Ask and receive: No prayer is wasted

by Carol Zaleski in the January 13, 2009 issue

I'm not a great fan of limericks. By a curious accident, however, we have on our living room wall an original autograph letter—itself a limerick, answering a request for a limerick—by one of the great limerick makers of the last century, the English priest and writer Ronald Knox:

> Dear Sir,
> I don't know if you meant that you want a *new* Limerick sent. I'm afraid, if that's true, this is all I can do, but I hope it will leave you content.
> [signed] RAKnox
> (Feb. 5, 1926)
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> (I quote it in full here thanks to permission from AP Watt Ltd. on behalf of the Earl of Oxford and Asquith.)

For years now I haven't been able to walk past this small framed letter without being amused and beguiled by it. The sense of Knox as a minor presence in our household made me want to know him better, so I began to read around, moving from his apologetic works to his detective fiction, from his English Bible to his academic satire *Let Dons Delight*, from his magisterial *Enthusiasm* to his *Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes* (the parody of biblical scholarship which launched the mock-serious industry of Sherlockian higher criticism). Finally, at a used book dealer's, I stumbled upon an obscure little tract called *Bread or Stone*, consisting of four talks Knox delivered during Holy Week 1915 on the subject of "impetrative prayer."

Prayer is impetrative when it seeks particular favors from God. This is the crudest kind of petitionary prayer, but also the most theologically dense and mysterious:

> We are taught it at our mother's knee, and it all seems quite simple then: we go on with it, by force of habit, and gradually cease to reflect whether we expect an answer to it or not. And then suddenly the pinch comes; the father, his knees still aching from the unwonted vigil, stares into the face of his dead child: the farmer, his crops ruined, lifts up a wisp of hay towards heaven on a pitchfork, and asks, "O God, do you call *that* a

> harvest?" And then—then they begin to wonder. And they apply to the clergy for an explanation, and for some reason the only explanation the clergy of to-day can give them, is that "Prayer is such a help." "But I've been on my knees night and day for weeks, and nothing's come of it." Yes, but prayer is such a help. "But how can God *grant* prayers? Does he make up his mind as he goes along? And how can he grant some people's prayers, without refusing others'? I can't understand." No, no more can I, but you can't deny that prayer is a help.

But the one thing Jesus didn't say, Knox points out, is that "prayer is such a help." Jesus said, "Ask, and you shall receive." Is it possible, then, that we receive what we ask for even when our petitions are denied?

Suddenly I saw Knox's limerick letter in a new light, as an interpretive key to the problem of prayer. A petition is made. Will the master of limericks hear and grant it? He refuses the petition, but in the very refusal grants it. And he grants it not as a general benefaction to humanity, but as something entirely new, composed for the particular individual who has asked.

"God loves you personally," says Knox. When you pray, "God is at that moment thinking of you individually, paying more attention to you than you are to him." If God refuses our petitions, then, it is not because he is bending to some larger necessity or overlooking the minor consequences of his providential plan, "it is because this was best for us, and if he had seen another issue to be best for us, though empires should totter, though Nature's laws should be suspended from their action, that other issue would have come about. It needs some faith to believe all that, doesn't it? But try for a moment to believe anything else."

A prayer refused is compensated, but not in the same currency. The proof of this principle is Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, the most spectacular example of a failed petition. Jesus asked—if only it could be his Father's will—to be delivered from agony and death. The Father granted the petition in refusing it, converting Jesus' unanswered prayer into grace. No prayer is wasted. God makes use of our failed prayers, Knox suggests, to bear the grace of that supreme unanswered prayer into desolate hearts unknown to us, and to prepare a place in our own hearts to receive him. "Jesus is about our Father's business, when he hides his Face."

Either this is a crude joke, like most limericks, or else it is the one final affirmation of divine goodness.