



Chapter 1

Petition

Petition may be the most common kind of prayer, but before my conversion, it was the kind I found the strangest. The Mass, with its otherworldly Eucharist, was eldritch enough to seem worth doing (if Christianity were true), but simple complaining didn't seem worthy of the name of prayer. Even if I conceded the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, that second “omni” seemed enough to guarantee that the whole project was futile.

An omniscient God must know before I did what I wanted (and whether I should have it). I hated people cluttering up my time and attention to inform me of what I already knew. Petitionary prayer seemed to include every annoyance of Twitter or Instagram—an endless litany of whatever triviality happened to pop into everyone's head. I couldn't imagine inflicting this kind of prayer upon the all-knowing God.

Tattling to God

Considering my attitude toward this prayer practice, it is not surprising that the superfluity or necessity of petitionary prayer was a matter of dispute between me and the Catholic boy I dated in college. The dispute remained mostly abstract until I got into a fairly nasty, personal fight with one of the other people running my debate group. A classmate who is

not named Madison had made some accusations, in front of everyone, that weren't true and that really upset me. I held it together at our meetings but kept bursting into tears when I was alone with my boyfriend. He would comfort me and help me manage the fallout among our friends; finally, he added that he was going to pray for Madison and that I was welcome to join in, if I liked.

I spat back something like, "I'm not going to *tattle* on Madison to God! And I wouldn't ask any kind of god to change her just because I'm too weak to deal with her without getting upset. If I were going to pray for anything, I'd only be praying to handle this better. Or not to be so stupid as to leave her or anyone else an opening next time!"

Stoicism and Kantianism had both taught me that I shouldn't care too much what other people thought of me or how they treated me. The Stoics would have said that Madison's response wasn't under my control, so it was as useless to be upset that she was being mean to me as it would to be upset that I got wet in the rain. In a storm or in an argument, my misery was my choice, something I opted to add to the experience of being wet (or slandered). And being upset did nothing to help, so it was an unworthy, self-harming choice.

Kant might have chimed in that I should focus on what *was* under my control—whether I was fulfilling my moral obligations toward Madison (not retaliating in anger, trying to find a fair solution, etc.), regardless of whether she was fulfilling her duties toward me. In fact, if she was treating me badly and making it harder to do what I ought, so much the better. It's easy to be nice to people who are nice to you, so there's not much credit in it, according to Kant. You might

be doing the right thing because you expect your kindness to be reciprocated instead of doing it out of pure, abstract love for the duty itself.

My boyfriend's suggestion that I ask God for help was unthinkable in my worldview—even if I hadn't been an atheist at the time. He was suggesting I cheat rather than simply do what I ought. He was proposing that I ask God to change the situation to make my duty pleasurable because I was too weakly committed to the Good to pursue it for its own sake.

I explained all this to him, and he replied, “No, I wanted you to pray for *Madison* because it must be hard for Madison to be this angry at you. She's really furious, and this isn't even the first time this semester that she's flown off the handle, so it must be exhausting and frightening for Madison to reflexively respond this way to a disagreement that's as low stakes as this one.”

Seeking the Good of the Other

I hadn't thought about our struggle this way before. I tended to treat other people's temperaments as immutable and mostly irrelevant since it wasn't (in Stoic terms) within my power to alter them. Since the other person's character was outside my control, I didn't give it much consideration when I was trying to figure out the right thing for me to do. I see now that I was behaving like a solipsist—as though I were the only real person in the world—since I barely cared whether I was interacting with real people or simulacra as long as I was giving the morally correct reaction to their actions.

But my boyfriend's comment made me pause and consider that what was best for Madison might be bigger than just

my doing my duty by her. Instead of imagining Madison and her anger as inseparable, I supposed that there might be some kind of authentic ur-Madison, just as literary scholars discuss the existence of an ur-Hamlet, the original source for Shakespeare's text. I could imagine a Madison who was happiest and freest and most herself. I could have sympathy for that ur-Madison and imagine that she might feel slightly frightened or trapped by the strength of her anger. My boyfriend probably felt the same kind of sympathy for the ur-Leah he envisioned, hampered and blinded by layers of briskness and callousness.

If that kind of inner self was what God saw and loved—the part of ourselves that was oppressed by sin, not melded into it—it made more sense to me that there was a kind of petition that wasn't just the equivalent of radioing in spiritual airstrikes to support you in a fight. Rather than calling on God to take my side and make things easier on me or to actively side *against* Madison and punish her, I could ask God to help me fight *for* Madison and to help her fight *for* me, too.

Both of us were hobbled by faults—there was anger and fear and callousness on both sides—and we both had the option to want to be freed from slavery to those faults. If we noticed that our positions were symmetrical, we also had the chance to hope that freedom from spite, anxiety, and uncharity would be offered to our erstwhile antagonist.

If we did so, we were conforming our wills to God's, not just through negatively framed requests—asking to be purged of sin—but by asking to be filled with and changed by the love that God bears for us and for our former enemy. The act of prayer would start that transformation, since prayer gives

me one small change to make: to assent to a desire of God's that I didn't always share.

Of course, at the time, I still didn't believe in God, so I didn't pray for Madison. I did try to be kinder and to treat her like a person instead of a bonus round in my own moral development; but for the most part, the whole exchange stayed an interesting academic point about theology in which I learned that petitionary prayer wasn't as silly as I thought. I tried to carry over the solidarity with people's best selves that I admired in my boyfriend's prayer into my secular life.

Thinking about petitionary prayer, in the midst of that fight and other conflicts that followed, gave me a sense of what it would be to look at other people and myself *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity. From that God's-eye view, Madison's anger and my coldness were distorting the larger and lovelier people we were meant to be.

I came to realize that my petitionary prayer, although rooted in the specific troubles of my daily life, helped me redirect my gaze and approximate God's gaze. When I struggle with someone else, I can see through petitionary prayer that I am not locked directly in battle with them. I'm usually blundering around in the darkness that clouds their own light or letting my own imperfections blind me to the love they're offering me. I no longer seek to be farther away from them, so that we stop interfering with each other; I want to see them more clearly, so that we can rejoice in each other's ur-selves.

Ultimately, I don't want God to make me *safe* from an antagonist (or the antagonist from me), but to make me one with my former enemy. I have to be one with my enemy if I want to be one with Christ. He will never sunder himself

from my opponent, so if I want to be incorporated into him, I can't nurse division or distance from someone who is currently frustrating me.

Fictional Characters as Intercessory Icons

I could assent to this theology in theory, but it was still hard for me to be moved to pray for the specific people from whom I was dividing myself. As I started trying to offer prayers of intercession, I was much more likely to have a spontaneous impulse to pray for fictional characters than for the people in my real life. Reading novels or watching movies and musicals tends to stir up more of a swelling in my heart and an empathetic desire to serve than does the bustle of everyday life.

For one thing, I still don't have very much practice thinking of prayer as an option in everyday life. When I run into interpersonal problems, I'm still busy exploring all my old habits and patterns, and it takes a conscious, deliberate effort for me to incorporate new responses I'm learning. And even when I remember that I can pray in the middle of a normal interaction, the logistics are not always clear to me in my overcrowded life. Do I want to just silently toss up a fast, declarative "Oh dear. Prayers for [this person]"? Do I want to extract myself from the conversation to wander off and pray out loud and in a way that will take more than fifteen seconds? Do I want to memorize or otherwise record the prayer intention and try to remember to come back to it later?

When I'm enjoying art, I'm more relaxed, less frenetic, and freer to quietly turn to God. I can't interrupt or inconvenience anyone else by praying while I'm reading, so it's easier

to get into the habit of ejaculatory prayer whenever I'm swept up in a strong movement toward love.

It's always been easier for me respond with spontaneous, deep love to the struggles of fictional characters than it is for me to respond that way to real people—and that's not entirely due to a defect in my nature. Reading often affords me the benefit of third-person omniscient perspective to peer into the heads of all the characters, antagonists included. My empathy is seldom that active or accurate in real life.

Even in a book using a third-person limited perspective, where the characters aren't completely open for my inspection, the absence of an "I" still helps. Third-person limited perspective forces a kind of equality between the protagonist and the people he or she encounters, since they're all described from the outside.

Reading makes it easier for me to understand the internal logic of someone's actions. If I am drawn into a conflict in my day-to-day life, there is no exposition or soliloquy to show me what my antagonist is actually upset about or which of my actions rankles him or why he feels under threat. In books, it's easier to see that all human actions are, as Aristotle argues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, aimed at some perceived good, even if it's a lesser good or an evil mistaken for a good.

I try to believe that this movement toward goodness is active in everyone I come into contact with, but I can't always see it in the course of normal life. Fiction helps me overcome my doubts by offering me a proof of concept, just as Christ remedied the skepticism of the apostle Thomas by showing him his wounds. However, when I return to the real world and try to move toward love without being able to peek at

people's internal monologue, I can understand how great a blessing it would be to be one of "those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29, NKJV).

Of course, I don't want to grow too reliant on the insight that fiction gives me, but it's helpful to have *any* sphere of my life where prayer feels natural. Praying for fictional characters begins to transform prayer from a theological topic I read about, or even something I do on a schedule, to a practice that permeates my life and isn't confined by time or place. Encouraging any opportunity for prayer takes me a little closer to the exhortation Paul offers in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thes 5:16–18).

Even if I were to make no effort to cultivate prayer for real people, I expect that nurturing these prayers for fictional people would cause the good habit to bleed over into other parts of my life. The habit of prayer anywhere helps create an affordance, an expectation that prayer is a possibility at any place and time.

But I have tried to speed the process along. When I pray for fictional characters, I sometimes try to offer those prayers in the same spirit as the general intercessions offered at Mass or the laments and pleas of the psalms. If I pray for Javert from *Les Misérables*, because his love of righteousness is so tinged with fear and defensiveness that he must doubt either the power or the goodness of God, I try to use him as an icon of all the people who also struggle with this very Pelagian weakness (me included). Javert gives me one specific, vivid example to hold in my mind and prompts me to pray for a

broad class of people like him, even if no particular person comes to mind.

The intimacy of fiction helps me get to the point where, as the characters in *Les Misérables* sing, “to love another person is to see the face of God.”¹ Praying for fictional characters draws my attention up to God by encouraging me to engage in spontaneous petitions, but it frequently also redirects my attention to the needs of the characters in my real life. Sometimes I recognize some aspect of a friend (or myself) in print and find I have much more empathy with the fictional *doppelgänger* than I did in the moment for the real person. I then have the chance to use my empathy with the fictional person as a kind of pilot line for my empathy with the real-world counterpart.

A pilot line is the first wire strung across a chasm that will eventually be spanned by a suspension bridge. It doesn't have to be very strong: the pilot line for the suspension bridge over Niagara Falls was a kite string, lofted across the gap and then secured at both ends. The pilot line only has to be strong enough to bear the weight of a second, stronger wire, which then supports the next cord, and so on until eventually the engineers are putting the final steel cables in place.

Feeling drawn to pray for a fictional character is enough of a pilot line to pull me into praying that God will lead me into the same love for a friend as I have for that character. This kind of prayer gives me a way to admit that I truly *would* like to return to unity and love with the person I'm frustrated with, even if at the moment I need to stand at the remove of an analogy to admit it.

Real-Life Petitions

It's while reading fiction that I'm most often internally moved to petitionary prayer, but it's during Mass that I'm most frequently exhorted to pray by someone else. The priest leads the congregation in prayer throughout the Mass, but there's a moment just before the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist when we all pause to pray for specific intentions. A lector comes out to read a list of petitions from a binder, and we all meditate on them and reply, "Lord, hear our prayer." There are some regular, universal prayers (for the pope, for the sick) and some that are more topical (peace for people in a war zone, hope and healing after a natural disaster).

At some parishes, after the scheduled prayers have been read, the lector will say something like, "What else should we pray for?" and anyone can call out a prayer request from the pews. I've heard things like, "For my son, who is preparing for marriage, we pray to the Lord," or, "For all students preparing for exams, we pray to the Lord," or, "For a friend who is struggling with anxiety, we pray to the Lord."

I've always liked this moment in the Mass. At the parishes that hear Prayers of the Faithful from the faithful, I feel as though I'm participating in a census of the needs of the community. Not long after this time for spontaneous, public prayer, it's time for all the congregants to exchange the sign of peace as part of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After hearing the prayers of others (and possibly contributing one of my own), I have the opportunity to offer help if I can, to pray with everyone else, and to simply know my fellow parishioners more deeply.

I'm not wishing an abstraction on my neighbors when I turn to them and say, "Peace be with you." The Prayers of the Faithful are a lesson in what Christ's peace will deliver us from: slavery to the fear of death, the misunderstandings and cruelties of others, our own habits of pride or contempt.

Not all parishes have people volunteer their prayer requests during the Mass but one can always ask for the prayers of a friend. After joining the Catholic blogging network at Patheos, I wound up in a Facebook group with the other Catholic writers on the site, and the reading recommendations and silly memes we share are frequently interspersed with prayer requests. Being invited to share our troubles and give prayer support makes the bonds of the community tighter (and some of the jokes funnier, since they're sometimes tailored to give comfort).

Hearing the prayer needs of others makes me more attentive to their lives as protagonists in their own stories. I've sometimes been surprised by the high levels of misfortune, sickness, and other problems that seem to afflict my fellow Patheos bloggers, but I think it's less likely that we're all unusually beset by "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and more likely that I simply don't give other people as many opportunities to share their troubles with me. Without the possibility of asking me to pray for them, my secular friends are less likely to share with me their deepest troubles, not wanting to burden me with a problem I can do nothing about. In Catholic circles, technically no problem falls into this category.

Praying for others also helps me remember how expansive the lives of other people are, full of richness and pain,