

Intercession

Carried Close to the Heart of God

Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

“I REMEMBER YOU CONSTANTLY IN MY PRAYERS NIGHT AND DAY.” So Paul writes in his second letter to his beloved Timothy (2 Timothy 1:3). At the very heart of Paul’s ministry to the young Christian churches was prayer. Paul prayed constantly for them. “I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you all,” he writes to the church of Philippi (Philippians 1:3-4). And to the church in Colossae: “We have not ceased praying for you” (Colossians 1:9). It is this kind of prayer – intercessory prayer – which underpins and empowers Paul’s entire ministry. And it is this prayer of intercession which has the power to transform and empower our own lives as well as the lives of those for whom we pray.

Jesus’ Prayer

The first disciples learned about prayer from Jesus. They prayed with him and near him. Simon Peter finds Jesus before daybreak praying in a deserted place (Mark 1:35). Luke tells how Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray (Luke 5:16) and spent a whole night on a mountain in prayer to God before choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 6:12-13). He later prays on the mountain where he is transfigured; he rejoices in prayer because his message is being received; he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane; and prays during the hours on the cross. In John chapter 17, he prays that great prayer, which is a kind of summary of the inner meaning of all his prayer – giving glory to God the Father.

After Jesus died, was raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, the disciples believed that although he was now exalted to the right hand of God in glory, he was still near to them and sharing very intimately in their earthly lives. Above all, they had no doubt that he continued to pray continually for them. And so we get the imagery in Paul’s letters, as well as in the Letter to the Hebrews, of Jesus as “high priest” whose intercession continues. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, “He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Jesus prayed for us while he was on earth, and he carries on praying for us still. But how does he pray for us? Interestingly, the verb we translate as “to make intercession for us,” in the original Greek is the verb *entunchanein*. This likely does not mean “to make petitions” nor to say any words at all. It means rather “to meet with” or “be with someone on behalf of another.” So when we talk of Jesus “making intercession” for us to the Father, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, we should not imagine Jesus *talking* to God about us. Rather, it is Jesus being intimately close to his Father and carrying us whom he loves on his heart and into the heart of God.

Our Prayer

And that is what we are doing in intercessory prayer. Profound intercession is not the reciting of a detached, impassioned “shopping list” of the needs of the world, which it can sometimes feel like. Nor is it informing God of something God does not already know! But rather it is a profound, loving and costly holding up of others in their need, before God. If we long to pray for others as Jesus prays for us, God invites us first to become very close *ourselves* to the heart of God, in loving adoration, and then bring those whom we love and long to be healed, with us.

True intercession is being with God with the people we love on our heart. In *The Christian Priest Today*, Archbishop Michael Ramsey writes movingly about intercessory prayer, and he gives a great image for what we are doing when we pray for others, drawn from the Book of Leviticus. Aaron, the high priest, would go into the Holy of Holies in the Temple wearing a breastplate on which were jewels representing the tribes of Israel, whose priest he was. He literally went into the holy presence, the heart of God, carrying the people, represented by the jewels, on his heart. At the heart of this image is love. It is our love that animates and gives power to our intercessory prayer. As Chapter 24 of our Rule puts it, “It is a wonderful thing that God makes us his fellow-workers and uses our love, acting in intercession, to further the reconciliation of all things in Christ.”

For me, this means that the words I use in intercessory prayer are much less important than the offering of my love for and deep desire for healing for another. God doesn’t really need to be told what he knows already, however eloquently! As our Rule says, “Our intercession 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 his Spirit who calls us to join him there by offering our love in intercessory prayer and action, to be used by God for healing and transformation.”

So in my own life of prayer I find that before I move into intercessory prayer I first like to spend time “centering” and becoming conscious of God’s loving presence. And it is into that relationship, into the loving heart of God, that I can then bring those whom I have on my heart. Sometimes I use words, at other times I hold a person up without words. I often use the story told in Mark’s Gospel (2:1-12) of the four friends who hold up the paralyzed man on a mat before Jesus to be healed. Without words, I just imagine holding the person I am praying for, before Jesus. Like those friends, it can be very hard work! They didn’t give up, and neither should we. Being faithful to intercessory prayer is hard work. Paul prayed for the churches on his heart “constantly night and day.” Perhaps we all need to pray with more passion. In the Gospels, the crowds and individuals longed and yearned, they begged and beseeched to be healed. Intercessory prayer is a work of love, but it is work: carrying those we love and long to be healed on our hearts, and taking them mysteriously and wonderfully into the very heart of God.

And when we do this, something else rather wonderful can happen to us. This kind of prayer can change *us*; it can mould and shape our own hearts. In intercession we can be given the power to love those we find difficult. Father Benson, as our Rule puts it (Ch. 25), taught that “in praying for others we learn really and truly to love them. As we approach God on their behalf, we carry the thought of them into the very being of Eternal Love, and as we go into the being of him who is Eternal Love, so we learn to love whatever we take with us there.” That is a wonderful gift.

Intercessory prayer plays a large part in our daily life as Brothers. As our Rule says, “From the beginning the Church has entrusted to the monastic communities a special responsibility for intercession.” Several times a day in Chapel we pray aloud for those who have asked us to pray for them, and we have an intercessions board near the Chapel where we can read prayer requests. We also encourage visitors to light a candle in the church, which can be a powerful way of expressing our heartfelt prayers for others.

When I was a parish priest, I greatly valued the presence of an intercessions board and candles in the church, as well as the group of men and women who pledged to meet together regularly to pray for the parish and for me. It seems to me that their work of intercessory prayer lay at the beating heart of the life of the whole church. In my own times of intercessory prayer, I keep a notebook by my side and write down the names of all those whom I want to hold up before God. After Christmas I keep a basket by my prayer desk filled with Christmas cards which I have received. Over the following weeks, I pick up a card one by one and pray for the person who sent it.

Praying for another is one of the most beautiful things that we can do. It is a sign of our dignity as children of God, called to share in the intercessory work of Christ. It is a prayer which can change others and change ourselves. If we abide in Christ, he will accept the offering of our prayers and use them to bless and uphold the world.

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Texts for Further Reflection

The prayers printed below are taken from *Praying our Days: A Guide and Companion*, a fine collection of prayers and teaching on prayer by Bishop Frank T. Griswold (Morehouse Publishing, 2009). The rule passages come from *The Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist* (Cowley Publications, 1997), which can be read online at www.SSJE.org/rule.

A beautiful prayer composed by St. Augustine of Hippo:

This prayer, which is included in the Office of Evening Prayer in the Book Of Common Prayer, captures many aspects of our care and concern for others.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

A prayer by J. S. Hoyland, holding those whom we love in our hearts before God:

Teach us, O Father, to trust Thee with life and with death,
And (though this is harder by far)
With the life and death of those that are dearer to us than our life.

Teach us stillness and confident peace
In Thy perfect will,
Deep calm of soul, and content
In what Thou wilt do with these lives Thou hast given.

Teach us to wait and be still,
To rest in Thyself,
To hush this clamorous anxiety,
To lay in Thine arms all this wealth Thou hast given.

Thou lovest these souls that we love
With a love as far surpassing our own
As the glory of noon surpasses the gleam of a candle.

Therefore will we be still,
And trust in Thee.

*Chapter 24 of the Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist:
The Mystery of Intercession*

Father Benson taught us to look always to the glory of the ascended Christ and find the meaning of all we do in union with him. We shall enter into the mystery of intercessory prayer only if we realize our oneness with Christ the great High Priest, who lives forever to make intercession for all the world. Christ makes this prayer to the merciful Father through the prayers of all the faithful who are baptized into his body. His voice does not appeal to God separately from theirs; “They are . . . so many mouths to Himself; and as they pray . . . His voice fills their utterance with the authority and claim belonging to Himself” (R.M. Benson, *The Final Passover*, v. 2, 307). The Father hears the voice of his beloved Son in our prayers and accepts them as Christ’s.

It is the Spirit of Christ who stirs our prayer and weaves the movements of our hearts into his great offering. Because the Spirit moves so deeply within us we cannot always be conscious of the full meaning and substance of our prayer. Often our intercessions will feel weak and incoherent. Yet the Spirit is helping us “in our weakness for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27).

Through faith we see Christ not only in his majesty in heaven, but in his lowly presence in every creature. He suffers with and in everyone in need. Our intercession 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 his Spirit who calls us to join him there by offering our love in intercessory prayer and action, to be used by God for healing and transformation.

It is a wonderful thing that God makes us his fellow-workers and uses our love, acting in intercession, to further the reconciliation of all things in Christ. We offer thanks with joy whenever prayer results in the transformation for which we had hoped. However, we must often suffer the pain of seeing no visible result to our prayer. But we should let no frustration wear down the trust that sustains our waiting on God. Every offering of love will bear fruit. “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13).

According to an ancient monastic saying “A monk is separated from all in order to be united to all.” The pioneers of monasticism believed that the monk was called to the margin of society in order to hear within himself the deepest cries of humanity, and to discover a profound unity with all living beings in their struggle to attain “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). In our intercessory prayer this solidarity will find its deepest expression. We shall also experience through faith our communion with all the saints in glory who pray unceasingly with us and for us.

*From Chapter 25 of the Rule of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist:
The Practice of Intercession*

Our hearts must always be open to those who ask for our prayers and depend on us to share their burdens. We will rejoice with them when the gift we have sought together from the Lord is given them. And we will stay joined to them in their struggle if God's response seems to deny their request or calls them to wait

We shall intercede also in our personal prayers day by day, appealing to God to pour out his saving grace on particular people and situations. In intercession we shall discover the power to love those we find difficult. Father Benson taught that "in praying for others we learn really and truly to love them. As we approach God on their behalf we carry the thought of them into the very being of eternal Love, and as we go into the being of him who is eternal Love, so we learn to love whatever we take with us there" (R.M. Benson, *Instructions on the Religious Life*, 108). God will also inspire each one of us to make certain causes our special concern. We may also be moved to draw the needs of the world into our contemplative prayer, holding them silently in the radiance of God's mercy within our hearts.

Intercession is not an intermittent activity, restricted to those times in which we are deliberately praying for the world and for people. The entire life of each member of Christ's body is intercessory. Christ takes up our actions and everyday experiences into the eternal offering of his whole self to the Father. If we abide in Christ he will show us that he accepts our labors, our struggles, our afflictions and the ordinary actions of our daily lives as sacrificial, and uses them to bless and uphold the world.

A moving prayer of intercession from India:

Jesus, let your healing love which flows from your cross
flow through your Spirit into my spirit and into _____'s spirit.

Heal _____ and let your healing love flow into the depths of
_____ 's heart and mind.

Let healing love find its way into all parts of _____'s body, bringing
with it wholeness, health and peace.

Let healing love flow back to my spirit, and back to you,
so that a stream of healing love

flowing from you, through me, and through _____
and returning to you

may make _____ whole,
and may make me whole.

Glory to you, and praise and thanksgiving now and forever.

Amen.

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Reconciliation

Preparing for the Sacrament

Resurrection

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Time

Redeeming the Gift

Transfiguration

To Bear the Beams of Love

The Brothers of SSJE are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

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