

## Why doesn't God always answer our prayers?

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

# Journey Toward HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

My dear first-generation Italian aunts sometimes stumped me, like when they would lament, "Sister Mary, why doesn't God answer my prayers?" A simple question, but complex to answer. Especially when talking with children, we want to give answers that will stand the test of time as their ability to reason grows. And we adults also need words and ideas, "faith pegs," to support our beliefs about answered prayer.

A starting point is to consider our knowledge of how God acts generally, not just when we pray. We learn how God acts by observing the world around us and reasoning about the "why" of it all. For example, when we share the Bible's account of creation in seven days with children, we need to be clear that this is a teaching story. Children know that stories teach lessons. The Genesis story teaches that God is the explanation that there is something, and that it is the way it is: creation evolves, changes, moves forward to greater complexity.

Genesis teaches that God delights in creation and gifts it to us through our story representatives, Adam and Eve, his friends with whom he walks and talks. Science adds to our understanding. It shows us that the universe is very old, that we humans are a relatively young species evolved from other earlier life forms. From the standpoint of science, God's unfolding creation is slow work. In the New Testament, we encounter many passages that teach us that God's creating is still going on through the unfinished evolution and development of everything that is, the universe itself and us. Science supports that. When we skip putting science and scripture together, children and others may conclude that beliefs are just "not true."

Now what does all this have to do with how God answers prayers? Well, when we say prayers of petition, we often ask for something specific, right now! But in God's long and continuing creating, perhaps the time is not right yet, or there is not the readiness on our part to benefit from what we are asking, or perhaps another better outcome might be in the future that God is unfolding. So praying less specific prayers of petition, prayers that allow for more variety in the way God might act to answer us, is a good idea for us and our children.

Freedom is another characteristic of God we can observe. We all, including young people, experience freedom as a given reality within us: a desire, an urge to grow and develop into a unique self not dictated by someone else. Science shows us that the universe is governed by laws or "forces" built into it from the beginning. It seems evident that God lets these forces operate and interact with one another "freely." He does not intervene. So sometimes humans get in the path of natural events – amazing water, wind, fire events – which we then call disasters. And sometimes cells multiply in ways good for the cells but causing us to die from cancer. These are natural evils.

And then there is moral evil which happens because human persons freely choose to behave badly. There seems to be a "bent streak" in human persons, one we name "original sin." While we all act badly sometimes or somewhat, some people act very badly. Children and youth experience evil early in school, in gossip, bullying, jealousy, lying, cliques, aggression and other hurtful behaviors. Why doesn't God do something about all this natural and moral evil? We pray to be saved from natural disasters, illnesses and moral evil and nothing happens.

Well, that's not really true, is it? People who say that nothing happens when they pray often picture God as a fixer, sitting somewhere outside his creation, watching and knowing but not acting. So they conclude there is no God. By the end of the 19th century, certain philosophers were saying that too. If there was a God who intervened

with laws of the universe, we could never even plug in a toaster with confidence because just at that moment God might decide to stop electric particles from moving! Good things just occur to us when we pray through the random working of the universe's laws, they said.

But what if we shift our perspective from expecting God to intervene in the laws of creation? What if we accept the God we know from slow, ongoing creating? What if we embrace a God who not only is the explanation for why there is a universe, but also for the very laws that give freedom to the developing universe to change and advance? When we pray, we freely open ourselves to God's work in us. Without that free openness, we short-circuit the connection between God's work and our lives. Getting rid of God the "fixer" helps us see the truly miraculous way that God brings the free dynamics of creation and our freedom together when prayers are answered.

Observing human and historical experience also supports our belief in how God answers prayers. Besides that "bent streak" in us humans, we also experience in our human nature desires for goodness, beauty, truth and love, desires stronger than that bent streak. Notice how in situations of tragedy and great evil, goodness flows out of people, who unite to help on a local and global scale. In the face of injustices, we see people fighting to right wrongs. When we are suffering, people reach out to us. These things also are not accidents but the result of God's creative work that has shaped our good human nature. Help children see goodness in people around them, acting with God to mitigate the evil we pray about.

Creation's laws also evolved a reflective consciousness in us. We can criticize our past actions and our historical actions from a standpoint of right and wrong, good and evil. We learn from our mistakes, although sometimes it takes great evil to open our eyes, such as genocide, war, racism or torture. But we do slowly learn, and advance in goodness personally and as groups (families, cultures, nations, churches). So when we pray about these evils, perhaps God's answer is a push to do something about them!

Unanswered prayers sometimes lead to a better answer to prayer! A relationship we pray to keep ends, opening space for a better one; a job we pray to get falls through and another wonderful opportunity comes along; a health crisis leads to a deeper appreciation for life. Share with young people times when that has happened to you.

And of course we end by talking about Jesus. Whenever we think God is too remote in the immense universe, we turn to Jesus of Nazareth. His was and still is a unique revelatory person. "I and the Father are one," he told us, meaning that the creating God was right there, in his first century Jewish humanity, in a singular and fullest possible joining of spirit and matter. Jesus never promised a life free of suffering. What he promised is that we can have that spiritual union with God too. And he promised to be with us, to accompany us as someone who experienced suffering himself, until the end of time. It is when we are in pain or struggling that we often have the most intense inner experiences of that divine accompaniment.

So we see that God answers prayers in many ways. But with my deceased aunts, someday I'll probably be up there asking God for more clarity about this complex simple question!

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