

*The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal; nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds. Sirach 35:21*

Last weekend our pastor's homily on Prayer carried over into our coffee hour. The question came up: does the prayer of petition really work? It referred to that kind of prayer that asks for something specific: the health of a relative, the passing of an exam, the relief of a worry, the repose of someone's soul, down to a request I once received from an elderly person – her dog's cure of the mange. It's the kind of prayer we often find in the Gospels where people ask Jesus to cure their paralytic friend or a synagogue official asks Jesus to save his dying daughter. Of course not all problems are as likely to be answered as easily as that of our canine friend, since a trip to the veterinarian might be God's advice to the petitioner. But take a problem like a close relative's addiction to drugs or alcohol (a son or a parent). That's a hard nut to crack, judging by how long we may pray for the victim with no ready result. The worry goes on for years with our prayers degenerating at times into shouting at God to *do something*. And to what end? Nothing. The same old stress!

I speak from experience. I entered monastic life at fifteen and was spared the stress of my mother and sister in dealing with my father's ever increasing addiction to alcohol – until he needed a lot of handling on the least notice. I blame it on the effect upon his self-esteem by the Great Depression of the 1930's. In the meantime I pursued my vocation and teaching career over the next 22 years relatively free of exposure to the problem – until my conscience compelled me to do my share. I therefore brought him to Washington D.C., where I taught at both a seminary and university, to place him in an apartment where I could oversee his behavior. Soon the tension between teaching at a university and continuing my responsibilities at my seminary while handling my father's problems became difficult. Anybody could have told me that, but I thought I could tight rope my way back and forth between both demands. I began to pray, to plead with God for my father's recovery in the manner of Moses in last Sunday's first reading, asking God to hold up my arms lest they sag under the weight of the worry.

And he answered my prayer – *not in terms* of my father's recovery but in my having to request permission to share his apartment for closer supervision of his behavior. That meant of course that I was excused from the regulated life style of a friar among friars. No more set times to pray, eat, study, sleep and so on. I was relatively free to handle my days as I saw fit. Within a short time my father died – and there I was in an apartment of my own. And I couldn't give it up, go back to institutional living. Soon I gained gracious permission to return to civilian life. My future was mine to create or suffer however it turned out. What I'm trying to say is: my prayers for my father were not answered but I experienced a different answer. My father's alcoholism changed my own life and situation. I was presented with a wider world. It was like I had been praying before, say, a statue of St. Francis to relieve my father's problem when suddenly a voice issued from the chapel, let's say, of St. Teresa of Avila situated all the way across the other side of the church with an answer I would never have dreamed of.

The point of my story? Prayers of petition do work but not always in the way you want. God whose wisdom is infinite often has other ideas as to what your real problem and situation is. As Scripture says: *the day of the Lord will come like a thief and then the heavens [of your current confinement] will pass away with a mighty roar.*