What do you say when a friend says their prayers are not being answered?

Theology 101 is focusing on the topic of evangelization. Specifically, the task is to offer some ways of approaching various questions Catholics may encounter from co-workers, family and friends regarding the practice of the faith. Of course, we must remember that nothing can replace the power of witnessing to the Good News through our own actions and words combined with our willingness to accompany others on their faith journey.

THE QUESTION:

What do I say when a friend tells me they have prayed and prayed for something, but their prayers were not answered? Now they are giving up on God.

THE THREE RESPONSES

A few years ago, a homilist gave a short reflection on his own experience of prayer: “Prayer may be about our needs, but it should never be about our wants. Prayer is an honest conversation in communion with God. It is simply receiving God’s gift of love. The answer to our prayers becomes the life we lead for God, for there are only three responses given by God to prayer: ‘yes,’ ‘not yet’ and ‘I have a better idea.’ You will notice ‘no’ is not an option.

NOT YET

When our prayer is not answered immediately, perseverance and persistence are required. One way of understanding prayer is to think of each prayer as a seed. The Gospel of Mark teaches us that the fruits of prayer may not be realized instantly. The seed first produces the blade, then the ear and finally the ripe wheat in the ear, all typically out of the sight and control of the farmer who planted the seed.

In addition, the parable of the sower might be helpful. (Mt 13) Sometimes, in order for our prayer to be fruitful, we need to sow it, taking care to water and tend to it, all the while trusting that the seed will grow of its own accord and on its own timeline. If we instead try to force this growth, we will succeed only in preventing it altogether. If we sow our prayer only to then “dig it up” incessantly with worry and doubt, it will never take root. Nor does it serve us to enthusiastically look for any signs that point to our prayer being answered only to give up hope at the first sign of delay.

I HAVE A BETTER IDEA

When our prayer seems to have gone unanswered, we are called to consider that God may have a better idea. This calls for our discernment and, ultimately, our surrender.

After celebrating the Last Supper, Jesus went to Gethsemane to pray. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that he began to feel sorrow and distress and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me?” (26:39) Of course, we know the cup he was referring to was the Passion of the cross. Three different times, Jesus repeated his prayer. Luke’s Gospel says that Jesus “was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground.” (22:44) Yet, Jesus’ prayer went seemingly unanswered as the cup of his death did not in fact pass.

Of course, that Jesus asked to be spared from the cross is not the whole story. He indeed asked for what he desired, but that desire was subordinated to the Father’s will. In the same way, the Gospels encourage us to ask ourselves about the conformity of our prayer to the desire of the Spirit.
FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Consider prayerfully reading the following passage from the Book of Exodus (3:7-8):

“But the Lord said, “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore, I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

REFLECTION QUESTION:

We know that the Israelites had been slaves for a long time at this point. We also know that even after the Lord delivered them from Egypt, they spent another 40 years in the desert before entering the Promised Land. Along the way, there was grumbling, backsliding, idolatry and doubt as their prayers and God’s promise were unfulfilled.

1. Given all this, what does this story have to teach us about the nature of answered prayer?
2. How might this passage help you support a friend who is struggling in his or her faith because of unanswered prayers?

“When our prayer is not answered immediately, perseverance and persistence are required.”

especially when we are tempted to stop praying because we think our prayers have not been answered.

In the spiritual classic Trusful Surrender to Divine Providence, St. Claude de la Colombière puts it this way: “Christ promised on behalf of his Father that he would give us everything, even the very smallest things. But he laid down an order to be observed in all that we ask, and if we do not obey this rule we are unlikely to obtain anything. He tells us in St. Matthew: ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice and all these things shall be given to you besides.’

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

How can you help your friend at this difficult time? Accompany him or her along every step of the spiritual journey. Pray with your friend. Encourage your friend to be persistent in prayer; demonstrate your trust in God’s faithfulness. We must show up to prayer, even more so amid distraction and dryness, with a humble and honest heart that pleads with the Father for our needs, but says, with Jesus, “Not my will, but your will be done.”

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