Prayers for Help

Prayer is not a list of requests; it is an introspective process, a refining process of discovering what one is, what one should be and how to achieve the transformation.

"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God."
(Catholic Catechism, 2559)

Can we change the course of events through prayer? Can we manipulate the mind and heart of God? Can we ward off some evil occurrence by specifically imploring God to save us from it? Richard McBrien in his text Catholicism (1994) states that we need to avoid the two extreme positions on prayer - namely:

- at one end of the spectrum which argues that prayer is a completely useless activity because it cannot change the course of events, or is simply auto-suggestion;
- and the other extreme, which depicts God as some sort of dispenser of beneficence who can be bargained with, cajoled or harassed into changing our destiny.

Christian prayer is perhaps most associated with seeking the help of God, the saints or any or all of the company of heaven for everything from living a life worthy of Jesus and therefore heaven, to finding lost items, being cured of disease and passing exams. Prayers for help stem from words attributed to Jesus: “I will do whatever you ask for in my name” (Jn 14: 13); and “Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you” (Mt 7:7-8).

Note though, there is a difference between petitions such as “May your will be done on earth as in heaven” and a petition for personal help such as “Give us today the food we need”. Not all prayers of petition are prayers for help.

Prayers for help across the centuries have been addressed to God as father or loving parent, stern judge or powerful creator; to Jesus as Lord, redeemer and brother to humanity; to the Holy Spirit particularly for inspiration and presence in difficult times; to angels, saints and even members of the Church triumphant - that is, departed relatives and friends. An examination of traditional texts of Catholic prayer, such as the websites below, provides a fascinating insight into the Catholic tradition of appealing to saints for help in every one of life’s challenges and difficulties. See for example, the list of prayers to saints and angels and their causes on www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/saints.htm; www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/marian.htm; www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/index.htm; and www.yenra.com/catholic/prayers.

Traditional Catholic veneration of saints causes various degrees of discomfort among post-Reformation Christian denominations, including elements of the Catholic church, who draw attention to Jesus’ statement to ask “in my name”, not through other brokers. Some contemporary theologians point out that Jesus’ scattering of the markets in the Temple was a dramatic rejection of the current Jewish understanding that God could only be approached by the qualified or anointed: Jesus claimed that God was not to be brokered and could be approached by anyone without the aid of the temple, its priests or its sacrifices. One reason for the development of Catholic veneration of the saints - especially Mary - was when, in the history of the Church, God and Jesus were put out of the reach of the ordinary people through insistence on rules of fasting, confession, ritual purity and the development of hierarchical structures in the priesthood. Unable to access God through the sacraments and denied access to, or deemed unworthy to pray the Scriptures, Christians turned to the saints, especially Mary as “Mother of God”, to intervene with God on their behalf. An examination of prayers to Mary reveal the strong theme of intervening with God on our behalf - e.g. “Remind thy son that he has paid the price of our iniquity” in the hymn Hail, Queen of Heaven.
While the Catholic tradition continues to affirm the veneration of the saints, including devotion to Mary, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) restored the Eucharist, sacraments, Scriptures and the Prayer of the Church as prime sources of prayer and personal relationship with God for Catholics. Images of God as loving parent, constant companion in life’s journey, nurturing creator and protective spirit were restored to religious language to balance the predominant images of God as judge, omnipotent power and distant ruler. The decline in devotions to saints and in traditional prayer forms to Our Lady, such as the Rosary, can largely be attributed to this change of focus since Vatican II and restoration of “direct” access to a more approachable God.

**Prayers for Forgiveness**

While St Paul assures us that Christ died “once and for all” for the forgiveness of humanity’s sins, Christianity presumes that as fallible human beings, we will continue to fail to fall short of the mark and be in need of reconciliation with God and each other. The sacrament of Reconciliation evolved in response to the desire of Christians to repent times when they did not live up to the model Jesus set and to resolve to better their lives.

In the Lord’s Prayer, the model for all Christian prayer, the fifth petition states: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” (Mt 6:12). In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus goes on to say: *If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done.* (Mt 6: 14-15). Praying for forgiveness, then, involves a twofold act. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2608) states: “From the *Sermon on the Mount* onwards, Jesus insists on conversion of heart: reconciliation with one’s brother (sic) before presenting an offering on the altar, love of enemies and prayer for persecutors, prayer to the Father in secret, not heaping up empty phrases, prayerful forgiveness from the depths of the heart, purity of heart and seeking the Kingdom before all else. This filial conversion is entirely directed to the Father.” In another place (2631), it states: “Asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer.”

Prayers for forgiveness then, not only have the aspect of saying “sorry”, but require a commitment to reconciliation with the one against whom the offence has occurred: there is a personal and communal dimension to prayers for forgiveness.

**Litanies**

Litanies are simple, ancient forms of responsive petition, used in public liturgical services and in private devotions, which serve purposes of prayers for help, praise, forgiveness, thanksgiving and blessing. Litanies consist of a lead statement followed by a repeated response, such as “pray for us” or “we praise you, we bless you, we thank you” or “Lord hear us”; or “Lord Have Mercy”.

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<th>Leader:</th>
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Litanies can have the effect of mantras - that is, the response is by rote or becomes automatic, not requiring thought. They are rhythmical and can accompany a procession. As with other prayers, litanies can be addressed to God, persons of the Trinity, Our Lady and the saints.

Because they involve the repetition of a single phrase, litanies serve the purpose of involving everyone without the use of texts. They are easily committed to memory and can serve a teaching function in the theological issues or statements made in the petition section of the litany.

Litanies can be found in the Psalms - e.g. Psalm 135 and in the *Song of the Men in the Fiery Furnace* (Dan 3: 57-87). They have been included in the liturgies of the Eastern and Western rites since earliest times and still have forms in the Modern Mass in the Penitential Rite and Prayers of the Faithful.

Examples of litanies can be found at [www.miraclerosarymission.org/litany.htm](http://www.miraclerosarymission.org/litany.htm); [www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/litanies.htm](http://www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/litanies.htm).