



**BECOMING
A PARISH OF
INTENTIONAL
DISCIPLES**

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CHAPTER TWO

Praying It Forward: Intercession and the Transformation of Your Parish

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“You want us to do *what?*” Karen asked, shock sending her voice nearly an octave higher than normal.

I worked hard to keep the smile from showing on my face. It’s not that I delight in torturing others, but I have to admit I enjoy moving people outside their comfort zones. And the fifteen parishioners sitting around me were definitely outside their zone of comfort.

“We’re going to go out in pairs,” I replied, “and each pair will head to a different street around the parish church. Once there, we’ll walk the street and stop in front of each home to pray for the people who live in that house.”

The gathered parishioners began muttering now, and the discontented sound grew louder. Clearly, this wasn’t going to be as easy as I’d hoped.

ROAD TO RENEWAL

Nearly two years earlier, the deaths of our parish’s retired pastor and our then-current pastor (only two days apart) rocked our

community. When the new pastor, Father Ed Pelrine, settled in, he found a parish that was in need of renewal but filled with wonderful people. Like many parishes in the United States, a small group of parishioners were doing most of the work (financially and physically) to keep the ministries, apostolates, and life of the parish going. The physical side of our campus, which had been largely left alone over the years, needed some serious attention. To top it off, we had a strong Catholic school but little participation by school parents in the life of the parish. This was a parish firmly rooted in maintenance mode.

Father Ed understood that the “secret” to renewal for our parish wouldn’t be found in a single program but rather a concerted effort at evangelization and the building of a culture of discipleship. To that end, he brought me on as the Director of Faith Formation a year after he came to the parish and asked me to focus on evangelization and the making of disciples. Together, we specifically worked on restructuring and renewing the RCIA program and youth ministry, and in general began the process of evangelizing the wider community. We knew we would have to spend time “preparing the soil” in order for the message of renewal through Christ to spread. We were not prepared for how rocky that soil would be.

In the book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell identifies a “culture of silence” that exists within Catholic parishes. This culture works against the spread of the Gospel by reinforcing attitudes that make it difficult for people to speak about their relationship with Jesus to others. Therefore, discipleship and personal relationship with Christ seem abnormal, “Protestant” or, worse, are not even dreamed of as possible.

At our parish, all of the detrimental effects of the culture of silence were in full force. Outside of a small percentage of parishioners who were intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, a

transformative, life-giving personal relationship with Jesus was not on the radar for most members of our community. These were wonderful, giving, and friendly people who just did not know that they did not know. We experienced a great deal of passive resistance during this time.

In addition to the power of the culture of silence, we quickly found ourselves contending with the enemy. The apostle Paul clearly spells out the reality of the spiritual dimensions of battle in his letter to the Ephesians:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.
(Ephesians 6:12, RSV)

In his desire to renew and transform our parish along the trajectory of discipleship, Father Ed was pushing back against the kingdom that opposes the Kingdom of God. And the enemy responded. Both Father Ed and I experienced this in several ways, but the most frustrating was a kind of "wall" that seemed to rise up every time he preached or I taught. In conversation, we were both surprised that we described our experiences in such similar ways: we could both "feel" our words slamming into a barrier before they reached the gathered people. We were even more surprised when this same experience was mentioned by other guest speakers we brought into our community.

I have been a teacher with the Catherine of Siena Institute for many years, and I've taught the Institute's workshop on spiritual gifts discernment too many times to count. I've seen the power and fruitfulness of charisms in my own work and in the life of the parishes I've visited. God has gifted his people with spiritual gifts for the sake of our mission. Therefore, even

though this was a period of great frustration, I knew that we had to gather together the community and begin to intercede for our parish if we wanted to start bearing fruit. Even more, I knew we had to identify gifted intercessors to break through the cultural and spiritual obstacles around us in a timely fashion.

THE POWER OF INTERCESSION

When I give retreats or talks, I often describe intercessory prayer as God's "Shock and Awe Campaign," because the fruit of individual and corporate intercession is often an overwhelming display of God's mercy, providence, and deliverance that changes the spiritual climate around a person or a place and transforms situations. Intercessory prayer disrupts the "infrastructure" of the enemy, by which I mean it weakens and destroys the network of lies, fear, intimidation, and confusion — the tools and strategies used by Satan to keep persons and situations away from God's peace, clarity, and redeeming love. In changing the spiritual climate around a person or community, this kind of prayer helps till the soil of the heart and prepares it to receive the seed of the Gospel.

Intercessory prayer is, however, more than simply coming before God with our prayers of supplication. When we engage in intercession, we participate in a sustained and intimate pleading before the Lord for someone else. Sister Ann Shields, in her book *Intercession: A Guide to Effective Prayer*, writes that "as intercessors, we literally 'go between' the Lord and those we are praying for, asking him to show them his mercy and blessing."¹ Some intercessors refer to this as "standing in the

¹ Sister Ann Shields, S.G.L., *Intercession: A Guide to Effective Prayer* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), p. 29.

gap" for someone else. They base this phrase on the passage from Ezekiel where the Lord is chastising the nation of Israel, and he speaks to the prophet saying: "Thus I have searched among them for someone who would build a wall or stand in the breach before me to keep me from destroying the land; but I found no one" (Ezekiel 22:30).

Intercessory prayer is woven deeply into the "spiritual DNA" of Catholics. Scripture is filled with people who stood in the gap for others — Abraham interceded with God on behalf of Sodom (Genesis 18), Moses offered to take God's wrath upon himself so that the Israelites could be spared (Exodus 32), Aaron made atonement for the Israelites (Numbers 17), and Samuel offered sacrifices so that the Israelites would triumph over the Philistines (1 Samuel 7). All of these examples of intercession were foreshadows of the coming intercession of the Son of God, who fulfilled all the promises God made in the Old Testament and who now "is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

Jesus Christ is the perfect intercessor, who pleads for us at the right hand of God. Rather than making our own attempts at intercession unnecessary, it is the person of Jesus who makes our intercession possible. We who were baptized into his death so that we might share in the life of the Risen Christ (Romans 6:3-4) also now live out the various dimensions of that life.

In other words, what Christ does now in eternity, we are called to do now in the world because of our baptism. Out of his great love for us, Jesus allows us to participate in his ministry of intercession, and he gives all of us his Spirit to strengthen our prayer and make it fruitful and effective (Romans 8:26). In addition, the Lord calls and gifts particular individuals with a charism for intercession that empowers their prayer for others.

Paul highlights the fundamental nature of intercession in the life of Christians in his first letter to Timothy:

First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. (1 Timothy 2:1-2)

Intercession is so essential to the life of a disciple that the Church includes it in every celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass — as we implore the Lord to hear our prayers on behalf of the Church, the world, and our local community. The history of the Church is also filled with men and women — many of them saints — who persevered in intercession for others. Perhaps one of the most well known, and beloved, of these saints is Thérèse of Lisieux. Such was the fruitfulness and intensity of her intercessory prayer that she holds the title copatron of the missions, despite having never sallied forth to do missionary work and, instead, living much of her short life within a cloister.

If we focus on the power of intercessory prayer, however, we inevitably come face to face with a dilemma: History (the world's and our own) is filled with “unanswered” prayers — or at least prayers which have not been answered the way that we hoped they would. People's hearts are still turned against God, our family members still fall ill and, sometimes, never recover despite our most fervent prayers. Intercessory prayer rests at the confluence of the mystery of God's mercy and the mystery of suffering. In reality, intercessory prayer is not a magic formula or a silver bullet; it's not a kind of extended arm on a divine slot machine that we only need to pull in order to line up three cherries and hit the miracle jackpot.

Prayer does not change God. Theologians have been teaching that for almost 2,000 years. He is immutable, unchangeable. If our prayers were to somehow change God, then we would have to admit that there was something deficient within God and he would, by definition, cease to be God. On the other hand, if God is, indeed, unchangeable, then aren't intercessory prayers really a waste of time?

This truly is quite a dilemma.

Our way through it, though, lies in an exploration of the nature of God and an understanding of causality — for which the thought of Thomas Aquinas, a medieval Dominican philosopher, will come in quite handy. Wait! Don't fall asleep yet! I promise you this will be quick, painless, and potentially enlightening.

For Thomas (as for many Christian philosophers), God was the primary cause of all creation — the source of existence. God created all living creatures and set them within the boundaries of his creation. Rather than simply setting everything in motion and then withdrawing to observe from a distance like some divine watchmaker, God chose to work through his creation “from the abundance of his goodness, imparting to creatures also the dignity of causing.”² We, therefore, are the secondary causes through whom God works to fulfill his plan.

In this sense, our prayers of intercession are “always already” a response to what God is doing. When we are moved to pray for others, we are cooperating with God's will. Rachel Erdman, a theologian, summarizes this beautifully:

I think the problem people have understanding prayer is that we tend to think of God as “responding” to our requests, when in reality it is only through the work of

² Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 163.

Expl. intercession



God the Holy Spirit that we are able to pray in the first place. It is God, always active in creation, who initiates the prayer in us — it is we who respond.³

Intercessory prayer, then, is initiated by the Holy Spirit so that we might dispose ourselves to the divine will and earnestly pray for its manifestation here on earth. In this, Jesus' instruction to his disciples regarding prayer is to be our model. The Lord's Prayer petitions the Father so that his will might be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, RSV).

Pope Francis acknowledges this reality when he speaks about intercessory prayer in his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*):

- ✧ The great men and women of God were great intercessors. Intercession is like a "leaven" in the heart of the Trinity. It is a way of penetrating the Father's heart and discovering new dimensions which can shed light on concrete situations and change them. We can say that God's heart is touched by our intercession, yet in reality he is always there first. What our intercession achieves is that his power, his love and his faithfulness are shown ever more clearly in the midst of the people. (283)

Seen this way, fruitfulness and effectiveness in prayer do not rely on personal effort or reciting the right words, but in "penetrating the Father's heart," aligning our will and desire with the divine and perfect will of our heavenly Father. This understanding sheds light on Jesus' own words that "whatever you ask in my name, I will do" (John 14:13).

³ Rachel Erdman, "Bending the King's Ear," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 20.1 (April 2013), p. 56.

To ask something in Jesus' name does not mean to throw out a prayer of petition and then tack on the name of Jesus as if it activated the power of the prayer like a magic word or formula. To pray in Jesus' name is to ask for what Jesus would ask for — not in an abstract “What would Jesus do?” kind of way, but actively to seek and ask him what he desires and then to listen with an open heart for the response. This is a pattern that I see repeated again and again in the life of mature intercessors — they do not so much come to God with their list of needs, but rather dispose themselves to the Holy Spirit so that he leads them in what they should pray for.

When we have raised up generations of such men and women at the parish level, we will truly begin to see the fruit of sustained corporate intercession in our evangelization and formation efforts. The question is: How do we raise up that generation?

CALLING ALL PRAYER WARRIORS

After reaching the conclusion about gathering intercessors to pray for the community during my first year on staff, I was stuck wrestling with that very question. I knew that I especially wanted to foster a cadre of gifted intercessors, but our staff — let alone the wider parish — did not yet have a common language around charisms and their discernment. I was also reluctant to post something in the bulletin that would appeal to gifted intercessors. I think many parish bulletins are too filled up with language and shorthand (like RCIA, CHRP, and so forth) that appeal to a small subsection of parish “insiders” but remain largely incomprehensible to those who might be in earlier thresholds of their spiritual journey.

Having taught the *Called & Gifted* workshop for many years, I did know that those with a charism of intercessory

prayer share some characteristics in common. First off, they experience praying for others as one of the most powerful ways that God works in the world, and they have a particular passion for standing in the gap. It isn't unusual for a gifted intercessor to be in prayer for hours and then emerge refreshed and energized, for example. In addition, these men and women often wake up in the middle of the night with a particular person, situation, or geographic place for which they feel led to pray. Many gifted intercessors feel as if their prayer is being directed by the Holy Spirit, almost as if he were "praying through" them, and they usually have a sense when they are "done." Most importantly, those with a charism of intercessory prayer see remarkable, often miraculous, fruit from their prayer for others.

When the time was right, I wrote a very general article for our bulletin advertising an upcoming "Evening of Intercession." In the article, I gave a very quick definition of intercessory prayer, and I invited anyone who might be interested to come — even if they had never heard about intercessory prayer and knew nothing about it. Imagine my surprise when almost fifty parishioners showed up! I asked for a show of hands from those people who understood what intercessory prayer was. Only a few shot up. Clearly, I couldn't move right into an evening of spontaneous praise, worship, and intercession. I had to lay some groundwork ... and fast!

We opened with a brief prayer and Scripture reflection, and then I gave more background on intercessory prayer. After that foundation, I knew that my would-be intercessors needed some safe, non-threatening experiences of intercession. I had consulted with a friend and colleague earlier and had already settled on using the Chaplet of Divine Mercy as a starting point. I broke the gathering up into five groups (one for each decade of the chaplet), and I asked each group to identify areas within our parish community where God's Spirit already seemed to be at work.

After about fifteen minutes, I called them all together, and each group read off the areas that they had identified. I then informed them that each group should pick an announcer. We would go through the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and at the start of each decade of the chaplet, the announcer from one of the groups would list the areas their group identified. We would then offer that decade for the intensification of the action of the Holy Spirit in those areas. //

Feedback from that meeting was exceptionally positive. We met again the following month. This time, I had each group list the obstacles they felt kept men and women in our local civic community from hearing and responding to the Gospel message. Each group led a decade of the Divine Mercy Chaplet, praying that God would remove those specific obstacles. Again, the participants were happy and excited to pray in this way.

We continued to meet monthly. Fewer and fewer people showed up, but the ones who did seemed to be energized by our intercessory sessions. Without a lot of direction from me, those with the charisms of intercessory prayer eventually became the majority in that group. We gradually shifted from more standard, rote prayers and began to experiment with Scripture reading, silence, and then spontaneous intercession. This continued for several more months until the fateful evening when I decided to send them out in twos to go prayer walking. I knew that we eventually wanted to send out "missionaries" from our parish into our local community, and I wanted to make sure that we had gifted individuals (and the general parish community) comfortable with "covering" the entire village in prayer before our evangelists went out.

There was a little more hemming and hawing, but I managed, through the grace of God, to cajole them out. We all grabbed our partner, said a quick prayer, and then walked and prayed through our assigned route. When everyone returned to the parish church, I could sense a buzz in the air, a kind of

energy that I hadn't really seen among many of our parishioners. Of course, they were excited that they conquered their fears and did something they might never have done without a little push. But there was something else. In talking to a few of these intercessors later that evening, it was clear they had experienced, briefly, a greater sense of participating in the redemptive work of Christ — a kind of intimacy in the “work” of prayer that they had never felt before.

As amazing as it was to see this group of mostly neophyte intercessors change and begin to transform into bold prayer warriors, the effect of their prayers on our parish was even more powerful. In the sixth months since their first meeting, the wall that Father Ed and I experienced between ourselves and the parishioners disappeared. People began to respond in even greater numbers and depth to the Gospel message, as they heard it preached at Mass, during the RCIA, and during our four-week homegrown evangelization process. The sense of disunity and opposition that seemingly surrounded our staff broke apart. Staff relationships and interaction became healthier. New staff members joined us, and disciples from other parts of the archdiocese began to show up at our doorstep. In short, the spiritual climate of our parish has changed — and that has had a positive impact on every other area of our mission.

Four years after we began this process of intercession, we are finding an even greater need for it. We have begun sending out a small team of missionaries to start evangelizing the local community. The Lord has also led us to begin a small healing ministry, which is growing at a regular pace, and our process for helping baptized Christians and the unbaptized become disciples of Christ in the midst of his Church is growing beyond the infrastructure we currently have.

We are still very much a parish in transition. We are not spiritual giants. So far, no one here has had to tie himself to

a pew to stop floating in the air during Mass (a la St. Joseph of Cupertino), and we do not have any Marian locutionists among us. We bicker, gossip, squabble, celebrate, and support one another like normal people. We are ordinary men and women whom God has equipped to do extraordinary things for his Kingdom — and we have helped to unleash that divine empowerment through sustained intercession.

Because of that, the number of intentional disciples in our parish has doubled in five years. We are no longer focused on maintenance. Our hearts and minds are gradually opening up to mission. The Lord continues to move us further and further out of our comfort zones as a community, and I find myself sending up a quick prayer of gratitude every time I hear one of our parishioners cry out, “You want us to do *what?*”

Because God is about to move.

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