

**A Primer on Intercessory Prayer**  
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*Introduction*

This need for a primer such as this was suggested by a Daughter in Austin, and the request was endorsed by the current Diocesan President, Brenda Amos, and the President-elect, Linda Astala. I was asked by the latter two Daughters to prepare a primer and what you are reading now is the fruit of that request. I welcome suggestions for improving it. Given that it is likely to read primarily by Episcopalians, I do not expect everyone to agree with everything I have written. Please read it with an open heart. I pray that the Holy Spirit will teach you whatever it is that the Spirit wants you to learn.

*What is prayer?*

Although this primer is intended to be more practical than theoretical, a certain amount of theory is unavoidable. If we do not have a clear idea of what prayer is, and is not, then our prayer life may not be as rich or spiritually nourishing as it might be. Prayer, in essence, is intentionally directing our minds and wills toward God in love. We desire to be conformed to God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and want to be God's instrument in the restoration of all creation to God through Christ. This is simply another way of saying that prayer is the expression of our desire to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength. Prayer, then, can be expressed in varied and numerous ways. Our whole lives should be prayers since our whole lives should somehow be directed and offered to God in love. We can, and we should, pray always.

*What is intercessory prayer?*

Intercessory prayer is prayer in which we ask God to do something for someone or something. Thus, asking God to heal a sick friend and asking God to bring peace to the Middle East are intercessory prayers.

*If God knows the needs of every human being, of what benefit is intercessory prayer?*

If my spouse has a terminal illness, I would, of course, want her healed immediately and would ask God for that favor. But our faith tells us that God loves both me and my spouse with a love greater than we can possibly imagine, and that nothing can separate us from this love of God. Perhaps the "best" and most unselfish intercessory prayer is the one Jesus himself taught, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I am not being flippant. We must believe in God's abiding love for all people. It may be that the best prayer is to place someone in the hands of God, asking God to give that person what that person most needs, and not what we think that person needs. After all, our greatest need is union with God, a union through which we come to know God as God knows us, a union through

which we come to see God face to face, and come to love both God and all creation with a love that is God's own love.

Sometimes, as Paul tells us, we do not know how to pray, and at those times the Spirit in us prays for us. At times, we might best simply be silent and let the Spirit do our praying even though we may not hear or know what the Spirit is saying.

Yet, intercessory prayer is valuable for at least two reasons: First, God has called us to share in the work of restoring all creation to its Creator. We are, in effect, co-creators with God. What we do and say does make a difference in how we and others relate to God. God wants us to ask for the welfare of one another. This asking itself, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can bring powerful results. Second, because we are members of the Body of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit, we are channels of grace and God's power on earth. Prayer releases spiritual energy for our own good and the good of others. Prayer brings positive change whether we get what we ask for in intercessory prayer, or not.

*Is intercessory prayer always answered?*

A popular answer to this question is "Yes, but not necessarily in the way we desire." We might also hear that "No is an answer as well as yes," or "God answers prayer in God's time, not ours." At least these cliches are true, if understood properly, but there are other responses that are not only false, but can be spiritually harmful: "Alice was not healed because you did not have enough faith when you prayed," or, "Alice was not healed because she was guilty of some secret sin that blocked the action of God."

My strong belief is that no true prayer (prayer as used in this primer) is without spiritual power or transforming effect. Often we do not see or feel the results of our prayer, and so we assume that the prayer was ineffective. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," Jesus taught us. We are here not to keep score or put extra notches in our prayer beads. We are here to do the work of Christ and to love others as we have first been loved. Pray and leave the rest to God.

*Should intercessory prayer be specific or general?*

One good Daughter I know reads the names of the persons for whom she has been asked to pray and says the following prayer:

Dear Lord, please heal and minister to those people in body, mind and spirit according to their individual needs and to your holy will for their lives through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

This is a beautiful prayer and recognizes that God will act in love toward those for whom we pray. There is nothing wrong with praying specifically, and there are those who advocate this as a "better" form of prayer, but I personally lean toward the more general form in keeping with "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." In the more general form, we abandon ourselves and those for whom we pray more to the infinite mercy and love of God. One cannot go wrong in

doing this, particularly if we are not sure how we should pray.

*Must we pray verbally or mention specifically all of the names of persons for whom we are praying?*

Here my answer may surprise you. In my opinion, it is entirely right and proper to pray as the Spirit may lead you to pray. Let me give some examples. First, when I am driving to visit a sick parishioner, I often offer the driving itself as a prayer on behalf of the patient. Second, you may feel called to a quiet form of prayer, e.g., centering prayer, and find verbal prayer difficult, or, at times, nearly impossible. You could place your prayer list close to you at a time of quiet prayer and ask God to bless those intentions for which you are to pray as you make yourself available to God in silence. Third, as noted earlier, you may ask the Spirit within you to pray when you yourself find it hard to pray, or you are not sure how to pray. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive, but merely illustrations to show that intercessory prayer does not have to involve verbally telling God who every person on your list is and what they want. God knows and honors the intention of whatever form your prayer takes. God understands the heart better than what you might say.

*What guidelines might apply to prayer lists?*

My view is that each Daughters Chapter should publish as widely as possible the following information:

- 1) There is a prayer list to which persons may add intentions for which Daughters will then pray;
- 2) How to add an intention to the prayer list; and
- 3) How long an intention is generally kept on the list. I recommend until the end of the first full month after which it has been added to the list, unless the request is renewed.
- 4) Someone may add an intention without stating more than a first name and a general plea, e.g., Jane for healing, Bob for a promotion, although intentions may be more precise if desired, e.g., Jane Doe for cancer surgery next Tuesday.
- 5) The prayer list is for prayer support only, and if the petitioner wants more, e.g., a home visit by the priest, or meals after surgery, the petitioner should make these requests to the parish office or appropriate parish ministry.
- 6) Although the Daughters do not make a point of publicizing intentions outside the Chapter, nor do they reveal the name of the person making the prayer request, the prayer list should not be considered a confidential document. Therefore, persons for whom prayers are sought who wish to remain anonymous should not be described in ways that are likely to reveal their identities. Understand that the Daughters do not deliberately “leak” the intentions, but when so many copies of a list are distributed, it is possible that one might be left inadvertently lying around for others to see.

7) Daughters like to receive follow-up information if the petitioner is willing to provide it, e.g., Jane has been released from the hospital and is doing well, or John Doe died yesterday.

Following these guidelines may help avoid misunderstandings and disappointments, e.g., if someone expects a home visit after making a prayer request, but has not indicated this to anyone.

*Is this all there is to know?*

Obviously not. Each Chapter, perhaps each Daughter, will have its or her own way to honor the commitment to intercessory prayer. One must not bind the Spirit, nor assume that one “one size fits all.” These guidelines are intended to answer some of the important questions that many Daughters have had concerning intercessory prayer. You are invited to share your ideas and comments to make this primer more helpful. God bless you all.

Comments are welcome. You can email me at [mgmign@hal-pc.org](mailto:mgmign@hal-pc.org).  
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