Scary prayers that are good for you

I have a short list of scary prayers.

Scary prayers are prayers where even the very words you say seem to convict you.

Most prayers are prayers of petition, prayers where we are asking God for his intervention. I have two friends who are battling breast cancer, and I try to pray for them daily.

I tend to take a shotgun approach with such prayers: praying for healing, or for a beatable form of the cancer, or for smart doctors, and always ending with "if it be your will." Those last five words can qualify as a scary prayer, because we really, really want healing to be God's will, and thinking it might not be God's will is, well, scary.

There are also prayers of praise and thanksgiving. I think of all the blessings I've received, gifts so extravagant I can never hope to repay, if that were even possible. My wife, my children, my friends, all those providential events in my life that in retrospect were unmerited blessings from a generous God.

And while you won't find this category in the catechism, don't forget prayers of whine and moping. Such prayers of complaint are hilariously parodied in a great Matthew Kelly line: "Listen Lord, your servant is speaking." But scary prayers are something different. They are prayers where the very words can turn to dust in my mouth. The Lord who knows all must surely know all the times I have given the lie to the very words I am uttering.

The prototypical scary prayer is actually the Our Father. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others." Uh huh, right. Forgiving others is tough work. The person who mistreated me, or betrayed me, or lied to me: Lord, forgive me my trespasses as I forgave these people. Too often I know how unforgiving I can be. Of course it is easy to forgive someone who loves me or is kind to me or can help me. Even the pagans do that, as Jesus reminds us. But the Lord's Prayer is asking for something much more.

Another scary prayer is the “Litany of Humility” by Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val, who served as secretary of state for Pope Pius X. The columnist J.F. Pisani first introduced me to this prayer. Pisani wrote that “I realize my deficiencies most of all” when praying it.

A few of the lines:

“That others may be more loved than I, Make it Jesus my desire. That others may be preferred to me … That others may grow in the opinion of the world and I may diminish … That others may be preferred to me in all …”

It is both an examination of conscience and an antidote to vain ambition and narcissistic strivings. Another part of the prayer says: “From the fear of being despised, free me, Jesus. From the fear of being calumniated … From the fear of being ridiculed …” Hard words in these days of vigilante social media and self-appointed scourges roaming the Catholic Twittersphere.

Similarly, the “Litany of Trust,” written by Sr. Faustina Maria Pia of the Sisters of Life, exposes our desire to wriggle away from what God may be asking of us: “From the fear that trusting You will leave me more destitute, Deliver me, Jesus. From refusals and reluctances in accepting your will … From the fear of being asked to give more than I have …”

Scary prayers are good but tough. They remind me of the road I still have to travel. They dispel comfortable illusions. And on most days, they are exactly what I need.

Copyright ©2019 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.