

Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O M I
Speaker, Columnist and Author

Website: <http://www.ronrolheiser.com/>

Prayer with an Infallible Guarantee

There are several places in the gospels where Jesus assures us that if we ask for something in his name we are guaranteed to receive it.

In Matthew's gospel, for example, he says: Ask and you shall receive, because everyone who asks receives. In John's gospel he promises us that if you ask anything in my name, the Father will grant it.

Why doesn't this always work? Sometimes we pray for something, pray for it in Jesus' name, and our request isn't granted. Sometimes we literally storm heaven with our prayers and heaven seems shut against them. Did Jesus make an idle promise when he assured us that God would give us anything we ask for, if we ask in his name?

Spiritual writers and apologists have offered a number of answers to this question: Maybe our prayer wasn't answered because we asked for the wrong thing. A loving mother wouldn't give her unknowing child a knife to play with, would she? Or perhaps our prayer was answered, but at a deeper level and only in time will we understand that answer. C.S. Lewis once quipped that we will spend most of eternity thanking God for those prayers of ours that he didn't answer!

There's merit in all these answers, though they are not the answers that Jesus used. Indeed, when he promised us that our prayers would be answered, he didn't add that it is on the condition that we ask for the right thing. He invited us to ask for anything in his name. He didn't specify that it be the right thing. So why aren't our prayers always answered?

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, a renowned scripture scholar, suggests that in Matthew's gospel, as well as in much of the rest of the New Testament, prayer of petition is linked to concrete charitable action within the community. Hence to pray truly for someone involves also reaching out concretely to help that person. To pray truly for justice and peace involves working actively for justice and peace. When we pray "through Christ" we pray not just through the resurrected Christ in heaven but also through the "body of Christ" on earth, ourselves. We need to be involved in helping answer our own prayers. Thus when our prayer doesn't seem to be answered it might mean that we, Christ's body on earth, have not been enough involved in trying to answer our own prayer, that we haven't in fact prayed "through Christ".

Karl Rahner, in commenting on Jesus' promise in John's gospel that anything we ask for in his name will be given us, offers us this reflection:

To ask for something in Jesus' name does not mean that we invoke him verbally and then desire whatever our turbulent, divided heart or our appetite, our wretched mania for everything and anything, happens to hanker for. No, asking in Jesus' name means entering into him, living by him, being one with him in love and faith. If he is in us by faith, in love, in grace, in his Spirit, then our petition arises from the centre of our being, which is himself, and if all our petition and desire is gathered up and fused in him and his Spirit, then the Father hears us. Then our petition becomes simple and straightforward, harmonious, sober, and unpretentious. Then what St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans applies to us: We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us, praying the one prayer, "Abba! Father!" He longs for that from which the Spirit and Jesus himself have proceeded: he longs for God, he asks God for God, on our behalf he asks of God. Everything is included and contained in this prayer. [If we pray in this way] we shall see that God really answers our prayer, in one way or another. Then we shall no longer feel this "one way or the other" is a feeble excuse offered by the pious, and the Gospel, for unanswered prayer. No. Our prayer is answered, but precisely because it is prayer in Jesus' name; and what we ultimately pray for is for the Lord to grow in our lives, to fill our existence with himself, to triumph, to gather into one our scattered life, the thousand and one desires of which we are made. ... To pray in Jesus' name is to have one's prayer answered, to receive God and God's blessing, and then, even amid tears, even in pain, even in indigence, even when it seems that one has still not been heard, the heart rests in God, and that-while we are still here on pilgrimage, far from the Lord-is perfect joy.

Until we have prayed like this, Jesus can truthfully say to us: "Up to now, you have not asked for anything in my name. You may have tried to, you may have meant to, but you have not yet made me the strength and burden of your prayer."

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