

**SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**  
**Year c      July 28, 2013**

**Theme: Changing God's Mind**

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Father Donald Cozzens a priest of the Diocese of Cleveland has recently written a little book called "Notes from the Underground: The Spiritual Journal of a Secular Priest."

In a section on prayer he asked this question:

"Aren't prayers of petition [prayers asking God to do something] an attempt to change the mind of God? 'Well,' God says, '*I was going to take you mother, but since you have prayed so hard, I will give her a few more years with you.*'"

Then Fr. Cozzens asks another question: "Do we, can we, change God's mind through our prayers?"

Think about that for a moment: "Do we, can we, change God's mind through our prayers?"

If we start out believing that God is all-knowing, all-powerful and most of all completely and totally loving, then why would we ever need to change God's mind?

Wouldn't God do what is best and right and loving from the get go?

Why would we ever need to change God's mind?

Besides this, what kind of a God would let my mother live a few more years just because I "prayed harder" than my neighbor who never learned how to pray and who loved her mother as much as I do mine but hers died at 60 and mine at 70 all because I prayed?

What kind of God is that?

And yet the tradition of petitioning God in prayer is clearly part of our scriptural and communal heritage as a people of faith.

Take the first reading today: though likely intended to showcase how few righteous persons there were in Sodom and Gomorrah before they were obliterated, the story of Abraham bargaining with God demonstrates successful sweet-talking and cajoling of the Almighty into changing the divine mind.

Similarly, Jesus' own parable of the persistent friend knocking on his neighbor's door at midnight suggests some downright pestering of the Lord to get what we want may not even be out of order.

Personally, I am really uncomfortable with both the story of Abraham and Jesus' parable.

Neither seems to jive with what we hear in other parts of the scriptures and with Jesus' teaching of who our God is – even with what in this same Gospel Jesus said God is.

If God is like a Father who loves us and cares for us and never would give us a snake or a scorpion when we asked for something to eat, why would we have to pester him and beg him for what we need and what is good for us?

Why would we ever have to pray to change God's mind when God already loves us and cares about us and would never ever do anything to hurt or harm us?

Like Fr. Cozzens, I really don't understand where or how flat out petitionary prayer works but as he wrote:

*“...Jesus appears to have underwritten this understanding of prayer when he told his disciples that whatever asked God in his name would be granted to them. So I continue to pray for friends and family, for my stumbling church and for my wounded world. If this is superstition, I plead guilty..... There is something at work here that I don't pretend to comprehend. I can live with that.” (page 116)*

On the other hand, if all natural events are **not in God's direct and immediate control** – if sickness and disease, decisions about jobs and current events are shaped by natural forces rather than manipulated by divine intervention – then perhaps prayer in some way impacts the spiritual realities also mysteriously at play in the world.

In other words, God's **Spirit hovers over all creation** and by our prayer we actually help the Spirit work to bring more goodness and love and peace to bear.

Perhaps that's why, in Luke's Gospel at any rate, Jesus says the **"Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."**

The Holy Spirit is the **ultimate answer to prayer** because through the Holy Spirit God exercises divine power over all creation and through that same Spirit we participate in that exercise of divine power.

This **Eucharist is surely an example** of such petitionary prayer at work:

We pray to the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine.

The Father hears our prayer and the Spirit transforms our gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ.

We pray; the Father hears; the Spirit transforms.

Let us pray then for the gift of the Spirit.

May the Father hear our prayer.

May that Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus himself, transform us and our world. Amen.