

Before I entered the Dominicans, I can recall my Mother saying that prayer was easy for priests and sisters because they liked to do it so much. Imagine my disappointment when I discovered as a Dominican that prayer was no easier for us. In the seminary we were called to communal prayer quite often, but personal, private prayer remained quite challenging, at least for me.

We've been taught, there are four types of prayer: Adoration of God; Contrition (that is, asking for forgiveness when we sin); Petition, as when we ask a favor from God; and the prayer of Thanksgiving, as when we acknowledge the blessings and gifts that we and those we know have received from God. Today, Paul addresses the issue of the need for prayer of Petition.

And so we are left with the question: Why is it important to pray for another, even strangers?

That one question has probably been asked by every believer from the time humankind started asking questions about the meaning of faith itself. The skeptic will quickly say that there is no reason to pray at all because life is mindless, a raw collection of random acts and no one can predict or change the future. But then, what about us believers? Does prayer change God's mind or alter what is going to happen? I addressed this issue when last I preached; I'm sure that you have instant recall with regards to that homily 2 weeks ago; if not, it can be found in the reference to homilies in our bulletin.

We revisit the Thessalonian congregation today and will do so again next week as this first century church holds a distant mirror up to our own time. When Paul wrote to this church, he was still very active in

establishing churches in the Mediterranean world. With him were his two ministry partners, Silvanus and Timothy, who, over time, became his most trusted companions. Even so, the question still remains: Why do we pray for the needs of others?

Paul answers the question NOT in some vague, sweeping treatise, but rather he personalizes it when he asked the Thessalonian community to “pray for us,” meaning pray for his ministry. So often people, sometimes even strangers, ask for our prayers. Do my prayers really help those asking for them?

We take an initial step towards answering this question by reminding ourselves that praying for others is an identification with them. When we pray for others, we confess to God that the struggles of another are in many ways our own struggles.

A colleague at work who learns that she has breast cancer becomes a person in our own prayers reminding us that her life is just as fragile as our own.

The neighbor who loses his job occupies a place in our prayers reminding us that employment is not guaranteed.

Terror that takes the lives of innocents in a place halfway around the world is a brutal invitation to identify with their unspeakable loss, sharing our common humanity that is so often sadly marked by tragedy.

As you know, we had a breakfast for the veterans in our community after the 8:30 am Mass, thanking them for their service. A parishioner, Brian, came up to me and shared an amazing story. About 4 weeks ago, he and his family were considered whether to pull the plug on their

brain dead daughter and donate her organs to those in need or to simply allow her to live out her years as a vegetable. They had people of all religions—Catholics, Mormons, Evangelicals—praying for his daughter when suddenly she woke up out of a coma and starting playing with puzzles appropriate for children of her age group. The hospital folks said that they never saw anything like it. And so ask Brian if he thinks that praying for others is worthwhile. Still, there are no guarantees, but such gives all something to think about

Sometimes the printing of prayer lists, prayer chains and prayer reminders are useful tools to strengthen our memories. But if we are not careful, that list becomes sterile ink on paper rather than a personalized connection with lives that hang in the balance between despair and hope. Praying for others calls us to identify our lives with them as we share in our common humanity.

When Paul wrote “pray for us,” he invited his Christian friends to advocate for his cause before God. The tradition of prayer across the 2,000 year history of the Church includes the saints’ intercession for the faithful and our partnership with the whole family of God on earth and in heaven. And such work takes time, energy and patience.

What might happen in our common life if we took up the work of interceding for each other before God’s throne of mercy and grace? Do you think it would weaken or strengthen our ties to each other or with God? I suspect that we all know the answer to this question. Together, praying for each other, asking God for wisdom, courage, healing and guidance would forge bonds of love between us.

I quite vividly recall when a doctor told my Mother that she had a serious form of cancer and that she would need 7 hours of surgery; given my Mother's weakened, jaundice state of health made a successful a long shot. Interestingly upon hearing that news, my Father fainted. As I've mentioned before, my parents didn't seem to have a very loving relationship towards one another. My Mother knew that I loved her, but she wasn't all that sure about my Father until that wondrous moment. As an only child, I was the one who would buy her Christmas presents in the name of my Father, along with Mother's day cards, birthday cards, etc.

After my Mother's diagnosis, I prayed for a good thing: that after so many years of questing my Father's love, that she could now enjoy some time with the knowledge that my Father actually did love her. But the hardest aspect of my prayer was to amend it with the prayer of Mary: not my will, but thy will be done. Actually my Mother lived another 21 years as an invalid with my Father taking care of her.

A third but surely not the last reason we pray for others is in the investment we make in our sisters and brothers when praying for them. The words "investment" and "others" are often reserved for those in education. Teachers invest in the lives of their students, mentors invest in the education of those they train and parents invest in guiding their young to becoming healthy, functioning adults.

Would you try to imagine what your life would be like today if your parents and teachers, religious educators and friends had not invested their lives into yours? We all stand on the shoulders of others (repeat). Praying for others offers up to God is a gift.

When we pray for those who care for the poor and dying, we invest our hope that through their lives, those who suffer will find peace. Praying for others may well be the most meaningful investment we can make with our lives.

So to this issue, Paul does not attempt a sweeping argument for prayer in general, abstract terms. Paul does, with humility and grace, personalize the work of prayer by believing that when we pray for others, God is well-pleased. As in the Our Father, our prayers for others confess that through this good work, God's work is done on earth, even as it is in heaven. So be busy praying for others. See yourself as an advocate for the sick, an investor in the needy, and a partner with the lonely so that God's work becomes our own mission in life.