Wasted Prayer

The Catholic Review

I must not have been more than six or seven. My brothers and I would dutifully accompany my mother many a Monday night for the novena of the Miraculous Medal, a strong devotion of the day evidenced by a large parish church half-filled.

The priest would lead the novena from the pulpit. In the midst of the central prayer, there would be a pause at the words “and for those for whom we now pray.” After the several second pause, the priest would resume by listing the petitions: “for my father out of work, for my sister with cancer, for an alcoholic friend, for my dying brother.” On and on he would go reading the intentions submitted by the congregation.

That’s not how I understood it, unfortunately. I thought all these were the personal woes of the priest himself, week after week, and I couldn’t understand how he managed to get out of bed every day, much less be the unfailingly kind and affable priest that he was.

At the time, while I was not aware of the term “intercessory prayer” in which we pray for others. I naturally engaged in intercessory prayer every night on my knees, bedside, as I prayed for my parents, brothers and others. I would, I’m sure, also have prayed for more mundane things: to win the next day’s ball game, for snow to cancel school, to get all A’s on next week’s report card. Many a time these did not find an answer or a response to my liking.

The problem with intercessory prayer is what happens when we do not get the result we pray for. (This is nicely treated in our Catechism of the Catholic Church #2734-2745).

Dr. Robert Susil, a 35 year-old brilliant oncologist at Hopkins, was buried earlier this month from our Cathedral. He was, if I may say, a saintly man in an ideal marriage and with a very young son, William Joseph Susil, not yet four years of age. The son-in-law of the well-known George Weigel, he was the recipient of prayers from around

the world as he struggled with a particularly aggressive sarcoma.

After Rob's death, George e-mailed the army of friends whose "prayers weren't answered": "The miracle didn't come; we know, however, that those prayers opened channels of grace and healing of which we are unaware, but for which we are grateful."

Good Catholic instinct. Solid Catholic belief: Prayer offered in the name of Jesus becomes the very prayer of Jesus. Such prayer will never be wasted, but rather bestowed generously on behalf of other members of His Body in need. Did not He Himself pray in the garden at Gethsemane, "Father, take this cup from me?" Then, "Yet not my will, but yours be done," joining His Will, ultimately to the Will of the Father, thereby gaining salvation for the whole world. His prayer, His suffering was "vicarious": nothing gained for Himself, totally offered for others and with what a result!

Our prayer offered in Christ, our suffering offered in Christ, will never return void and will find answer with a universal application and impact beyond our imagination. Why? Because it is Christ's prayer as well.

Our intercessory prayer and suffering become also, vicarious prayer and suffering, joined to the sufferings of Christ, open to the Will of the Father, with far-reaching results.

The Church, each Lent, exhorts us to fasting for this very reason. Yes, to create an emptiness, a hunger for God, but also in our own flesh, to "fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church" (Col. 1:24).

Two conclusions:

- No prayer is ever wasted.
- There is nothing so wasted as wasted suffering.