

Does God Answer Our Prayers?

A Reflection by a Jewish Convert to the Catholic Church

I was born on October 10, 1933 in Berlin, Germany of Jewish parents. By the grace of God my mother and I were able to leave Germany on May 13, 1939 and eventually got to England in June 1939. In May 1943 we were able to come to the United States and settle in Brooklyn, NY where I grew up and received all my education. My mother made sure that I was raised in the Orthodox Jewish tradition which I practiced until the age of 29. I entered the Catholic Church on February 23, 1963. My first wife Irma, also a Jew, was baptized later that same year. That is a very short synopsis of my life before and after I entered the Church. In this reflection I briefly describe a few events that I experienced in my life that addresses the question "does God answer our prayers".

1960

Early in 1960 my wife became pregnant. On November 21, 1960, she gave birth to our second child David via Caesarian section, the same as with our first child Stephen. David weighed almost 10 pounds. That afternoon at the hospital, the doctor confided that the baby had a serious problem. When he tried to take him out of the incubator David would immediately turn blue so he had to be put back. After I returned home the doctor called to tell me David had not improved. At 6 o'clock I went to a window, looked up at the sky now clear with bright shining stars, and prayed to God for my son. The following words came out of my mouth: "Jesus, if You are the Son of God, save my son." Why would I, a Jew who did not believe in Jesus, suddenly pray to Him for help? I could have asked Abraham or Moses for help. But I went to Jesus. Why? The answer as to why would be given to me sometime in the future. At 7 o'clock I went back to the hospital to see Irma and the baby. The doctor told me that the baby had died an hour earlier, just about, at the moment I had asked Jesus to save him. In the meantime Irma was unaware of what had happened. I was reluctant to tell her that evening the baby had died, because she had just undergone surgery in the morning. Although slightly sedated, she was happy and alert. I don't know how I kept the sad news from her. What followed was the toughest night of my life. Mostly I prayed, shed tears, and felt very much alone. Stephen, only three years old at the time, slept peacefully. The next morning, I knew I had to tell a young 23-year old mother that her child had died. When I went into her room very early the next day and saw her, I broke down and cried as I told her about the baby's death. It was a terrible day. Several days later Irma came home without her baby. The autopsy revealed David died because of a big hole in his heart. If the hole had been slightly smaller he could have lived and had surgery to correct the defect. I tried to ask God for answers. At the time no answer came. Neither Irma nor I blamed God. After his death, the baby was circumcised, given the name David, and buried in a Jewish cemetery.

1963

One month before my baptism on January 19, 1963, Irma, only seven months pregnant, gave birth to a girl. I had prayed during Irma's pregnancy that this baby be born healthy. The baby however weighed only two pounds, had no neck, and died after seven hours. We named her Lisa

and buried her in a Jewish cemetery. Several years later I found out that a nurse had quietly baptized Lisa before her death.

1964

In 1963 Irma became pregnant again. During her pregnancy she developed an extremely high blood-sugar level which necessitated her spending five days in the hospital to stabilize her condition. Once again I prayed that Irma and the baby would be fine. On March 9, 1964, our daughter Andrea Patrice was born by C-section, weighing almost 10 pounds. Everything appeared normal. Happily, I phoned Father Savastano, the priest who gave us our instruction in the faith and baptized all of us, with the good news. Although he was very busy that day, he promised to visit them both the next day. That afternoon I received a telephone call from our pediatrician expressing concern over the baby's condition. Her lungs were filling with fluid. I immediately called Father Savastano. However, he had already been to the hospital. Something prompted Father to go to the hospital and upon hearing about Andrea's condition he baptized her. In the evening I returned to the hospital to visit Irma and Andrea. The nurse let me see my baby who was in an incubator in the nursery. I told Irma the baby had developed a medical problem. After spending some time with Irma, I went back to check on Andrea. When I got to the nursery all the blinds were drawn. I asked someone why the screens were drawn and was told a baby had just died. No one had to tell me it was Andrea. I checked and learned it was indeed Andrea. This time I could not fake it. I immediately told Irma the sad news. I do not believe it's necessary to describe what happened then or how we felt. Two days later Father said a Mass of Angels for Andrea. Except for a friend, Frank, who didn't want me to be alone and the baby in the little white coffin, nobody else attended the Mass. Irma was still in the hospital. After Mass, Father and I took Andrea to the cemetery and buried her.

My father-in-law never called or came to see his daughter. My mother-in-law came to the hospital to see Irma on the day of the baby's burial and then stayed overnight at my home. That evening while we sat alone in the kitchen, Irma's mother blamed me that my becoming Catholic had split the family. I was, also blamed for Irma becoming Catholic. She was trying to justify her husband's behavior. Near the end of our conversation I went into the bedroom, got a crucifix, and put it on the table in front of her. I proceeded to tell her she ought to kiss that figure on the cross. It was because of Him that no matter what she or her husband would ever say or do to me, they would always be welcomed in my house and be treated with the utmost respect. And, although they may have hated me, they remained in my prayers. I always prayed for reconciliation. It was their choice that it never happened. Although they have now passed away I still pray for them.

1970

In January of 1970 my mother who had stomach pains went to the doctor. She was told she had a nervous colon. I prayed that she would be okay and get well. It was not until the late 1970's that colonoscopy procedures came into wide use. On November 15, 1970 my mother died from colon cancer. My mother was 61 at the time of her death. She had three sisters all who lived into their nineties and died of natural causes. Why did God take her so young? After all, it was

she who made me practice the Jewish faith. I had been the only one in my family that could pray in Hebrew and lead the Sabbath worship services as a cantor in the synagogue I attended years earlier. She was very proud of that. After Irma and I told her in 1963 that we had become Catholic, her reaction surprised us. Quite simply she told us we were nuts, but she still loved us and her grandchildren. On the other hand; Irma's Father, who along with his wife was basically agnostic, never again talked to us or his grandson whom he had loved. He also never acknowledged the births his granddaughters. Irma's mother kept in touch with us infrequently, and blamed me for the break up in the family.

1982

In 1975 a doctor diagnosed Irma as diabetic. In 1978 she began taking insulin shots, but she never really followed the doctor's direction and even stopped taking shots. In December 1981 Irma formed a blood clot in her leg and was rushed to the hospital. The surgeon said she needed a simple surgical procedure that would take less than an hour. I sat in the waiting room for five hours until the surgeon finally came back. He told me Irma had a vascular system of a 75-year-old. He did not hold out much hope that she would live long. Irma stayed in the hospital four months. During that time, she became practically blind, one leg was amputated, and her kidneys and liver barely functioned. By March 1982 she was barely lucid. During this period, I prayed constantly for her. I asked the Lord why it was not I who was suffering in that bed instead of her. For four months I visited her almost every night watching her deteriorate. She taught me a lot about dying. I hope that when my time comes I can be as courageous as she was. On March 30, 1982, Irma at the age of 44 died peacefully and went to her reward since she already had experienced purgatory on earth. During her illness she never said, "Why me God," even though she knew she was dying. Several hundred people attended her wake, in spite of a very rainy night. On April 1, after a beautiful Mass, concelebrated by several priests, she was laid to rest in Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Wheaton, MD.

After my conversion I had frequently gone to daily Mass, prayed the Rosary and other prayers. I even got a Master's degree in Theology and was ordained a permanent deacon on September 30, 1972 by Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington. Yet by the age of 48 I had lost three children, a mother and a wife. So how does one explain the things that happened in my life that I described above? It seemed that God did not answer my prayers in the way I wanted. I have heard many times people say that God did not answer their prayers. But I must admit that a few years earlier I began to pray very little, attend Mass mainly on Sundays and Holy days and I had even become quite liberal in following Church teachings.

In the Gospel of St. John chapter 15:7 we read:

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.

I knew I had to find some understanding to all this so that I could experience the peace Jesus promised and be a witness to the love of the Jesus I believed in. There was an answer and there always is. But it requires an effort to understand the will of God. This would be a journey that would take some time and work on my part. It could even last until the time our Lord calls me home.

A good start is to go to the Scriptures and recall the love of Jesus for us, what He has taught us and what He expects of us.

In the Gospel of St. John chapter 15:9-14 we read:

As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

In the first letter of John chapter 3:16 we read:

The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us;

In the Gospel of John chapter 3:16 we read:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

Our Lord never promised we would have an easy life if we truly followed him. Sometimes we seem to forget Jesus telling us that we must pick up our crosses and follow Him (Mt 16:24-27):

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.

In 1 Peter chapter 4:12-13 we read:

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly.

In the first letter of St. John chapter 5:14-15 we read:

And we have this confidence in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in regard to whatever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours.

In the Confessions of Saint Augustine we read the following:

In every place, O Truth, you are present to those who seek your help, and at one and the same time you answer all, though they seek your counsel on different matters. You respond clearly, but not everyone hears clearly. All ask what they wish, but do not always hear the answer they wish. Your best servant is he who is intent not so much on hearing his petition answered, as rather on willing whatever he hears from you.

But how do we discern God's will for each of us? The Catholic Church provides us with many ways to do this. But it is not handed to us on a silver platter. It takes an effort on our part. Prayer is always essential. The greatest prayer is the Mass. But it was not until a few years after I married Sara that I started going back to daily Mass as often as possible. I did this not because I became holy, but I had come to realize once again that it was essential for me to do this in order to follow our Lord as He desires. It was prayer and the Sacraments that brought me back to Catholic orthodoxy. The following are some other ways that have helped and continue to help me.

- Praying daily the Rosary, the Divine Office, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy
- Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament
- Stations of the Cross on Fridays at home or in Church
- Scripture reading and reflection
- Reading the Catechism of the Catholic Church
- Reading books by Catholic authors on Church history, on teachings of the Church, on how to develop virtues like humility and patience, on understanding suffering, on how to love of others unconditionally as Christ loved all, etc.

There are many who have experienced the pain that comes from losing children no matter their age. My only regret is never having been able to have held or kiss my children even if it were only for a few minutes. But my faith in the Lord reminded me that my children, Irma and my mother are in a place where God, his angels and saints dwell. A place St Paul describes in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 2:9

But as it is written: "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him,"

Some things will always be a mystery in this life on earth. However, it is no mystery that God is a God of Love. My faith in the Lord helps me understand that God always knows what He is doing. Some day He will show each of us why trusting in Him during all the pain and suffering we experienced on earth, was necessary and ultimately rewarding.

Many years ago, I went to a mission conducted during lent at a local parish and heard a beautiful talk given by a priest about Jesus on the Cross. Essentially what the priest said was that whenever you are having difficulties or experience a loss or pain, go and kneel before a crucifix. Then ask Jesus if He loves you. Listen, and you will hear in your heart His words "What more can I do for you?" And if you are still not sure go to God the Father and ask Him if He loves you. You can hear the Father saying, "Look at the Cross. That is my Son, the only Son I ever had. What more can I do for you?" If I might add, we could ask our Mother Mary the same question as we look at her holding the dead body of her only Son in her arms, after He is taken down from the Cross. You will hear her say, what more can I do for you?"

I have no doubt that our Lord answered all my prayers in the best way for my sake and for all involved. And He will continue to do so, as long as I stay close to Him and always trust Him.

The blessings I received from the Lord in my life

If we dwell only on the bad things we have experienced in life and not on the many blessings we have received from God, then we are indeed a sorrowful people. I would like to share briefly a few of the many blessings I have received from our Lord in my life.

The greatest blessing, I have received from God is to come to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and that there are three Persons in the One God of Israel, I had always believed in. Then there were the blessings that enabled me to recognize that Mary was my mother and that the Catholic Church was my home.

In our years at St. Andrew's Irma and I had become very friendly with a Father Anthony De Vial. Father Anthony, a priest from France, worked on a lay family program and was assigned to our Church. He saw Irma frequently during her hospitalization and gave her the sacraments of Anointing of the Sick and Confession. In one of her very few lucid moments she told Father Anthony that when she got to heaven she would tell Jesus to send Charlie a good wife because he deserved one. Irma knew that as a deacon I could never remarry. She did not like that rule. She expected me to remarry. If I did not, it meant to her, that our marriage never meant much to me.

After a tragedy occurs in one's life, a person can sink into a form of isolation especially if one is spiritually bankrupt. That happened to me. I felt sorry for myself and very lonely. I yearned for female companionship. I took a self-imposed leave from all diaconate functions. I decided not to remain celibate and would remarry when the right woman came along so I started dating. One evening sitting in my living room and feeling very down, I began to pray. This life-style of dating disturbed me, so I prayed to God to send me someone good.

A friend named Pilar happened to call me shortly after I prayed in the living room. She encouraged me to call her friend named Sara. A few days later I did call Sara. We talked for almost thirty minutes. I felt really good talking to her, so I asked her for a date. Sara lived only about ten minutes from my house. One evening I drove over to Sara's house. When she met me at the door I was almost speechless. She was beautiful. Sara invited me to come inside where she introduced me to her three teenage sons, Donald, Mark and Eric as well as her parents and her brother. Here is a little background about Sara. She was born in Lima, Peru, November 21, 1942. Her paternal grandfather was a Jew who migrated to Peru from Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century. She came to the United States in 1962. In 1963 she was married in the Church. Sara's upbringing taught her that a woman must be a faithful wife, a good mother, and she must serve her husband. By 1967, her husband had become very abusive to her, unfaithful to his marriage vows, and, in general very irresponsible. He was a non-practicing Catholic, even before his marriage to Sara, with almost no knowledge of the Catholic faith. He possessed no understanding of Catholic teaching regarding marriage. In 1968 Sara divorced her husband and she got custody of their three sons. In 1979 her parents and youngest brother Ricardo came to this country to live with her. Sara wanted her family here with her because she never intended to remarry. Sara's other brother lived in Peru with his family at the time. Difficult years followed. She worked a second job in the evenings and translated documents at night to support her family. Another reason Sara had no intention of marrying was her commitment to always care for her youngest brother who was mentally handicapped and unable to support himself or live alone.

Normally a man going on his first date with a woman would have been overwhelmed to meet all these people. But what attracted me most to Sara, besides her looks and bubbling personality, was her love for her family and the struggles she endured to keep them together. Her steadfastness in raising her children can serve as an inspiration to many single mothers today facing similar hardships. Sara reminded me of what my mother went through. My father had abandoned us and divorced my mother. She raised me all alone with no support from him.

On our first date Sara and I went to a nearby place for a drink and spent over two hours talking. For the first time in a long while, I enjoyed being with someone and being able to freely and easily communicate with her. Sara and I enjoyed our first date and we started seeing each other often. It was not long before I decided this was the woman I wanted to marry. Once Sara agreed to marry me, I requested a dispensation to marry and she applied for an annulment.

After I submitted my request for dispensation from celibacy or laicization, I received a letter from the Archdiocese which recommended I go on a retreat to reflect, whether or not marriage was the right decision for me. This response upset me since I considered myself a mature adult (48 years old) knowing quite well what a marriage commitment meant. Still being at a spiritual low and having no prayer life, additional letter exchanges with the Archdiocese upset me even more. Sara and I decided to get married civilly on August 13, 1982. By attempting marriage prior to my laicization, I incurred an automatic suspension from the diaconate.

In 1984 I again requested dispensation in order to in order to get married in the Church, or laicization. Cardinal Hickey could not support my return to the diaconate ministry, but did support my request for laicization. In 1984 a rescript issued by the Congregation for the Sacraments included a dispensation from clerical celibacy and remission of the automatic suspension incurred by attempting marriage prior to laicization. Sara also received her annulment in 1984. On January 4, 1985 Sara and I were married in the Church during a beautiful Mass concelebrated by five priests with Father Anthony De Vial the main celebrant.

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 10:28-30 we read:

Peter began to say to him, "We have given up everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.

The Lord did give me two children, Stephen and Andrea Faith. But I had always wanted a large family. But when the events I described earlier happened, I thought this was not meant to be for me. However, the Lord works in ways that are at first are not always clear to us. Our first years together Sara and I had some trying times with our children. In 1988 grandchildren started to arrive. Within a few years because of prayer and the sacraments things started to get much better. Today we have 19 grandchildren. Seven range between the ages 20 to 28. Twelve range in age 20 months (identical twin girls) to 14 years. One of our sons Eric and his wife Nicole have nine children who are home schooled. I can't even begin to describe the joy and blessings Sara and I have received from our Lord in all our beautiful grandchildren.

In a sacramental marriage the two become one flesh. In Genesis chapter 2:24 we read:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 10:6-9 we read:

Jesus said to them 'But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate."

I believe then that a spiritual union between a husband and wife, who become **one flesh** in a sacramental marriage, is greater than any physical union. Therefore we only have only children and grandchildren. For me there is no such thing as step-children or step-grandchildren. I am very proud of what all of our sons and daughter have become.

When Sara agreed to marry me she was the love of my life. As the years passed by because of prayer and the sacraments we grew closer to our Lord and His Church. After 35 years together I am happy to say that Sara is still the love of my life and will remain so until the Lord calls me home.

The following is a prayer that should help us understand how the Lord will answer our petitions.

In all petitions we ask of you Lord, may your will be done. We ask that our prayers advance the glory of God and the coming of the Kingdom you proclaimed, Lord Jesus. We believe that the will of your heart is what is best for us and our loved ones. We abandon ourselves and our petitions to the will of your loving heart.

May God be always praised!

Charles Hoffman
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