



“Prayer Changes Things”

When I was a very little boy my grandmother, who lived with us, kept a little plaque on her dresser. It leaned against a beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother and was continuously illuminated by a small blue beeswax vigil lamp. She explained to me at a very early age that there were only three things you could do with your life: be a priest, be a nun, or, if you decide to live the life of a lay person and go to work and keep a home – you must live a life of continuous prayer. For her the lighted vigil candle was a symbol to her favorite devotion to the Divine Mother that “prayer was in progress.” Inscribed on a little plaque was a phrase that disturbed my understanding and became one of the most compelling puzzles of my spiritual life – *“Prayer Changes Things.”*

It tested it! Maybe around the ages of third and fourth grade I started a rather unusual practice. Everyday after school I would go the church, sit in the very back in a corner next to a long row of flickering blue glass candle lights and begin to read page after page of prayers to saint after saint. I even began to collect “holy cards” (you know the ones with a picture on the front and a small prayer on the back!) and over time needed a notebook to keep track of who and what I was praying for and where I was in the nine days of prayers in a “novena.” After a while I had to use a school bag to carry my “holy stuff” to church. It always felt so safe and sacred spending that hour or so practically all by myself in that space alone with God reading my prayers and sitting quietly.

Over time my great enthusiasm and absolute trust in prayer began to waver. Many times I would ask God for something for myself or for someone else and nothing happened. Sometimes things actually got worse. Sometime during my second or so year of my intense and confident prayer life my grandmother became bedridden and very ill with pneumonia. I knew the family was very concerned and I remember telling her that she

didn't need doctors because I was praying for her and God would make it all right. Well, she died and a part of me died too! God let me down. My prayers didn't work. I was probably about nine at the time and I recall vividly a child's version of "existential crises" or, as St. John of the Cross called it, *Dark Night of the Soul*. I remember that the warm, hopeful, sweet relationship feelings with a loving God were replaced with feelings that felt very cold such as alone, empty and on my own facing an all powerful being that let bad things happen.

The parish priest noticed my daily absence and one day called me in to the rectory with a few other boys. We were all issued rakes and shovels. It was fall and there were a lot of leaves on the church grounds. Kids would always be doing something to help out and this day Fr. Flynn was going to make a bonfire of the raked leaves and bake potatoes in the ashes. It didn't get any better than this! But, on my way out he called me back; motioned me to a big stuffed high back chair and said; "we've missed you!"

Not holding back any tears I stammered through my story and presented my heart's chilling nightmare: *Prayer Doesn't Change Things!* My relationship with God was one sided. I cared. He didn't. He left me all alone in a world that was just far too big to have to live in without Him. The center of my life had been those quiet hours with Him – thinking that He was with me. I couldn't depend on Him anymore.

The priest tried to explain "mysteries." He said that God's ways are not our ways and that we have to have "faith." At nine years of age these concepts were not comforting. A wise man he was; and sensing this dark state of mine, he went upstairs somewhere and come back down with another little card that turned out to be my salvation. It was quite simple and it got God off the hook and gave me something to do:

*"Pray As If Everything Depends on God.
And Work As If Everything Depends On You."*

For a while I was satisfied but I was keeping count! In my little book I added up the number of times that my prayers were answered and the number of time that they were not. The successes and failures were about even. And I was asking for “faith” as Father Flynn told me to ask. I really didn’t understand faith but I know it had something to do with believing that when God did not answer a prayer the way I wanted Him to, He knew what He was doing.

One day he saw me light a candle at one of the secondary altars at the church. It was the place where the candles were all blue and they were at the feet of a beautiful statue of the Blessed Mother. When he asked, I told him that every time God answered a prayer I would light a blue candle. He thought that was a wonderful idea but then asked what I did when God did not answer a prayer? I had no answer. I did nothing more than perhaps to cheerfully suppress my disappointment. He walked me to the other side of the altar where there was a statue of Jesus as the Sacred Heart of God and the same type of candleholders but the glass was red. He took a nickel from his pocket and dropped it into a coin slot and said: “here, light a red one for the prayer that He didn’t answer.”

“Why?”

“Son, just light a candle whenever you pray. To God it doesn’t matter that your prayers get blue candles or red candles. He likes that you talk to Him and He really like candles! He likes when you come in here and pray to Him. If He answers your prayers, good. Light a blue candle. If he answers your prayer by saying “no” then light a red one. The point here son is to keep lighting candles.

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about but I liked the idea of lighting a candle and getting a “no” didn’t seem like such a let down. It was many years later that I realized how brilliantly he was teaching me something that cannot be put into words.

Some time later, my memory is a bit vague, but I recall after an altar boy meeting he asked me to come to the altar with him and sit in the priests’ area. What an honor! He

said that we would pray in a different way today. He was going to show me the way the priests pray after their “regular” prayers. I was to leave my books and cards behind (he called it ‘my holy stuff’) and just sit up near the altar and be “quiet.” He told me that if I got restless just say in my heart the sacred name of “Jesus” over and over. Saying Jesus’ Name invites Him to come into your heart. (My first mantra!)

I remember looking at the stain glass windows, the flickering candles, the statues; smelling the beeswax burning and the distant sounds of old doors creaking open and groaning shut. A half hour passed in minutes. I must have been saying the name “Jesus” because I could hear it in my head when I “came to.” When he said it was time to go, I didn’t want to move or ever leave. I know he sensed that and when we left the church to go to the rectory, along the way he asked if I was listening. (I had no idea what he was talking about!) He wisely rephrased the inquiry to asking how I was feeling inside. All I could say is that “I felt really good.” He then said; “then you were listening.” The other half of praying is “shutting up and listening.” (Good advice for relationships of all kinds!)

I won’t go into every recollection, but over many months I practiced praying in a new way. I was amazed that there was nothing to really learn or do. Just sit quietly and think the name “Jesus.” Each day I would spend a little time down back of the church rambling through all the words and sacred formulae, and then, with his permission I would go up to the side of the main altar and pray by being quiet and listening. Truth be told, I never heard words, but Father Flynn said that God talks to us in deep feelings – for me it was simply feeling quiet and good. So, I talked to God and God was talking to me.

To keep this incredible heart warming practice going, I had to chalk up “*Prayer Changes Things*” to being a “mystery that is only revealed in faith” (whatever that meant).

Whenever I tried to figure out why it seemed that prayer did not change things, I noticed that I would feel irritable inside and the “quiet, warm feeling” would temporarily go away.



Years passed. But each time I looked at my altar and saw that saying about prayer I was still a little bothered. I disciplined myself to not think about what it meant. Somehow, someday it would come to me. As time went on I started reading physics, Eastern philosophy and the classical Christian Mystics. (Boy, did they have common threads running through them!) One day I was nearly knocked over when St. John of the Cross described prayer as:

“the consent to God’s Presence within us.”

At this point I actually experienced my mind shutting down which is what happens when we take in “pure knowledge.” That is why so many people at retreats “check out” when listening to scripture – the words of a saint – especially when they listen to the words of a saint while in Silence. The words are impregnated with that saint’s consciousness and it blasts through our noisy and incomplete understandings to a place deep inside where we remember, not learn – where we know and live and bathe in Wisdom. I like to say that if spiritual life was really about “learning” then all the Germans would be saints because they are so smart. But you can’t learn what is already alive inside you. Spiritual learning is actually remembering – you remember. The mind learns the things of the secular world having to do with thinking, feeling and sensing from a temporal body – mind unit– the

soul remembers Itself in Eternal Life! The mind looking outward can only see and understand life as lessons – the soul looking in witnesses life as Divine Revelation.

Even the highest level of understanding the idea of “karma” or as we say in the West “life’s sufferings” transcends any learning. The saints say to “endure our circumstances” keeping your mind on God and your heart in Silence. Knowing (faith) that whatever comes to us (prayers answered or not) is coming to us from a very loving God who has a specific plan to attract us back into His Sacred Heart.

St. John went further and said that:

***“The perfect prayer is to stand unprotected
(without desire) before God.
And what will God do?
God will take possession of you,
And that is the highest purpose of life.”***

I realized in a flash why I had been so bothered by that saying about prayer changing things. It does change things but not in the way that I had thought.

***Prayer, as God’s Presence within us,
changes us! (not necessarily things!)***

***Prayer is not necessarily a “request”
but a receptivity to the Word working within us.***

My mind went into hyper drive and the “mystery” began to reveal itself with one insight after the other:

- So it doesn't really matter whether we get what we want or not. That "feeling" of being in God's Presence is all we really, really wanted in the first place.
- I was trying to "possess" God and get something that I didn't have rather than allowing God to "possess" me in which I have everything – Him!
- Prayer does change things but it changes things by changing me – and how I experience things.
- Blue candles, red candles – it doesn't matter. The priest was just trying to help me keep my mind on God without getting too bent out of shape with the results. He reinforced the "process" and instilled the mustard seed of faith that grows into the Tree of Life with the fruits of Revelation.

So, which kind of prayer is better? Asking, Chatting or Receiving?

The answer is "Yes!" All of them!

This year during the Christmas retreat I prayed quite ardently. I asked the Divine Mother to keep an eye on the details and make the program life transforming for the participants; that they may get closer to Her and understand better the mission of Her Son in this world.

Walking down the hallway I remember saying, "OK Lord, it's about ready to start. Keep me out of the way and do what you need to do."

Later, during a break, I went back to my room, closed my eyes and thought "Lord Jesus Christ, I am Thine and Thou art mine" until the knock on the door about ten minutes later – time to go back to work!

And whether at the end of the day I light a blue candle or light a red one – it doesn't matter. It is all in His Hands anyway. I love to mentally light that candle because it is in “our relationship” that I live and move and have my being.

And – I am never, ever ALONE!