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PRAYER AS SEEKING GOD'S GUIDANCE

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[Third in a four part Advent series on Prayer]

In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Dorothy Day tells of a very difficult time in her life. She had just converted to Christianity, after a long period of atheism, and then given birth to her daughter. During her season of atheism, she had fallen in love with a man who had fathered her child; and she and this man, atheists disillusioned with main-stream society, had made a pact never to marry, as statement against the conventions of society.

But her conversion to Christianity had turned that world upside down. The father of her child had given her an ultimatum; if she had their child baptized he would end their relationship. Dorothy chose to baptize the child, but paid a heavy price. She deeply loved this man and suffered greatly at their breakup. Moreover, given that her conversion took her out of all her former circles, it left her with more than a missing soul mate. It left her too without a job, without support for her child, and without her former purpose in life. She felt painfully alone and lost.

And this drove her to her knees, literally. One day she took a train to Washington, D.C., from New York and spent the day praying at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. And, as she shares in her autobiography, her prayer that day was shamelessly direct, humble, and clear. Essentially she told God, again and again, that she was lost, that she needed a clear direction for her life, and that she needed that direction now, not in some distant future. And, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, she prayed that prayer over and over again.

She took a train home that evening and as she walked up to her apartment, a man, Peter Maurin, was sitting on the steps. He invited her to start the Catholic Worker. The rest is history.

Our prayers aren't always answered that swiftly and directly, but they are always answered, as Jesus assures us, because God does not withhold the Holy Spirit from those who ask for it. If we pray for guidance and support, it will be given us.

In Scripture, we see many salient examples of people who, like Dorothy Day, seek out God's guidance in prayer, especially so when they are alone and afraid as they stand before some major upheaval or impending suffering in their lives. We see this, for example, in Moses who when lost in the desert and facing a revolt from his own people climbs Mount Horeb to ask for God's counsel. And we see it in Jesus who also climbs Mount Horeb to pray and who spends whole nights in prayer, struggling to find both the guidance and the courage he needs for his mission.

Looking at the prayer of Moses, Jesus, Dorothy Day, and countless other women and men who have prayed for guidance from God, we see that their prayer, especially when they feel most alone and desperate, is marked by three things: honesty, directness, and humility. They lift their own minds and hearts to God, not someone else's. They share their aloneness and fears with shameless honesty. There is no pretense, no rationalization, no hiding of weaknesses. They pour out their fears, their inadequacy, their temptations, and their confusion, as do children, begging for someone's hand to help them.

There's an interesting parallel to this inside some of our classical fairy tales where the figure of God often appears in the form of an angel, a fairy, a fox, or a horse. Invariably those who approach that God-figure with over-confidence, arrogance, or pretense, are denied all counsel and all magic. Conversely those who approach the God-figure in humility and admit that they are lost in their search are awarded with counsel and magic. There's an important prayer-lesson in that.

All of us, at different times in our lives, find ourselves alone, lost, confused, and tempted towards a road that will not lead to life. At such times we need to approach God with a prayer that is shamelessly honest, direct, and humble. Like Dorothy Day, we need to raise our true fears and insecurities to God, praying, over and over again: "I'm afraid! I feel so alone and isolated in this! I don't want to do this! I'm completely inadequate! I haven't any strength left! I'm full of anger! I'm bitter at so many things! I hate some of the places where my Christian morality has led me! I'm jealous of others who don't have my moral inhibitions! I'm tempted in ways that I'm ashamed to speak of! I need more support than you've been giving me! Send me someone or send me something! If you want me to continue on this road you've got to give me more help! I need this now!"

And then we need to wait, in patience, in advent. Perhaps no Peter Maurin will appear on our doorstep that night, but, with desert-helplessness having done its work, an angel will come to strengthen us.