

Anicia Faltonia Proba, who died in AD 432, was a Christian Roman noblewoman. She had the distinction of knowing both Augustine, the greatest theologian of the first millennium of Christian history, as well as John Chrysostom, its greatest preacher. We have two letters of Augustine to Proba, and the first (Letter 130) is the only single, substantial treatment on the subject of prayer that Augustine ever wrote.

I had the chance to read the letter recently and was impressed with its common sense and some of its unusual insights. Proba wrote Augustine because she was afraid she wasn't praying as she should. Augustine responded with several principles or rules for prayer.

The first rule is completely counterintuitive. Augustine wrote that before anyone can turn to the question of *what* to pray and *how* to pray it, he or she must first be a particular kind of person. What kind is that? He writes: "You must account yourself 'desolate' in this world, however great the prosperity of your lot may be." He argues that no matter how great your earthly circumstances, they cannot bring us the peace, happiness, and consolation found in Christ. The scales must fall from our eyes. If we don't see that truth, all our prayers will go wrong.

Second, Augustine says, you can begin to pray. And what should you pray for? With a bit of a smile (I think) he answers you should pray for what everyone else prays for: "Pray for a happy life." But, of course, what will bring you a happy life? The Christian (if following Augustine's first rule of prayer) has realized that comforts and rewards and pleasures in themselves give only fleeting excitement and, if you rest your heart in them, actually bring you less enduring happiness. He turns to Psalm 27 and points to the psalmist's great prayer: "One thing have I desired of the Lord, one thing will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord to behold the beauty of the Lord." This is the fundamental prayer for happiness. Augustine writes, "We love God, therefore, *for what he is in himself*, and [we love] ourselves and our neighbors for his sake." That doesn't mean, he quickly adds, that we shouldn't pray for anything else other than to know, love, and please God. Not at all. The Lord's Prayer shows us that we need many things. But if God is our greatest love, and if knowing and pleasing him is our highest pleasure, then we'll be transformed both in what and how we pray for a happy life.

He quotes Proverbs 30 as an example: "Give me neither poverty nor riches: Feed me with food appropriate for me lest I be full and deny you . . . or lest I be poor, and steal and take the name of my God in vain." Ask yourself this question. Are you seeking God in prayer in order to get adequate financial resources—or are you seeking the kind and amount of resources you need to adequately know and serve God? Those are two different sets of motivations.

In both cases the external action is a prayer—"Oh, Lord, give me a job so I won't be poor"—but the internal reasons of the heart are completely different. If, as Augustine counseled, you first became a person "desolate without God regardless of external circumstances" and then began to pray, your prayer will be like Proverbs 30. But if you just jump into prayer before the gospel re-orders your heart's loves, then your prayer will be more like this: "Make me as wealthy as possible." As a result, you will not develop the spiritual discretion in prayer that enables you

to discern selfish ambition and greed from a desire for excellence in work. And you will be far more crestfallen if you suffer financial reversals. A Proverbs 30 prayer includes the request that God not give you too much, not only that he not give you too little.

The third rule was comprehensive and practical. You will be guided, he said, into the right way to pray for a happy life by studying the Lord's Prayer. Think long and hard about this great model of prayer and be sure your own appeals fit it. For example, Augustine writes: "He who says in prayer . . . 'Give me as much wealth as you have given to this or that man' or 'Increase my honors; make me eminent in power and fame in the world,' and who asks merely from a desire for these things, and not in order through them to benefit men agreeably to God's will, I do not think he will find any part of the Lord's Prayer in connection with which he could fit in these requests. Therefore, let us be ashamed to ask these things."

The fourth rule is an admission. Augustine admits that even after following the first three rules, still "we know not what to pray for as we ought in regard to tribulations." This is a place of great perplexity. Even the most godly Christian can't be sure what to ask for. "Tribulations . . . may do us good . . . and yet because they are hard and painful . . . we pray with a desire which is common to mankind that they may be removed from us."

Augustine gives wise pastoral advice here. He first points to Jesus' own prayer in Gethsemane, which was perfectly balanced between honest desire ("Let this cup pass from me") and submission to God ("Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done"). And he points to [Romans 8:26](#), which promises that the Spirit will guide our hearts and prayers when we are groaning and confused—and God will hear them even in their imperfect state.

Anicia Proba was a widow by her early 30s. She was present when Rome was sacked in 410 and had to flee for her life with her granddaughter Demetrias to Africa where they met Augustine. Augustine concludes the letter by asking his friend, "Now what makes this work [of prayer] specially suitable to widows but their bereaved and desolate condition?" Should a widow not "commit her widowhood, so to speak, to her God as her shield in continual and most fervent prayer?" There is every reason to believe she accepted his invitation.

*See Augustine's Letter 130 (A.D. 412) to Proba found in Philip Schaff, ed., "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers," First series, vol. 1, 1887. Christian Classics Ethereal Library pp. 997–1015.*