

Praying With Confidence and Perseverance

God has a gentle way of teaching important lessons. Often times, these insights come from unexpected sources. Perhaps you have similar experiences. Let me share my recent experience; however, before I begin, I need to disclose a little background information.

Some years ago a dear friend of mine informed me that his marriage was in serious trouble. In our culture of broken families, divorce touches most of us in some way. It is such a painful and destructive experience, I was deeply concerned for him, his wife, and their children. He wasn't looking for advice, so there was little I could do. He was merely sharing his pain with a friend. The wounds in their marriage ran deep, and although I wanted to help, I knew I needed to listen and turn to prayer.

I reasoned that Jesus could do what I could not. He could bind the wounds and draw this couple together. I was confident I was on very solid ground. After all, in the Gospels the Lord affirmed the indissolubility of marriage (Mk 10:2-12; Lk 16:18; Mt 5:31-32; 19:3-12; cf. 1 Cor 7:10-11; Rom 7:2-3). In the Book of Malachi God announced: "For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel" (Mal 2:16). God hates divorce because he loves children (Mal 2:15), who often carry the heaviest burden when their parent's marriage rips apart. Armed with this understanding, I began many months of prayer that God would heal this torn relationship.

Over a year later I received the distressing news that my friends were indeed divorcing in pain and bitterness. I was profoundly disappointed, not in them, because only God can read and evaluate hearts, but in the hopelessness of the situation and the suffering the whole family was experiencing. But there was more. I also felt a personal sense of failure. Should I have done more? Did I let them down by not praying with sufficient fervor? There was also an unspoken question that was too disturbing to bring to the surface. Had God let me down? Why did he not heal their marriage? Where was the power of prayer?

Now more than another year has passed. The divorce litigation has ended and each has settled into the new rhythm of their life as time marches on. I continued to remember them in my prayers, but I recently recognized that it lacked the former frequency and intensity. Was I afraid that God would let me down again? As that thought bubbled to the surface, I recalled with considerable unease Jesus' words to Peter, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt" (Mt 8:31)?

My insight came as I was reading about a genuine prayer warrior named Monica. She stormed heaven for many years begging God with unrestrained tears to save her son Augustine, who had embraced a heresy, was living with a woman outside of marriage, and had an illegitimate son. As Augustine neared his thirtieth year his conversion seemed far off and highly unlikely. Worst of all this wayward son wanted to go to Rome, where he would be exposed to all the temptations of this ancient imperial city. If that happened, she judges all hope would be lost.

Monica was desperate. Her prayers and weeping intensified as she clung to Augustine. He related what happened in his *Confessions*:

“Why I left the one country and went to the other, You know, O God, but You did not tell either me or my mother. She indeed was in dreadful grief at my going and followed me right to the seacoast. There she clung to me passionately, determined that I should either go back home with her or take her to roe with me, but I deceived her with the pretense that I had a friend who I did not want to leave until he had sailed off with a fair wind... She would not return home without me, but I managed with some difficulty to persuade her to spend the night in a place near the ship where there was an oratory in memory of St. Cyprian. To abandon yourself thus to Jesus is to permit Him to carry out His whole work of love. He wants us to follow Him the King, crucified and crowned with thorns, even to Calvary--but also to Resurrection, to His Heaven of glory” (Bk 5, Ch 8)!

So while his mother was in prayer, Augustine sneaked on a ship and sailed to Rome. But there is more to the story. Monica ardently opposed Augustine’s move to Italy, but it was in Italy that Augustine met St. Ambrose, who was the immediate instrument God used to convert Monica’s son. Monica pleaded with God: “Don’t let him leave.” God did not answer that prayer in order to answer the prayer under it: “Save my son!” God knew that Augustine’s trip to Rome would lead to his conversion, Monica did not. Despite her lack of knowledge and apparent hopelessness of the situation, Monica continued to pray and trust.

St. Paul wrote: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways” (Rom 11:33)! This episode from Augustine’s life was a pointed lesson to me of how little I perceive of any present reality. Only God sees the whole picture. Therefore, I need to rethink my judgment about what is working and what is not working. I need to put aside my ideas of success and failure, and trust in God. I thought of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They misjudged Christ’s death on Calvary as a failure, but in reality it was the victory of victories.

My reflection on St. Monica’s faithfulness in prayer and the dispirited disciples walking with Jesus exposed my lack of confidence and perseverance in prayer for my friend and his family. They now again figure prominently in my prayers. In summary I learned two important lessons. First, I need to pray ardently with confidence and never give up. Secondly, I need to leave the judging and implementation to God. In this I need to adapt Jesus’ attitude in prayer, “Not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mk 14:36).