



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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INTERCESSION

Intercession is perhaps the most common form of Christian prayer. We find it natural to share with God our concerns about those who are close to us. But intercession is also a form of prayer which raises problems for Christians. We wonder how it works. We know that God knows better than we do what people need, and it seems strange to us to be asking for things. We know that we cannot manipulate God, like the pagan magician manipulates the supernatural powers.

And yet, intercession is a natural thing to do. We believe that God is a loving and caring God. We believe that He cares about all the things that are important to us because He cares for us. He cares for those who are dear to us. In addition, we believe that God acts in the world. He does what is best for people. His actions do not generally violate the natural order of things, of course. Rather He works through the natural order. But He does work, as we know from our own experience of His actions in our lives. If He both cares and acts, then it is reasonable for us to ask Him to do particular things for other people, for He cares about them, and He is capable of acting in their lives.

Moreover, intercession is commanded in Scripture (I Timothy 2:1, e.g.). He wants us to intercede. But there are obstacles. We may feel that someone's problem is too trivial for God's concern. That is, however, underestimating God's power and love for us. Even if we cannot imagine it, His love for us is infinite, and omits nothing of all that is human. More seriously, we sometimes fail to take things to God in prayer because we feel we have not done enough ourselves. We may not pray seriously for a sick person because we feel guilty at not having visited the hospital or sent cards regularly. Here our pride gets in the way. As with all prayer, it takes a certain humility to intercede, for we are asking for help and thereby admitting that we cannot do it all ourselves. We may also have to admit that we have not done even what we could have done. Sometimes intercession must begin with confession.

In intercession we sometimes get bogged down in the question of how it works: how does this prayer accomplish its desires? That question is hard to answer directly. A better approach is to begin at the other end: how do our intercessions affect us? If we can understand how intercession fits into the Christian life, then we can understand why God has commanded us to do it. We need to see how intercession makes us better Christians and how it fits into the life of prayer.

The first step in understanding intercession in terms of the intercessor (rather than the object of intercession) is to understand how we are to go about it. How do we intercede?

First of all, intercession is not a matter of sitting down with God as you would with a moneylender or a disagreeable but wealthy and heirless old uncle, to see what you can get out of Him. Intercession has nothing to do with trying to wheedle something out of God, either by making some sort of deal with Him ("If you cure Aunt Mary's cancer, I'll go to church every Sunday") or by trying to convince Him that it is really in His interest anyway ("She gives a lot to the church"). Intercession takes place within our relationship with God. To the extent that that relationship is defective -- treating God as a moneylender -- then intercession will suffer as a result. In particular, intercession is not to be ruled by selfishness, any more than our prayer of quiet is a time for pure selfishness. We should not be asking in order to gratify some selfish desire of our own. Intercession is in fact the exact opposite of selfishness. If we respect God, we will not ask Him to do anything immoral or merely for our gratification.

In intercession we lay the problem before God. It is not so much that we ask God to perform some particular action ("Heal Mary"), as it is that we place the whole problem in His hands ("Care for Mary, body and soul, in her illness"). Thus it is not just a matter of making a request and going our way. We must open ourselves to God in the concrete situation of this particular concern. Our openness is an essential characteristic of intercession. It means that we will be ready to see whatever answer may come. If, for example, we are praying for healing of a sick friend, we will be ready to receive recovery as God's answer to the prayer. It also means that we will be open to receive unexpected answers to the prayer, if He chooses to answer in an unexpected manner (as He so often does). Then we will still be able to perceive that it is an answer to prayer. If the illness brings the sick person to a new faith and holiness -- that too can be an answer to the prayer. In short, we must be open to God if we ask anything of Him.

Third, in asking God to deal with the problem, we are acknowledging His authority in the matter. Thus if we ask His help, we must turn over the primary responsibility for the problem to Him. This means that having asked, we must let God resolve the problem. We

must not demand a particular solution, even if it is the only one we can conceive. We must trust Him to do greater things than we can ask or imagine.

By the same token, we must ask in a way that allows God to speak to us, in the event He would like us to do something about the problem. Our petition must be made in the quiet of our communion with God. Intercession is thus properly part of the prayer of quiet, even if we use set prayers in that context. For it is out of the depths of our communion with God that we share with Him our concerns for other people and for the world.

This governs how we ask things of God. We ask in the context of our relationship of love with God. It is a personal request. We share our concern with Him, knowing that He shares it, because He too loves the person involved. In fact, He loves rather more perfectly than we do ourselves. Thus He knows what is best in the situation, and is ready to act. Our petition has more the character of a shared concern between friends than a businesslike request between professional acquaintances. The foundation is the shared love.

Intercession is a work of sacrificial love. Interceding is putting ourselves in the position of the one who is needy, sharing their burden in love. The love involved is that given to us on the Cross. Intercession can therefore be costly. When we ask something for someone we must be ready to do whatever God may ask of us to accomplish it. And that may be difficult and costly to us. In making the request of God, we put ourselves in His hands no less than the other person. He may choose to lighten the other's burden by allowing us to share a bit of it in the Spirit. There is a spiritual bond between the intercessor and the one he intercedes for. It is not easy to explain exactly how this works. But it is the fruit of our love for the one in difficulty and our desire for what is best for him. In our love, we want God to act according to His infinite goodness both in the other's life and in our own. Interceding is a matter of placing ourselves in God's hands for the sake of another, that he too may find himself in His loving hands.

If this is how we are to go about serious intercession, then what are its results in the intercessor? How is the one who prays affected?

Intercession is, first of all, a recognition of God's authority in our lives in a concrete way. So when we pray for another, we are practicing the truth of obedience to our Lord. Since we waste a great deal of time and energy going off on our own apart from Him, any activity which will subject us to His rightful authority is worthwhile.

A second benefit of intercession is the increasing of our deep communion with God in love. Intercession is a shared love for some

particular creature, shared between God and man. Since in it we are striving to share God's love in this particular situation, we are aspiring to His love: His pure, selfless, redeeming love. This love is our great aspiration in Christian life. Intercession is a chance to practice that love.

Third, intercession is an opportunity to identify with fallen humanity. When we intercede we acknowledge the need for redemption. We see that we cannot live without God's help. We accept that there are problems quite beyond our capacity to solve. This puts us in a position where we can receive from God because we have acknowledged our need. It increases our identification with the fallen world. It helps us to see our own helplessness apart from grace. And thus it helps us to be patient and forgiving with the difficult people and situations in the world, for we see that we are as much a part of the fallen world as anyone.

The spiritual benefits of intercession are great, if we undertake the work seriously and in the intimacy of our quiet with God. Most of us begin Christian intercession by going through a list of loved ones every night. That is a good start, and God will make good use of it. But there is more to intercession than that, and we should aspire to its higher forms, especially when some particularly compelling need presents itself to us. Intercession then is holding the need and the person before God, sharing that love which he has for us (and we for Him) with that needy person. Thus it must take place when we are closest to God: generally in our prayer of quiet. Then we can be with God. Then we can place the intercession before Him to be lifted up by the love which flows between Him and us.

Intercession is a participation in the present work of Christ the High Priest, who "ever liveth to make intercession for us." (Hebrews 7:25) By the offering of Himself upon the Cross He gains the presence of God as the Intercessor. If we are to follow Him in this as in all things, the Cross will be for us the route of intercession. For intercession is governed by the principle of self-giving love which is shown to us by the Cross. If we follow that, we will never go wrong.

