

Petition: The Prayer of Petition – Br. Curtis Almquist

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Br. Curtis Almquist offered this homily on the prayer of petition at the Monastery as part of the Teach Us to Pray series, February 2, 2010.

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This evening is the conclusion of a seven-part sermon series we have entitled, "Teach Us to Pray," which was the very request the disciples made of Jesus. This evening I will speak about the Prayer of Petition. The English word "petition" comes from the Latin *petitionem*, which is a request or solicitation. The Prayer of Petition is asking God for help or healing or hope – whatever may be our need or our awareness. Petitionary prayer is the most spontaneous prayer, the most uncensored prayer, the prayer that tumbles off our lips without coaching when the demands of life are too great and we feel too small. I have heard people pray specifically for parking places, for the rain to come, for the sun to appear, for a job, for protection, for passing an examination, for someone to be well, for someone not to die. You may have your own experience of praying very particularly, very specifically for someone or something.

I can still remember my own prayer of petition at one point when I was in junior high school.

- I prayed on my knees beside my bed; I prayed with my hands tightly folded, my back straight; I prayed with eyes closed, absolutely no peaking; I thought it best if I kept saying "please." I said "please" to God a lot. And this is what I prayed for, the most important thing in whole world:
- I prayed very, very hard that I could get to try out for the seventh grade basketball team... which happened.
- I then prayed I would make the cut and get a uniform... which happened.
- I then prayed that I could mostly sit on the bench during the games because I was too self-conscious and too clumsy. I was benched.
- I then prayed I would get a little court time to play during some games, but just enough for me to earn my basketball letter for my letter sweater... which happened.
- And this oh-so-fervent praying without ceasing was mostly for the sake of Jackie Claypool, whom I wanted more than anything to like me. If I was a lettered basketball player, she would surely like me.

And that's how I prayed, and prayed, and prayed.

(I did get my basketball letter; Jackie never did give me the time of day; I meanwhile fell in love with Christy Swenson, who *did* notice me and we started going together steadily... for all of two weeks or so. By then I was praying for other important things.)

No one ever taught me that I was supposed to pray to God for all these things that I wanted (or didn't want). I simply prayed. I prayed my heart out. And I still do. I pray for myself and I pray for others, what I think or know they need from God. I still say "please." Sometimes the prayer is for some very specific need: my nephew, serving with the Marines in Iraq, that he come home safe and sound. Sometimes my prayer is not specific, when life – life for me or for someone else – is overwhelming. Prayer at those overwhelming moments is like the petition of the psalmist, Psalm 69:

"Save me, O God, for the waters have risen up to my neck.

I am sinking in deep mire, and there is no firm ground for my feet." [ii]

But why in the world ask God for anything? At the outset of our liturgy we joined in a prayer that begins: "**Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid...**" God already knows. So what is going on then when we petition God, if God already knows and cares?

Our prayer is certainly not like a news conference, where we are briefing God on what's going on down here, things which may have missed God's attention. God is omniscient; God already knows it all about everything and everyone.

And our petitionary prayer is not like an artillery bombardment of the heavens: if we shoot up enough prayers in enough ways we will eventually hit the target of God's heart and we'll get some action from God. No. That would make God elusive or conniving or clever, and why pray to such a God for our most vulnerable needs?

Nor is our petitionary prayer a barter: if God will only do this or that, I promise to always (or to never) do such and such. That would make God despotic and manipulative, not trustworthy.

We open our hearts to God because of our relationship to God, a relationship which God has initiated. Our prayer is always a response to God. We don't initiate a relationship with God when we pray; we are always responding. More than anything, God longs to be in relationship with us and with all whom God has created. It's of God's essence to be in relationship. How God will break through to us will probably be because of some need we either have or know about.

That is one thing that is going on when we petition God for help. A presenting need has opened our heart to God. We can look to Jesus on this. In the Gospel according to Matthew, we hear Jesus saying: "When you are praying... your [heavenly] Father knows what you need before you ask him." [iii] Quite. But what that need has elicited in our soul is our own awareness of our relationship with God. That is one thing that is going on when we petition God. It's not about information being given, but about a relationship being shared. It's not unlike a relationship you have with a good friend, someone whom you can "read" really well. Sometimes you may know pretty clearly what's going on with them, not because they've told you but because you have a certain intuition, and you know you're right. But what a difference it makes when this friend decides to freely tell you what you already know. It's not about information; it's about trust in your relationship... and that makes all the difference. So it is in our prayer.

But then there is this presenting need. What about that? Jesus – just a few verses after reminding us that our heavenly Father already knows all – Jesus tells us: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." [iiii] This is an invitation for our prayer to be transparent and authentic and specific. If there is something in particular on your mind and in your heart, pray as specifically and as many times as you need to. Will you always "get" what you ask for? No. At least that's not *my* experience. Sometimes things do come to be, exactly as I had been praying. Sometimes it seems almost the opposite. The condition, the need seems to stay the same, but *I* am changed. [iv]

Prior to my coming to the Monastery I was a parish priest. Each Wednesday we celebrated the Holy Eucharist with laying on of hands and anointing with healing oil. One woman came to this liturgy week after week. We anointed her and we prayed, as she requested, for healing for her husband and son, both of whom were in real trouble. This prayer went on for two years or so, week after week. One day she came to this liturgy and there was light in her eyes and a smile on her face. After the liturgy she stopped to speak with me. I said to her, "there has been healing, hasn't there?" And she said, face aglow: "Yes!" And said I said, "Your husband or your son is better!?" And she so, "Oh, no: they're the same, but *I* am so much better." We had been praying all along for healing for her husband and son; the healing actually came to this faithful woman.

I have had my own experience of this. Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies. So many times, when I have prayed for an enemy or, more likely, someone I am finding very irritating or angering or disappointing... and I pray for them. I might set off praying that this person be silenced, or punished,

or stopped dead in their tracks, or motivated to get on the stick. I'll call this real prayer; it's not *nice* prayer – I'm not praying nicely for all the right things. It's *real* prayer as things really are for me. And what will happen, inevitably, is that my heart will be broken open for this person. God will use the conduit of prayer, which is opened because of my irritation, to be a conduit for my own transformation. It's not this person gets changed because of my prayer; it is *I* who get changed because of my prayer for this person. It's as if God brought this person into my life – this irritating person whom God knows and loves – for my own salvation. Pray for your enemies, keep praying for your enemies, and sooner or later you will love them as God loves them. *That* is one way that our prayer is not answered in the way we have petitioned God... but the prayer is answered.

Another way our petitionary prayer is *not* answered has to do with immediacy. You may have found yourself praying for something or someone, and for some particular outcome about which you are very clear. And it does not come to be. Not now. But in the fullness of time, something else comes to be for this person or this need. If your experience is like mine, so many times what eventually comes is the right thing. Though it's not what we were praying for at the time, it *is* the answer which proves to be right. In this way I think of God the Father as a heavenly parent and we as children of God. Any parent or godparent or teacher of young children will know that you have to interpret children's language. You can't just listen to their words; you have to listen for their meaning. Not long ago I saw a young mother bend down to speak to her young boy who was very fussy. She said to him, "Honey, what do you want?" He folded his arms across his chest, pierced his lips and barked to his mother, "Nothing!" She knew and I knew that wasn't the case. He wanted something, something important, and she was able to figure out what he needed... despite his words. And so with God: God knows better.

Another thing that is going on in our petitionary prayer is God's making good use of our relationship. The relationship God longs to share with us is very personal but it is not private. It's not just all about "me." It's about us. God loves me as much as God loves you and everyone else. God will use our relationship with God for God's good purposes. And so I might be praying quite specifically for someone or something (and God already is fully apprised about this need... because God is God). What's going on in this conduit of prayer we are directing to God is actually an answer to prayer which God is directing to us. God has caught *our* attention concerning a particular need. Somehow we figure into the answer of this prayer which began in God's own heart. God has given us an awareness of some need, and that need is somehow being addressed through our own awareness and our own availability. It's not that we are waiting for God to answer our prayer. Rather, it is God who is waiting for us to be an answer to God's prayer for this need, this person, this world. We say in our own *Rule of Life* that prayer "does not call down the divine presence to come to the place where we have seen a need, for the Christ who fills all things is already in that place. It is [God's] Spirit who calls us to join him there by offering our love in prayer and action, to be used by God for healing and transformation." [\[v\]](#)

When the disciples asked Jesus, "teach us to pray," Jesus' instruction was what we call the Lord's Prayer, which is a series of petitionary prayers. The opening two words of the Lord's Prayer are very significant: "Our Father." The first person plural pronoun, "our" is used. Not "my father," but "*our* father." It's not just about me; it's about us. That introduction should contextualize our petitionary prayer. If you're going hiking and are praying for a sunny, clear day, just remember that there is likely a farmer who is praying for rain. Our prayer should open our own heart to the heart of God who so loves this world. [\[vi\]](#) The second word of the Lord's Prayer, "Father," is a rather stiff translation of the Greek noun, *abba*, which means "papa" or "daddy." This reveals the tender relationship Jesus has with the God whom he calls papa, daddy. Jesus has his papa's ear, and when we pray, we pray through Jesus, i.e., Jesus mouths our words for us into his papa's ears. And that is such a tender, disarming invitation for us in our petitionary prayer. Be real in your prayer, and you will know God to be really present to you.

The spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola has had a great influence on our own community since our inception in the 1860s. Saint Ignatius left us with a very tender and transparent prayer of petition, and with this I close:

*Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, inebriate me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me;
Within thy wounds hide me;
Suffer me not to be separated from thee;
From the malignant enemy defend me;
In the hour of my death call me,
And bid me come to thee,
That with thy saints I may praise thee
Forever and ever. Amen.* [\[vii\]](#)

[\[i\]](#) Psalm 69:1-2.

[\[ii\]](#) Matthew 6:7-8.

[\[iii\]](#) Matthew 7:7.

[\[iv\]](#) The great Danish philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), prayed: "O Thou who are unchangeable, whom nothing changes! Thou who art unchangeable in love, precisely for our welfare not submitting to any change: may we too will our welfare, submitting ourselves to the discipline of Thy unchangeableness, so that we may in unconditional obedience find our rest and remain at rest in Thy unchangeableness. Not art Thou like a man [or woman]; if we are to preserve only some degree of constancy, we must not permit ourselves too much to be moved, nor by too many things. Thou on the contrary art moved, and moved in infinite love, by all things. Even that which we human beings call an insignificant trifle, and pass by unmoved, the need of a sparrow, even this moves Thee; and what we so often scarcely notice, a human sigh, this moves Thee, O Infinite Love! But nothing changes Thee, O Thou who art unchangeable! O Thou who in infinite love dost submit to be moved, may this our prayer also move Thee to add Thy blessing in order that there may be wrought such a change in the one who prays as to bring them into conformity with Thy unchangeable will, Thou who are unchangeable."

[\[v\]](#) *The SSJE Rule of Life*, chapter 24: "The Mystery of Intercession." Also see chapter 21: "The Mystery of Prayer"; chapter 22: "Prayer and Life"; chapter 23: "Meditative Prayer." The *Rule* is available through www.SSJE.org in both text and audio formats, and also for purchase as a bound volume.

[\[vi\]](#) John 3:16f.

[\[vii\]](#) St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), in his prayer, "*Anima Christi*."