

Contemplative Intercession: sitting in the presence of God with and on behalf of others

David Swain July 2011

Each one of us will have a different approach to intercessory prayer and this is right. It would however be good if people could share their different ways of understanding intercession, so enriching us all. Sharing our different approaches could be part of a ministry of encouragement and an important part of our belonging as members in the Third Order.

The ongoing practice of prayer is a bit like the connection between a painting and the painter. None of us, and no artist, paints a picture in exactly the same way as another. When we look at the paintings of different artists, we rejoice in the amazing and beautiful differences in the use of colour and the light and dark in relationship with each other. They give, along with perspective, the illusion of space. We can be fascinated also by the different techniques and approaches to drawing and execution. Also a good painting always shows a sense of struggle that is often what makes a great picture great! If we can see our prayer as unique to each of us, as a painting is to a painter, then we can rejoice in what we discover through prayer and also be receptive to the experience and struggles of others. These may help us. Perhaps by using the metaphor in a different way we can see ourselves as the painting, and God as the painter. Something unique is being worked in our life as we pray. To pray in any way is to change. Are we open to God changing us as we sit in prayer?

Intercession is not just a matter of reading from lists. It is about being conscious of God's presence and 'sitting' in His presence with and on behalf of others. "Presence is longing reaching at once outwards and inwards" says John O'Donohue in *"Eternal Echoes: exploring our hunger to belong"*. In intercessory prayer, our hunger to belong is met and we begin to glimpse how we can be part of God's great work of creation and redemption.

Intercessory prayer should never be practised in isolation from the awareness of others, or be merely self-cultivation. It must be other-centred. The divine context, of our love for God in Christ who is ever present, is essential. Our own personal penitence for sin is also critical, along with our desire to remain in constant thanksgiving each day. This is how we practice intercession in our personal prayer life.

I suggest three elements which may help us to pray our intercessions with understanding and openness to change.

1. Presence

Intercessory prayer in the presence of God.

Prayer in our Eucharistic living (our life of constant thanksgiving) means that both sacrament and life will be integrated and we will always be trying to hold them together. We are not God's puppets and he is not to be manipulated. When we sit in his presence in prayer we become, whether we know or experience it or not, a part of his divine purpose. Our subjective feelings are not important.

Intercessory prayer is always in the wider context of placing our selves bodily and mentally in the presence of the love of God (i.e. in time and space). The context too of our life as it is - our imperfect humanity with all its contradictions, and the acknowledgement of God's presence within this humanity. In the context of worship (Common Worship, the SSF Office book or some other pattern for prayer that we choose), we intercede on behalf of others as well as our selves. In worship both with words, or by just by being 'wordless' in 'wordless' prayer, and either in company or when we are alone, we find the way to intercession. The acknowledgement of context means that there will be unity to our very being and aspiration as a praying people. Our Intercession becomes meaningful in many different ways to us and indeed in ways that change us - as it opens up God's purpose in us and the lives and those of others.

Intercession then begins quite simply by sitting in the presence of God, who is within and without us. In this sitting in the presence of God we pray for those with whom we sit with and also for those who are not with us. It is as if we are acknowledging that we all belong to one another in God.

2. Awareness

Prayerful development of awareness.

A holy and sanctified awareness becomes our prayer 'without ceasing', to which Christ calls us. God's first gift to us in intercessory prayer is a growing and respectful "awareness", along with a deepening reverence. We may not know personally the people we pray for on our list, but in Christ as members of his body we are made aware of first their existence and then in time more. Sometimes, remarkably, we eventually meet people or come to know more about them because we have prayed for them. The gift of growing, compassionate awareness is a subtle gift of Grace and indeed the first answer to our prayers.

3. Action and being

Prayerful openness leads to action and loving discernment.

The love of God that inspires us as the result of intercession sometimes leads us to action in service. This can be, but is not always, sacrificial. It may be just a “letting be”. The discernment as to whether “to act”, or just to “let be”, comes to us as a gift of Grace and is a further answer to prayer.

Whether we have the time to develop a life of extended prayer, or are busy people who have not so much time, we need to keep the above three elements in mind as we pray our Intercessions. They can be lengthy, or just very short and simple. We may only have the paper or book, or a list, open in our hand. It is not just a matter of reading through lists, although they must be read from time to time, but of moving into God’s presence and being open to a growing awareness and needed sacrificial action. Alternatively it can be “just being” - simply experiencing whatever is given to each of us, in different ways, by God’s ever present grace. The action of God on those praying for others may be grace filled awareness and concern. This will sometimes lead us to act in specific ways, but at other times to just “be and let be”.

Conclusion

We can only enter into the ministry of intercession if we seek to live within active praise and prayer in God’s presence. Indeed this is set out in our Third Order Principles, where we “aim to be constantly aware of God’s presence”. The indwelling of Christ within us, and within the people for whom we pray, is the only reason we can pray at all. This is at the heart of meaningful and effective intercession. It means that we can pray for those who we like and love, along with those we do not like and do not understand at all or do not love. Praying for our enemies is part of the wonderful, paradoxical challenge of the Gospel imperatives given to us in the teaching of Christ. When our intercessions have this dimension of radical inclusion, we are cooperating in the coming of God’s kingdom. We break out of small mindedness and a critical spirit and into inclusive, loving healing.

It is thus that in praying for other people in intercession, we acknowledge the presence of God in ourselves and in others. We become sensitively aware of the great needs of humanity, and participate in the ‘prayer without ceasing’.

For the above reasons our intercession lists are very important. They are the ground maps by which we are drawn out of ourselves into the greater purposes of God in the Church and the religious life, so becoming part of His work of new creation. Paradoxically, these lists do not initially have to be written down. They often exist first in our heart and then expand to include others. When this happens, writing down becomes important to let the prayer draw us out of ourselves. John Wesley often spoke of “heart work” in prayer. At the centre of intercessory prayer is the heart of

love longing for reconciliation, peace and healing. A name on a list is not just a name to be read out, but also someone in whom the spirit of God dwells as He does in each and every one of us.

The wonder of God's presence becomes an enriching experience through intercession. Our awareness of the needs of God's creation is sharpened.. The very variety of answers different people who pray can itself be a part of God's strange work and his divine will.

The answers to our prayers are not always immediately obvious, but we can sometimes be surprised by "God-coincidences" or "God-incidents", as Archbishop William Temple once said about intercessory prayer. The divine surprises of Grace are indeed good when they come. The lists in our heart and on paper will constantly change as we engage in the important ministry of intercession and allow ourselves in turn to be changed by it. We pray for others, but in praying we ourselves are changed. This is at the heart of the Christian journey.

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