

Prayer of intercession

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This double movement, this stepping from humanity to God and from God to humanity, bound both by obedience to God's will for ourselves, others and the world and by compassion for others in their situations of sin, need and poverty, explains why intercession in the Bible is the special responsibility of the pastor or leader of the people, the king, the priest, and the prophet. Intercession finds its full realization in Christ, the "one mediator between God and the human race" (1 Timothy 2:5). It is with Christ, and him crucified, that Job's longing is fulfilled: "If only there were someone between us, Lord, who could lay his hand upon us both, on my shoulder and on your shoulder" (cf. Job 9:33). Here Job is asking for an intercessor! If the icon of the intercessor in the Old Testament is Moses who, standing on the hill between Aaron and Hur who support his hands, keeps his arms raised toward heaven to ensure the victory of the people of Israel fighting on the plain (Exodus 17:8-16), in the New Testament the icon of the intercessor is the crucified Christ, whose arms outstretched on the cross lift all of humanity up to God. Christ on the cross lays one hand on God's shoulder and the other hand on each human shoulder. The most complete act of intercession is thus the gift of one's life, the taking of another person's place, the cross! Moses expresses this well in his intercession for the children of Israel: "Lord, if you would only forgive their sin!

If you will not, then strike me out of the book that you have written" (Exodus 32:32). In our intercession we learn to offer ourselves to God for the sake of others, and to express this act of offering in a concrete way in our daily lives. Intercession leads us to the heart of what it means to live a responsible Christian life. In total solidarity with others in their sin and need, knowing that we ourselves are in the same condition of sin and need, we step into a human situation in communion with God, who in Christ has taken the decisive step for the salvation of all people. The Servant of the Lord intercedes for sinners by taking their sin and the punishment intended for them upon himself, and bearing their infirmity and weakness (Isaiah 53:12). Through his Incarnation and death on the cross, Christ accomplished the most radical act of intercession possible, the decisive step between God and humanity. Now, living forever with God, he continues to intercede for us as a great and merciful high priest (Hebrews 7:25). His hand on our shoulder inspires our trust, boldness, and *parresía*: "Who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?" (Romans 8:34).

The gift of the Spirit makes us participants in the intercession of Christ: the Spirit teaches us to pray "according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27), conforming our prayer and our life to the prayer and life of Christ. It is only in the Spirit, who tears us away from our closed individuality, that we are able to pray for others, allow them to dwell within us, and lift them up into the presence of God. In the Spirit we even find it possible to pray for our enemies, which is an essential step to take if we want to learn to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). There is direct reciprocity between prayer for others and love for others. We might say, in fact, that the fullest expression of our intercession consists less in words spoken before God than in living in the presence of God in the position of the crucified Christ, with outstretched arms, in faithfulness to God and in solidarity with humanity. And at times there is absolutely nothing else we can do, when we want to preserve a relationship with another person, except preserve the relationship in our prayer and intercession. At this point it should be clear that intercession is not a task, a duty, or 'something we should do,' but the essence of a life consumed by love for God and others. The church should remember this: what is the church if it is not intercession with God for all people? This is the truly powerful service the church is called to carry out in the world. It is a service that situates the church in the world not as the leader of crusades, but as a body that bears the marks of the cross!

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