

Intercessory Prayer

Intercessory prayer – any prayer – is transformative. Let me back up a little...As Christians, we are in the business of transforming lives – the lives of others and our own. Prayer is a major piece in accomplishing that. Prayer is being in relationship with God. We pray to God our Father, through Jesus the Son, with the power of the Holy Spirit. What is this transformation that we are undergoing? Well, first we recall that God is love. Next, we think of the two great commandments that Jesus gave to us - to love God with all that we are and to love each other. And then we realize that God desires that everyone and all of creation be in right relationship with Him and with each other. This is God's plan for salvation – we see this in the two great commandments and prayer is one way for us to work at achieving this...prayer is the place where we abandon ourselves to God's will, where God's desires become our desires. That is what we are striving for. Prayer is the place where we open ourselves up to God's love, where we express our love for God, and – in the case of intercessory prayer – where we bring others with us into the presence of God's love.

What exactly is intercessory prayer? Different scholars word it in different ways but they are all saying the same thing...Intercessory prayer is loving others. Intercession is asking on behalf of others. The Society of Saint John the Evangelist says intercessory prayer is “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 (founder of SSJE) 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.”

You can see why this would be transformative ...The more we love, the more we are able to love and we love what God wants us to love instead of our own wills and desires. Prayer leads us through the process of becoming more Christ-like because *Jesus loves everyone*. Prayer shapes us, transforms us, makes us more and more holy as we progress toward God's ultimate goal of bringing everyone and all creation into right relationship with Him and with each other.

The SSJE also make another valuable observation about intercessory prayer:

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.”

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.

How do we do intercessory prayer?

During your prayers, in your favourite space, at your favourite time, in your preferred posture, you would name the specific needs/concerns of your family and loved ones. You would ask for healing, strength, guidance, etc. for each person according to the need/concern. Next, spend some time in silence to hear what God has to say – listen for what you could do to help; listen also for others that God may point out to you to include in your prayers and actions. The Rt. Rev. Donald M. Hultstrand offers these words...Picture in your mind the person you have prayed for. See this person “filled with joy, lifted up into God’s presence. Leave them there. Now it is God’s work. Intercessory prayer is primarily lifting others into the presence of our Lord.” P.40 *The Parish as a Center of Prayer* published by The Anglican Fellowship of Prayer (1996)

Richard Foster says this:

Here is my own approach. After prayer for my immediate family, I wait quietly until individuals or situations spontaneously rise to my awareness. I then offer these to God, listening to see if any special discernment comes to guide the content of the prayer. Next I speak forth what seems most appropriate in full confidence that God hears and answers. After spoken intercession I may remain for a while, inviting the spirit to pray through me “with sighs too deep for words.” I will stay with any given individual or situation until I feel released from the prayer concern. Throughout the time I may jot down brief notes in a small prayer journal as I sense the Spirit giving instruction. These notes are often extremely helpful, for over time a pattern sometimes emerges that holds the key to the person’s need. This then informs the direction of future intercessions.

From Prayer Finding the Heart’s True Home

Stephen Cottrell says, “Intercession is not about persuading God to do something that is opposed to his will, but standing in God’s presence on behalf of another person and seeking God’s will for the person’s life. Our job is to fill the jars with water. We must then trust God to do the rest, in his time, and in his way, and for the fulfillment of his will. God is concerned for all people and for the whole of life. Nothing has its being except through him (Colossians 1.17).” p.28 *Praying Through Life* by Stephen Cottrell.

You’ll notice that intercessory prayer (prayer in general, as a matter of fact) involves a lot of listening. This is because, in order to discern God’s will rather than our own (which is key in aligning our desires with God’s desires, to become more and more holy, to fulfill God’s plan for Salvation), we actually need

to stop talking so that we can hear what God has to say. Simply presenting a list of needs and wants doesn't accomplish anything since God already knows all of our needs and wants. We must shift the focus from telling God what *we* want, to listening for what *God* wants. We need to *listen* to hear what God wants us to *do* about these needs and wants. Prayer is always a prelude to action. So, prayer does two key things...it transforms us in love and allows us to discern God's will in order to act on it. Both of these things further us in our journey of becoming more like Christ and bring us ever closer to fulfilling God's purpose for all of creation.

What about intercessory prayer within the liturgies of the Prayer Offices and Holy Communion?

Our worship services are a ritual enactment of our overall life and practices that we should be engaged in throughout the week. It is also a ritual rehearsal of life in the kingdom of God. Thus, as a ritual enactment, we don't include everything. For example, we hear the word of God but we don't do a bible study or hold theological debates. We share the bread and the wine but we don't eat the meal that came in between those two things. We pray for the world but we don't include every issue, every concern, every person, every week. Members of the congregation would then uphold the concerns mentioned, and other personal concerns, during their personal devotions throughout the week. As a ritual rehearsal for life in God's kingdom, our intercessory prayers are very eschatological in nature. By that, I mean that we pray now for the perfection of the world that we know will be a reality in the future when God's kingdom is fully realized here on earth as in heaven.

Again, different liturgical scholars have different ways of wording this but, they say the same thing...The Prayers of the People is the people of God "praying the world to God". We pray for the needs of the church and the world. Traditionally, it was a deacon who led the Prayers of the People (first called The Prayers of the Faithful – only baptized members of the Church were permitted to be present and participate in these prayers before receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion). The deacon is the link between the Church and the world – the deacon brings the love of God found within the Church out into the world and brings the cares and concerns of the world back to the Church to be upheld in prayer. Here is an example of a very early intercessory prayer – in fact, it is the earliest prayer of this kind that we have. It was written by Clement of Rome in about 95 A.D.:

Save the afflicted among us,
have mercy on the lowly.
Raise up the fallen,
show yourself to those in need.
Heal the sick
and bring back those who have strayed.
Fill the hungry,
give freedom to our prisoners,
raise up the weak,
console the fainthearted. Amen.

The Presiders' Manual for the BAS Eucharist tells us:

[The Prayers of the People] are a moment when the gathered community exercises its priestly role...While we pray for the world as we envision it perfected in Jesus Christ, our intercessions also need to be grounded in the present reality. For example, while a petition to "bring an end to all famine" is clearly grounded in the vision of the new creation, there is also an implicit demand that the Christian community make a tangible response to that petition. The petition would ring hollow if a community did not also respond in contributions to the local food bank, Primate's World Relief and a heightening of consciousness of the root problems perpetuating world hunger. (p.23)

The brothers of SSJE tell us that God makes us his fellow-workers and uses our love, acting in intercession, to further the reconciliation of all things in Christ. It's part of our responsibility as God's stewards here on earth to intercede for others and for the world itself. It is important to be aware that, as we pray our intercessions, the Spirit of God is with us and we allow the Spirit to guide our prayers.

To facilitate the guidance of the Spirit and to ensure that the prayers are relevant to the people present and to the community, periods of silence follow the biddings of the intercessor. For example, when the bidding says that we are asking God "For good weather, and for abundant harvests for all to share", you may be asking for good weather so that plenty of sap flows into your buckets or you may be asking that the shelves of your local food bank be filled to overflowing, etc.

The Presiders' Manual for the BAS Eucharist points out a common problem:

One problem frequently encountered is the often excessive length of the prayers. It is important that the prayers do not over-shadow the other elements of the liturgy by their length.

It is not necessary to pray for *every* concern in the parish each time the community gathers. Many of the issues of concern not mentioned by the intercessor will be raised by others in their petitions during the spaces of silence. Exhaustive prayers tend to preclude these petitions and defeat the sense that these are the prayers *of the people*. We must also assume in our corporate life that we will worship together over an extended period of time; to attempt to include all our needs in one intercessory prayer tends to undermine this. (p.25)

Ideas to promote your parish as a center of (intercessory) prayer:

Prayer Ministry of Shut-In Members of Your Parish

During Communion – holding up in prayer those people at the altar rail

Healing Service

Parish Cycle of Prayer for use during Prayers of the People

Cycle of Prayer of Afflictions

Holden Prayers Around the Cross

Prayer Group

RESOURCES

Cottrell, Stephen. *Praying Through Life: How to Pray in the Home, at Work and in the Family*. London: National Society/Church House Publishing, 1998.

Foster, Richard J. *Prayer Finding the Heart's True Home*. New York, USA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992.

Hilton, Mar C. (ed). *The Parish as a Centre of Prayer*. Orland, Florida, USA: Anglican Fellowship of Prayer, 1996.

Holeton, David, Catherine Hall, Gregory Kerr-Wilson. *Let Us Give Thanks A presider's manual for the BAS eucharist*. Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1999.

<https://www.ssje.org/worship/rule-of-life-resources/> (especially #'s 21, 24, and 25).