

Fr John Flader, Question Time:

150 Questions and Answers on the

Catholic Faith (Ballou, Connor

and Publishing, 2009), pp. 297-9.

## Chapter Four Christian Prayer and Devotions

### Christian Prayer

#### 119. The efficacy of prayer

I have recently read an article challenging the efficacy of prayer of petition. The writer asked whether we think that our prayers can make God change his mind, or inform him of our needs, as if he didn't already know what we need. I must say, I ended up somewhat confused myself. Could you please address this issue?

Your question has occurred to many people down the ages, so it is an important one.

Let us begin by stating that Jesus told us explicitly and repeatedly to pray to God for all our needs. In the Sermon on the Mount he said: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (Mt 7:7-8)

In the Gospel of Luke, which is sometimes called "the Gospel of prayer", Jesus encourages us to pray by giving two examples of persons who beseech another until they obtain what they want. The first is that of the man who goes in the

middle of the night to ask his neighbour for three loaves of bread and persists in asking until he gets them. (cf. Lk 11:5-8) Jesus concludes by saying, "because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you..."

Later he "told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" and gave the example of the widow begging the unjust judge to give her justice against her opponents, persisting until at last he gave her what she wanted. (cf. Lk 18:1-8) We recall that at the end of that parable Jesus asked the poignant question: "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8)

So it is clear that we should ask God perseveringly for our needs. But why? Jesus himself tells us that it is not so as to inform God of what we need, for he already knows: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Mt 6:8) In this regard, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "Our Father knows what we need before we ask him, but he awaits our petition because the dignity of his children lies in their freedom. We must pray, then, with his Spirit of freedom, to be able truly to know what he wants." (CCC 2736) That is, God wants us to use our freedom and responsibility to ask him for what he already knows we need, praying to know what it is that God wants. In this way he is treating us as true adult children, not just giving us what is good for us but engaging us in a loving dialogue beforehand. In this sense, the *Catechism* says: "Christian prayer is cooperation with his providence, his plan of love for men." (CCC 2738)

And we certainly do not ask God for things in order to make him change his mind and give us by our persistence what he otherwise would not have given us. God is immutable, unchangeable from all eternity and for all eternity. From all eternity he has determined to grant us or not grant us what we ask of him, taking into account whether and how much we pray to him for them.

If Jesus asks us to pray, it is among other reasons because our prayer influences us for the better. It exercises and increases

our humility and our faith and love for our Father God, to whom we pray. In the words of the *Catechism*, "Transformation of the praying heart is the first response to our petition." (CCC 2739)

St Thomas Aquinas expresses it like this: "If the petition is necessary to man to obtain benefits from God it is because it exercises an influence on the one who asks. Because he should stop to consider his smallness and to desire with fervour and filial spirit what he hopes to obtain with his prayer. In that way he makes himself able to receive it." (*Comp. Theol.* II, 2)

Also, our prayer helps us to focus on God himself, more than on what we ask for. In the words of the *Catechism*: "Since the heart of the Son seeks only what pleases the Father, how could the prayer of the children of adoption be centred on the gifts rather than the Giver?" (CCC 2740)

Ultimately then, our prayer is always answered. We may not receive the particular thing we asked for but we receive much more than that, the Holy Spirit: "If our prayer is resolutely united with that of Jesus, in trust and boldness as children, we obtain all that we ask in his name, even more than any particular thing: the Holy Spirit himself, who contains all gifts." (CCC 2741)