Do we pray for vocations? For our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted? For the message of the Gospel to be spread by zealous missionaries in our time?

Other examples of intercession in the Sacred Scriptures

In the Old Testament Book of Exodus we have a powerful example of Moses intervening to save the Jewish people from God's wrath. The people had worshipped a pagan image of the golden calf and even sacrificed to it. It is then that we read, "I see how stiff-necked this people is," continued the Lord to Moses. 'Let me alone, then, that My wrath may blaze up against them to consume them. Then I will make of you a great nation.' But Moses implored the Lord, his God, saying, 'Why, oh Lord, should Your wrath blaze up against Your own people, whom You brought out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with so strong a hand?'... So the Lord relented in the punishment He had threatened

to inflict on His people" (Exodus 32:9-11,14). When we pray for peace in the world, ultimately we are praying that God will not punish us for our sins just as Moses implored God's mercy when His people had worshipped false gods. There is always a need for us to pray that God will forgive us our own sins as well as the sins of our brothers and sisters.



Another powerful Old Testament example of intercession involves the great prophet Elias. He had stayed with a widow in Sarepta who took care of his needs for food and drink for a whole

year during a time of famine. Her son became severely sick and died. The prophet interceded on behalf of the child's life, praying: "'Oh Lord, my God, let the life breath return to the body of this child.' The Lord heard the prayer of Elias; the life breath returned to the child's body and he revived" (1 Kings 17:21-22). Elias' prayer was powerful because it was the prayer of a very holy man. He prayed intensely for the sake of the woman who had showed him such kindness. When our prayers of intercession are motivated by compassion for those whom we see suffering, they take on a special strength because they are pleasing to God.

In the New Testament we also see convincing evidence of the power of intercessory prayer. Saint Paul was one who believed in its power. He himself prayed very often for his converts. He begins his letter to the Philippians with a beautiful sentiment of a prayer of thanksgiving. He writes: "I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the Gospel from the first day until now... and this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:3-5, 9-11). This great Apostle of the Gentiles held all his converts in the various churches he established always close to his heart, and remembered them continuously in prayer. Saint Paul not only prayed for others, but he sought their prayers as well. He ends his letter to the Ephesians with this beautiful plea for prayer for himself as well as all those who are promoting the Gospel: "With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones and also for me, that speech may be given me to open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains, so that I may have the courage to speak as I must" (Eph. 6:18-20).

The power of prayer in common

We have a great example of this in the early Church. We read that King Herod began to

persecute the Church (c.f., Acts 12:1ff.). He martyred St. James, the brother of St. John, by the sword. When he saw that the Jews were pleased with this, he went on to arrest Peter. We read in the Acts: "He had [Peter] taken into custody and put in prison under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. He intended to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf" (vv. 4-5). As a result of this constant prayer, Peter was miraculously freed from the prison by the intervention of an angel. When he arrived at the place where the Christian community was assembled, we read: "He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who is called Mark, where there were many people gathered in prayer" (v.12). Our Lord Himself told how powerful communal prayer could be. "Amen I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by My heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:19-20). We experience this power of communal prayer when we pray together with other Christians at a prayer meeting, or say the family rosary, or are joined in prayer for common petition.

The saints are always interceding for us

It is amazing how saintly people like Padre Pio were constantly sought after for their prayers. A few days before he died, this great mystic of the twentieth century was asked by his religious superior, "What do you want written on your tombstone?" The Padre answered: "Write down: 'Here lies a priest who prayed.'" And pray he did. We could say of him what was said of St. Francis of Assisi, "He was not so much a man of prayer as he had become prayer personified." Padre Pio spent two hours each morning in preparation for his daily Mass which sometimes lasted for as long as 2 1/2 hours. In addition he always made a fifteen minutes thanksgiving after Holy Communion at the end of Mass. Furthermore, he constantly prayed the rosary throughout the day.

The reason he spent so long at Mass was because he made long remembrances in praying for both the living and the dead. Throughout his life he always prayed the Roman Canon at Mass. That prayer has a place before the Consecration

to remember the living. After the Consecration there is a similar place to remember the dead. He would spend at each of those two places of prayer as much as twenty-five minutes. He had many of the living to pray for. For example, he prayed for his penitents. Hearing confessions on an average of 15 hours a day, that meant he heard as many as 300 confessions daily. No doubt he prayed in general for all of them but maybe he remembered specific persons with a longer prayer. He also prayed for those he called his "spiritual children" to whom he gave spiritual direction and guidance. Some of them lived near his friary in southern Italy, while others were scattered throughout the world. No doubt he carried their needs before the Lord at Mass. It is also estimated that he received between eight and ten thousand letters a week from people who sought his guidance, his blessing, and his prayers. While he was alive, he would even tell people to "send me your Guardian Angel" if they had to bring urgent needs to him so he could pray for them. Sometimes he was approached with very unusual requests for his prayers, like the lady who asked him to pray for her husband to find work. When the Padre asked what kind of work he did, she answered "He's an undertaker!"

Fittingly, he also prayed for the dead. He had a great love for the souls in purgatory. He was once asked if any souls from Purgatory ever came to his Mass. He answered: "More people come to my Mass from purgatory than do the living!" By the way, in his later years after the building of a new church, there were over a thousand people at his Mass each day. Stories abound that souls in Purgatory were allowed to appear to him and request his prayers. One such story involved a Capuchin novice who had been stationed at the friary about 100 years before Padre Pio lived there. He appeared to Padre Pio one night in the chapel. Padre Pio asked who he was. He answered: "Padre Pio, I was a novice in this friary a hundred years ago. I did not do my work as sacristan! I am now in Purgatory doing my job. Please pray for me!" Padre Pio prayed for the novice and he never saw him again. Presumably he had gone to Heaven.

Trust in the power of intercessory prayer

Most Catholics and even devout members of other religions know and instinctively trust the power of prayer. As an old saying puts it, "There

are more things wrought by the power of prayer than this world imagines!" And people who pray know this power. When we pray for others, whether living or deceased, we are praying the "prayer of intercession." We are asking God on behalf of others to bestow His graces, His providential care, His guidance, and His mercy. The intentions we need to pray for are almost endless.



We should pray for the needs of the Church. This means, first of all, to pray for our Holy Father, the Pope, because he carries enormous burdens as the Supreme Shepherd of our Church. We can only imagine the tremendous concerns

he has for the needs of the Church throughout the world! We should also pray for our bishops for their burden is not an easy one. They are often criticized for difficult and painful decisions they must make. Archbishop Sheen once commented on St. Paul's remark that it was a good thing to desire to be a bishop. He said the Apostle said this because he knew that in his day bishops were sure to be martyred. Archbishop Sheen added: "Today, the martyrdom of bishops comes in different ways." They need our prayers! We should also pray for our pastors and all the priests who minister to us as well as the religious women and men who work for our spiritual good. Jesus Himself said we should pray for more religious and priestly vocations in the Church when He told us to ask our Heavenly Father, the Lord of the Harvest, to send more laborers to gather in the harvest.

Praying for our own personal needs

This does not mean that we should not pray for ourselves, because we all have our own physical as well as spiritual needs. Some people have the mistaken notion that they should not pray for themselves. This is a false idea. After all, Jesus taught us: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). If we pray for the needs of our neighbors because we love them, must we not also pray for our own needs because we have a proper love of ourselves? Jesus assumes that we have this proper love of ourselves in order to properly love our neighbor. What we must condemn and reject is a self-centered or distorted self-love, not a love of self that is properly in line with God's love. Let us look at an example that Jesus Himself gives us. When He gave His disciples the Lord's Prayer, He taught us petitions that are directed at our own personal needs: "Give us this day our daily bread..."; "forgive us our trespasses ..."; "lead us not into temptation ..."; "deliver us from evil ..." (c.f., Matthew 6:11-13). The saints assure us that we must pray to God daily for the graces needed for our salvation. One of the favorite sayings of many saints was, "Pray as if it all depends on God; then go out and work as if it all depends on you."

Praying for others is a mission we all have

The Spiritual Work of Mercy, "To Pray For The Living And The Dead" reminds us that we have a mission to pray for others. Since each one

of us is a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, each one of us has a responsibility to pray for the good of the whole Church as well as for those whose lives we personally touch. The idea of praying for the living and the dead is connected with the "Communion of Saints" who are all united in the three-fold structure of the Church.

First there are the members of the Church who are still alive on earth. This aspect of the Mystical Body is called "the Church Militant" because, as St. Paul says, we are still "fighting the good fight" (c.f., 2 Timothy 4-7). This means we are still striving to resist the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil by practicing the Christian virtues. Not only do we ourselves need God's grace to do this, but so do our brothers and sisters in Christ. Many of them are not praying for themselves. And so we need to pray for them. Our Lady in her message at Fatima reminded us of this important point when she told the three little children, Lucia, Francesco, and Jacinta: "Many souls are lost from God because there is no one to pray and to offer sacrifices for them." Therefore, we must pray for them that they will receive from God all the graces they need to serve Him faithfully and win the crown of eternal salvation.

The second aspect of the Mystical Body is called the "Church Suffering." These are the souls in Purgatory who are being purified through suffering from the last vestiges of sin. Once purified, they can enter Heaven where they will enjoy the Beatific Vision of God for all eternity. They will be among the saints in God's Kingdom. It is our understanding that the souls in Purgatory cannot pray for themselves but merely endure their purifying sufferings. It is we who can pray for them to assist them more quickly through their intense sufferings. This is one of the reasons why the Church has the practice of offering Masses for the repose of the souls of those who die. Many of them need the abundant merits of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to help them. The Church also has the special remembrance of the souls in Purgatory on November 2nd, All Souls Day, as well as throughout the entire month of November. The greatest thing we can do for our loved ones who have died and for any of the souls in Purgatory is to pray that they will be quickly released to go to Heaven. Many people

frequently offer prayers for "those souls in Purgatory who have no one to pray for them." No doubt they will pray for us if we are in a similar situation of need. If those we pray for are already in Heaven, God will certainly give the graces to another needy soul.

The final aspect of the Mystical Body is called the "Church Triumphant." These are the saints in Heaven who are enjoying the bliss of eternal life. We do not pray for them since they do not need our prayers any longer. They have reached their eternal goal and won their crowns in Heaven. But we pray to them because they greatly help us through their powerful intercession with Almighty God.

At other times we invoke the intercession of the saints to plead before God's heavenly throne for our needs and the needs of others. Some people feel that it is wrong to ask the prayers of the saints or even the prayers of the faithful on earth. They have the mistaken notion that we should always go "directly to God" and not through others. They would argue that God loves all of us, and so He will listen to each of us when we pray directly to Him. This is true but only to a certain extent. God does love us but we also have our faults and those He does not love. So the power of our prayers is limited. Furthermore, the saints are very close to God and very pleasing to Him for they no longer have sin in their lives. We can apply to the intercession of the saints what often applies in the business world: "It's not what you know but who you know." The saints can get right through where we may stumble. After all, they enjoy God's deepest love and friendship. The saints, in their great love for us, would desire nothing more than to assist us by their prayers so that someday those of us who are still on earth as well as the souls in Purgatory will be among their number praising God forever in Heaven.