

Storming heaven

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Not long ago I went to visit my mother at a busy New York hospital where she was recovering from heart-valve surgery. The elevators were so crowded that I had to go *down* to the basement to claim a place for the trip *up* to the sixth-floor coronary care unit. At each floor the doors opened in front of identical signs: “No cell phones. No laptops.” At the fifth floor, the opened doors revealed a different sign: “Pediatric Intensive Care. Neonatal Intensive Care.” It was only a sign, but my heart dropped back down to the basement.

Why was this such a shock? Don’t I know that there are infants and innocents battling for their lives in every hospital around the world? Here at least they are cared for, not abandoned. What stunned me, I think, was to be reminded of what faith must contend with. The battle is in earnest: death assails us, evil stalks us, pain batters us, loss grieves us.

Yet there was an infant born in Bethlehem who was God’s message that every infant is precious and none will be lost . . . a 12-year-old lingering with the rabbis in Jerusalem who taught us that even the child who goes astray is precious and none will be lost . . . a 33-year-old at Golgotha who gave us proof that every person is precious and none, not even the dead, will be lost. The battle has been engaged and will not be finished until all manner of evil, disease and corruption is defeated.

Recently we learned about a young girl in our area who has been diagnosed with a virulent cancer. Doctors say her odds of survival are at best 20 per cent. She has just begun chemotherapy and her immune system is so ravaged that the most innocuous virus could kill her. This little girl is being prayed for around the clock by friends and strangers—and now, I hope, by readers of this column. Her disease will be fought with every weapon in the medical arsenal devised by God-given human ingenuity. At the same time, her family will storm the gates of heaven with prayer, commend this girl to her Creator, her guardian angel and the saints, and call in all reinforcements, for resignation is not a Christian virtue.

It would be different if we were adherents of a Star Wars religion, latter-day Stoics who believe that the universe is ruled by an impersonal Force; then our task would be to adjust ourselves to its ordinances without complaint. We would follow the counsel of Marcus Aurelius—the philosopher-emperor now enjoying a small revival with his appearance in the film *Gladiator* and the recycling of his *Meditations* into a neo-Buddhist self-help manual—to “remain ever the same, in the throes of pain, on the loss of a child, during a lingering illness” and to reflect that “all things are little, changeable, perishable.”

If we think that suffering is a result of misinterpretation, that individuals are sparks cast off by the infinite spirit and destined to return to the mother flame, we do well to practice composure. It is, however, a characteristic peculiarity of Christianity (as of Judaism) to fancy that God wants us to complain and commands us to intercede. Moreover, the creed tells us that we belong, by calling, to the communion of saints both living and dead for whom intercessory prayer is the natural medium of communication.

In recent years we have seen widely publicized clinical studies of the efficacy of intercessory prayer, among them Randolph Byrd’s 1988 double-blind study of patients in a San Francisco coronary care unit who either received or did not receive prayers, and a better-designed 1999 Kansas City study published in the American Medical Association’s *Archives of Internal Medicine*. I’ve even come across a 1997 study of the effect of intercessory prayer on the speed of call handling by health-care representatives in southern California.

Despite optimistic claims about these studies, none is conclusive and there is plenty of valid criticism of their research designs. I might add that none of this will be truly impressive until scientists find a way to measure the effects on souls in purgatory, traditionally the chief target of intercessory prayer.

Perhaps the best-designed experiment I’ve seen took place in a small woodland chapel at a Benedictine monastery in Massachusetts. My family and I visit this monastery often. One day our son John ventured into the woods nearby and then ran back to report a discovery. Attached to a tree was a bell and a carved sign that read “St. Gertrude’s.” John rang the bell and no one answered, but peering further into the woods we caught sight of a tent and a Coleman stove.

Later on, we went to the chapel for the monastic liturgy. Among the few visitors was a distinguished-looking elderly gentleman in British tweed who was kneeling at his

pew with a row of photographs and a list of names arrayed before him. Among the photos was a picture of his wife, and on the list were names of many others for whom he wished to offer prayers. The tent in the woods was his hermitage for that winter. We haven't seen him lately, but we imagine that the names and photographs of people he loves go with him, creating a living picture of the ceaseless intercession that binds all together in the communion of saints. Here is an experiment worth repeating, even if its final outcome will be known only in heaven.