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INTERCESSION

AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Fr. Joseph Sergott, OP

Intercession is a part of everyday Christian life—but do we fully understand it? What does it mean to intercede on another’s behalf and who is capable of such intercession?

Merriam-Webster defines “intercede” as “to intervene between parties with a view to reconciling differences.” In the secular world this happens all the time. Diplomats act as mediators between nations in conflict with each other. Court-appointed attorneys will sometimes meet with opposing parties to hammer out an agreed-upon resolution. Health advocates speak on behalf of infirm patients who cannot speak for themselves. Parents act on behalf of their children. Intercession in society is commonplace and actually keeps the structures of society intact.

In regard to Jews and Christians, intercession works in a similar way. God’s people have often needed intercessors to speak on their behalf in instances where they could not help themselves or save themselves; or, God himself has chosen to use mediators between himself and his people.

Recall some of the great leaders of the Jewish faith, e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the prophets. All of them—chosen by God—were mediators between God and his people. At times God spoke directly to these leaders with the intent that they would deliver his message to the people. They in turn spoke to God to intercede on behalf of the people. One can recall the intercession or mediation of Moses during the Exodus, as he led the Israelites through the desert, when he told the Lord of the complaints of the people who were hungry and thirsty. God heard Moses’ pleas on their behalf and provided food and water for them.

For Christians, there is one unique intercessor that stands alone, Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son. Perhaps we don’t see Jesus in the role of intercessor. But think about it for a moment: when Adam and Eve had betrayed the Lord and sinned, there was as a result, a great chasm created between God and man. So, God, in the fullness of time sent his Son to save us. Jesus’ death on the cross was the greatest act of intercession in human history. Recall the words of St. Paul, “there is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as ransom for all.” (1 Tim 2:5-6)



Assumption by Barbieri - 1650

When we pray the Sorrowful Mysteries, we meditate on that sacrifice of Jesus and how he reconciled all of humanity with God through his passion and death. Ever since Jesus’ death, the Christian people have looked to our Savior as Mediator to intercede on our behalf.

As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ actively continues to be our Savior. We pray in the penitential rite of the Mass, “You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: Lord, have mercy,” as inspired

by the words of St. Paul, “It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.” (Rom 8:34) As Our Lord himself says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn 14:6)

Many of our Protestant brothers and sisters challenge the Catholic belief of intercessory prayer, questioning that if Jesus is all we need, then why do we look to anyone else? They ask, “Isn’t it saint-worship to ask a saint to pray for us?” But, let’s refer again to the Old Testament: couldn’t we ask: “Why didn’t God just speak to the Israelites directly, why did he use Abraham, Moses or the prophets?” Moreover, in the Christian life it is natural to

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Holy Names of Jesus and Mary

By Fr. Augustine Hilander, O.P.

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"The center of gravity in the Hail Mary, the hinge as it were which joins its two parts, is the Name of Jesus." (Pope St. John Paul II from *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* Oct 16, 2002)

Jesus is the center of our life. This is most clearly reflected in the life and experience of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The prophecy of Jeremiah, "For the Lord has created a new thing in the earth - A woman shall encompass a man." (31:22) surely refers to the new creation, the Blessed Virgin Mary encompassing the new Adam, Jesus Christ in her womb. Jesus enters our life through the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is central to her life, literally.

It is only right, then, that the Holy Name of Jesus be the center of our prayer directed to her. But it is worth looking again at the two parts of the *Ave Maria* to see the centrality of Jesus and Mary for us. The first part is from "Hail Mary" to "Jesus" and the second part is from "Holy Mary" to "Amen."

Mary is the first one we welcome with "Hail" and the last one we want with us at our death. Her full titles are Scriptural: "full of grace" and "with the Lord," and ecclesial: "Mother of God." The Blessed Virgin has primacy of place among women as well as primacy of time for us "now." Our Mother is to give birth to Jesus, the fruit of her womb, and this will end in death when Jesus will open to us our heavenly homeland and our Mother will be waiting for us.

Another great prayer handed down to us by St. Luke is the *Magnificat* of the Blessed Virgin Mary. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for He has looked with favor on His lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me and Holy is His Name." (Lk. 1:46-49) The Blessed Virgin has included in this praise of God, the Name of God and the praise of His Name. She calls Him, "God, my Savior." The Hebrew Name Jesus means, "God is my Savior." Her Son is named in this prayer. And this prayer is part of the fulfillment of prophecy given to the Blessed Virgin Mary when she was told about her relative Elizabeth at the Annunciation.

The *Magnificat* is always compared to the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. The first two verses mirror the first two of the *Magnificat*. "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy like the Lord, there is none besides thee; there is no rock like our God."

Hannah does speak of God's salvation, but she cannot pronounce the Name of the Savior. It has not been given. It is first in the *Magnificat* that Mary can put to voice for the first time the Name of the Savior and praise His Glorious Name.

The Holy Name of Jesus is central to the *Ave Maria*, begins the praises of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the *Magnificat*, and is also the inheritance handed onto Mary at the Cross. Mary at the Cross stands sorrowful, yet full of hope in a future out of reach of anyone but God. Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, gives Himself to the Blessed Virgin Mary in a new way at the Cross. He gives Himself in the Church. "Behold your Son; Behold your Mother." (Jn 19:26,27) She now has the responsibility of receiving all new Christians. And what is she going to say? "Do whatever He tells you." (Jn 2:5) But instead of telling us as His servants, she tells us as His friends, who now know what the Master is doing (cf. Jn 15:15). Now she gives us His Name, not in the superstitious way of a servant, who can only mimic syllables, but in a possessive way as a friend, who cherishes the Name above every other name. Mary gives us her Son's Name, Christian, and we have the dignity of living as sons and daughters of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And whenever we speak the Name of Jesus with affection, we do so also with confidence.

Mary and Jesus are intimately connected such that their Names go together. One of the most ancient and most revered prayers of the Church is the Jesus Prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." (See Mk 10:47, Lk 18:38, Mt 9:27, Mt 20:30) But while saying it consecutively, it is important to ask the Blessed Virgin Mary to protect us and watch over us in praying. She will help us to make sure the prayer is held in our heart not only on our lips and she will protect us from the snares of this world. Before praying the Jesus Prayer it is important to pray the *Ave Maria*.

St. Anthony of Padua gives us a good reflection on the Holy Name of Jesus from the Song of Songs "Your Name is oil poured out." (1:14) St. Anthony comments: "And take note that this Name Jesus is not only called 'oil', but 'poured out'. Whence? And whither? From the Father's heart into heaven, earth and hell. In heaven, to give joy to the angels, so that they cry out in exultation in the Apocalypse: Salvation to our God, who sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb, (Rev. 7:10) That is, to Jesus.

In earth, for the comforting of sinners, of which Isaiah says: Thy Name and Thy remembrance are the desire of the soul; my soul shall desire Thee in the night. (Is 26:8-9)

In hell, to free the captives, so that they are said to have cried on bended knee, "You have come, our Redeemer, etc." (from the Breviary) (Translation by Paul Spilsbury)

The *Catechism* makes plain: "The second commandment forbids every improper use of God's Name. Blasphemy

is the use of the name of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Virgin Mary, and of the saints in an offensive way.” (CCC 2162) The Blessed Virgin Mary reminds us in the major apparitions of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries not to profane God or His Holy Name in blasphemy. Our Lady speaks to the children at La Salette saying that missing the Sunday obligation and using God’s Name to swear were two offenses which our Lady called for an end to. Our Lady of Fatima famously spoke about the five blasphemies committed against the Immaculate Heart:

1. the blasphemies against the Immaculate Conception,
2. against her virginity,
3. against the Divine Maternity, refusing at the same time to accept her as the Mother of all mankind,
4. those who try publicly to implant in the children's hearts indifference, contempt, and even hatred against this Immaculate Mother, and
5. those who insult her directly in her sacred images.

Speech is a distinctly human act and as such must be used to lift the soul to God. Words reflect the goodness and truth of creation. We can speak badly about anything. Nothing reflects God perfectly and no words perfectly describe our merciful Lord. But when we speak badly of God or use His Name or the names of the holy ones as a curse we will always be lying and misusing what is always good for us, His Name and the Names of his loved ones, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints.

We strive against blasphemy by making more use of our act of contrition when we do blaspheme even if accidentally as when, for example, we speak it automatically without thinking. An act of contrition is still called for since the words were real things that we used in wrong ways. This venial sin of accidental blasphemy can be wiped clean by an act of contrition either said immediately or at Mass. The Jesus Prayer, which I spoke of earlier, can be used as an act of contrition if the act of contrition for Mass or Confession hasn't been memorized.

We also do not realize the wrong done by blasphemy. But the saints do realize how wrong it is. “St. Gemma Galgani was also noted by her companions that because of her great love for God, she would literally faint when she would hear someone blaspheming, or cursing the Name of God.” St. Joan of Arc inspired her troops not to blaspheme and corrected them directly when they did.

Finally the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary are most useful for a happy death. Many saints ended their days and started eternity with the Names of Jesus and Mary on their lips. St. John de Brebeuf, one of the Jesuit North American Martyrs wrote this prayer: “May I die only for You, if You will grant me this grace, since You willingly died for me. Let me so live that You may grant me the gift of such a happy death. In this way, my God and Savior, I will take from Your hand the cup of Your sufferings and call on Your Name: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!” St. Ignatius of Antioch, one of the first martyrs, called out, “Jesus, my love,” at the time of martyrdom. Bl. Karl of Austria died in

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What would the Blessed Virgin say about the Name of Jesus?

by Fr. Augustine Hilander, O.P.

The Name of Jesus was first spoken by the angel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary. His Name came down from heaven along with the promise that Jesus would be "great, the Son of the Most High, sitting on the throne of David and ruling over the house of Jacob in an eternal Kingdom." (cf. Lk. 1:32-33)

Mary was the first one given the exact name of the Son of God. All other names about Jesus were descriptive: "Emmanuel (God-with-us), Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father forever, Prince of Peace." (Is. 7:14; 9:5) The Name "Jesus" means "Savior." "Jesus" is the Latin form of the Greek Name, "Iesous" which transliterated the Hebrew name Joshua or Jeshua.

The first person to be named Joshua in the Bible is Joshua, the son of Nun, who himself received the name from Moses. (Num. 13:16). In the Book of Numbers, Moses renames Heshua, Joshua. "Heshua" means "Salvation" while "Joshua" means "God saves." Moses added the divine prefix to his name. Joshua, coming from the promised land, describes the land that the Israelites are to take as "a good land, a land which flows with milk and honey." (Num. 14:7, 8) Joshua is also the one to lead the Israelite people into the promised land across the Jordan River and to say to the Israelite people: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Jos. 24:15)

The name "Jesus" is also a family name for the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the genealogy of Jesus according to Luke, one of Jesus' ancestors is "Joshua, son of Eliezer." (Lk. 3:29) Elizabeth was asked about the name John, because it was not a family name. Mary does not have to ask the question that was asked of Elizabeth, because Jesus was a family name. The plan of salvation comes through a woman, and was started long ago. The very name of Jesus was given at the beginning with Joshua, son of Nun, continues in the line of the Blessed Virgin Mary with Joshua, son of Eliezer, and finds its completion with the Name pronounced first from heaven by the angel Gabriel, Jesus, the son of Joseph. (Lk. 3:23) The Blessed Virgin Mary knows that this Jesus, her son, is the new Joshua, who comes from our heavenly home and so can tell us of it. He receives the name "God saves," a family name. He leads his people across the new Jordan by baptism to enter into the promised inheritance of the Son of God.

**At the name of Jesus every knee
should bend.** Philippians 2:10

The Holy Names (continued from page 3)

exile in 1922 with his wife and children around him. He spoke the Name of Jesus and told his wife, "I love you so much." No matter how we die, to die with the Name of Jesus and Mary on our lips indicates perseverance.

"Most holy Virgin, obtain for me the grace of invoking the Name of thy Son Jesus in all my necessities, together with thine own, my Mother Mary; but let me invoke them always with confidence and love, so that I may be able also to say to thee as did the devout Alphonsus Rodriguez: 'Jesus and Mary, may I suffer for You; may I die for You; may I be wholly Yours, and in nothing my own!'" (St. Alphonsus Liguori, *Discourse on the Name of Jesus, Affections and Prayers*)■

From the rising of the sun to its setting, let the name of the LORD be praised. Psalm 113

Intercession... (continued from page 1)

ask someone else to pray for you. I hope that every Jewish, Protestant and Catholic congregation has intercessory prayer as a part of their worship. It is clear that God answers the prayers of diligent, faithful people—why would he not listen to the pleas of the saints who are already with him in heaven? Consequently, we should seek the prayers of those people who are closest to the Lord, whether they are on earth or in heaven.

Perhaps the key point here is that when people make petitions to God, the Lord responds in the way he chooses, whether it is directly or through an "ambassador" who represents him and acts on his behalf. No matter how the Lord responds, it is his grace that is the active agent. Thus, when we say that a saint "has worked a miracle," what we are really saying is that God has answered a particular prayer through a saint's intercession. There is no saint in heaven that would want us to think that he or she answers our prayers independent of God. They would have us recognize that any prayer directed to God through any mediator will be answered by God through his grace.

Along with the Our Father, the Hail Mary is the most well-known intercessory prayer in the world, which includes, "pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." I wonder how many people have prayed the Hail Mary in desperation when a loved one was dying—even if they had not said the prayer before . . . The Blessed Virgin Mary has a preeminent role as intercessor. As Mother of the Church she prays on our behalf. As one who is "full of grace," she listens to the prayers of all who come to her. However, she would be the first one to tell you that it is Jesus' grace that flows through her and that it is his will that she as Mother of the Church intercedes on our behalf. *Lumen Gentium* states, "Mary's function as mother . . . in no way obscures or diminishes

this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. [Her] salutary influence on men originates not in any inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it, and draws all power from it." (LG #60; CCC #970)

St. Louis De Montfort says, "Let us implore without fear the help and intercession of Mary, our Mother. She is kind, she is tender, and there is nothing harsh or forbidding about her, nothing too sublime or too brilliant. When we see her, we see our own human nature at its purest. She is not the sun, dazzling our weak sight by the brightness of its rays. Rather, she is fair and gentle as the moon, which receives its light from the sun and softens it and adapts it to our limited perception. She is so full of love that no one who asks for her intercession is rejected, no matter how sinful he may be." (*True Devotion*, #85)

In the Third Glorious Mystery, we find Mary in the upper room with the disciples, no doubt seeking communion with God and praying for the nascent Church. Ever since then intercessory prayer has been a common practice in the Church. It is always part of the Eucharistic Prayer in the Mass in various forms. In addition, following the creed or the homily, the community together makes petitions to God for various needs in the Church or the world (cf. CCC #1349). Normally, we call these the "prayers of the faithful," following the inspiration of St. Paul, "I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity." (1 Tim 2:1-2)

Finally, don't forget that each one of us can pray for anyone. Even when we are infirm and bed-ridden, we can offer up our sufferings for those who are in need, including for the faithful departed. So, let us be reminded of the power of intercessory prayer, let us call upon the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and seek the Lord's grace that flows freely toward those who ask for help. ■

Blessings & Petitions Corner

Please pray for the complete and Divine healing of my brother, Tahsin, who had hip-bone surgery recently. Pray also for me and my father, Mehmet, and for all my brothers and sisters, and for the soul of my mother, Nedime, and for all my departed family members. God Bless you for all you do for us.

Cecilia

Please pray for my grand-nephew, Nicolas, as he is being treated for serious illness. Also, please pray for his mother and grandmother that they become true instruments of healing in this young man's life.

Billie, Portland, Oregon

I have two grandsons with Cystic Fibrosis (CF). Your prayers have helped them, even averting a surgery, for which I am extremely grateful. I ask for prayers for all who suffer from this illness.

Calvin, Oregon