



## Pastor's Column

St. Peter Catholic Church

July 1, 2018 ~ Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

### *A Stone Too Heavy for God to Lift? Changing God's mind?*

Question: "The Christian idea of an omnipotent (that is, all-powerful) God is logically contradictory. Can the Lord make a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it? If He can, then there is something that He cannot do (lift the stone); but if He cannot, then there is also something that He cannot do (make such a stone)."

Answer: "To accuse others of a logical contradiction, you first must understand their idea correctly. Otherwise, you commit the logical fallacy of the 'straw man.' This question misunderstands omnipotence."

The term "omnipotent" means "all-powerful" (the Latin *omnis* means "all" and the Latin *potens* means "powerful"). This is often said to mean that God can "do anything." But this statement is ambiguous, and this ambiguity leads to the question above.

What does it mean to say that God can do anything? If "anything" means anything *that you can say*, then the idea would involve logical contradictions. You could, for example, say that God could make four-sided triangles, square circles, married bachelors, two-horned unicorns, and other entities whose definitions involve inherent logical contradictions. For example, the very definition of "unicorn" is a horse-like creature having one ("uni") horn ("corn") on its head; a two-horned unicorn, therefore, is by definition illogical.

This is not what Christian theologians mean by "omnipotence." Instead, they mean that God can do anything *that is logically possible*. That is, God can do anything that does not involve a logical contradiction. This causes the question above to vanish because if omnipotence excludes logical contradictions, then by definition, it does involve them.

It thus resolves the question of whether the Lord can make a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it. By virtue of omnipotence, God has infinite (that is, unlimited) lifting power. There is no upper limit to what God can lift. Thus, a stone too heavy for God to lift would have to have *more than infinite weight*, and the idea of "more than infinite" is illogical; there is nothing more, nothing greater, than infinity.

Stones too heavy for an omnipotent being to lift fall in the same category as four-sided triangles, square circles, married bachelors, and two-horned unicorns. They are illogical; they defy the very definitions that describe them; and therefore, they contain logical contradictions and thus represent gibberish rather than logical possibilities.

Question: "Why should we bother praying? If the Lord is all-knowing, then He knows what we need, and we cannot change His mind because He is changeless."

Answer: "Prayer is not about giving God information or changing minds; rather, it is an activity that we need to do because it draws us out of ourselves and builds relationships – with God and with other human beings. That is why God rewards prayer."

Jesus teaches that prayer is not about giving God information: "Your Father knows what you need before You ask Him." (Mt 6:8)

The reason why God wants us to pray is that it keeps us from closing in on ourselves. The Lord wants us to have a relationship with Him – to think about Him, to love Him. Human beings build relationships with one another by talking, and so it is with us and God. The Lord rewards us when we talk to Him in ways that we are able. He also wants us to care about one another and not to think exclusively about our own needs. Thus, He rewards it when we pray for others.

This way, the people of God are built up through love and mutual concern. When we pray, we are drawn out of ourselves to care about both God and neighbor.

Because the Lord already knows what we need, praying is not something that helps Him. It helps us. It rescues us from thoughtlessness and makes us better, more loving people. It also does not change God's mind. It is true that the Lord is outside of time and changeless, but this does not prevent Him from knowing the prayers that we offer to Him at particular moments in time and rewarding them.

That fact that God is changeless but gives gifts to those in time was noted by Saint James: "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with Whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change."

Notice how, by praying to God and on behalf of others, we learn to care about both, thus helping us to fulfill the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. (Mk 12:28-34)

~ Fr. Lewis