

## A TIMELESS PRAYER

The Peace Prayer is prayed in Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. Even my Muslim friend from the Sudan prays it occasionally. It has been cross-stitched and memorized, used in times of sorrow—like funerals—and of joy—like weddings, anniversaries and ordinations. The Peace Prayer is truly a prayer for all peoples and all times.

Why does this prayer cast such a magical spell upon us? Why do princess and pauper, bishop and bellhop, saint and sinner turn to it in emotional moments? During the next 11 months, I'll try to answer these questions.

### Who Wrote It?

Most of us know this prayer by its popular name, "The Peace Prayer of St. Francis." And yet Francis of Assisi had nothing to do with its composition. Scholars have found the earliest version in the breviary of William the Conqueror, king of England from 1066 to 1087—200 years before the saint.

Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, archbishop of New York from 1939 to 1967, is the one who attached the name of Francis to this prayer. In celebration of his appointment to the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Spellman visited the hometown of his patron saint. Just as it is today, the Peace Prayer was sold in Assisi with a picture of St. Francis under the title "A Simple Prayer."

Spellman returned to the States with a copy of "A Simple Prayer" in hand. He used to hand out copies under the title "The Peace Prayer of St. Francis"...and the rest is history, as they say.

Though the saint did not compose this prayer, it clearly encapsulates what Francis was and what all of us are called to be: people of peace, love, forgiveness, joy and understanding.

### The Prayer's Structure

This prayer's structure reveals a way of life that is rich in biblical spirituality.

By acknowledging there is a Lord,

we admit there is someone in this universe more important than ourselves. For many of us who live self-centered lives, this causes a psychological and spiritual earthquake. We are forced to realign our priorities. As Paul reminds us, "you are not your own" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Indeed, we belong to Jesus Christ. We are challenged to become instruments of the peace which is his legacy to us after the Resurrection—"Peace be with you" (John 20:19).

The peace of the risen Lord is more than the "absence of war or other hostilities," as a dictionary would define it. Specifically, it is the purest expression of biblical *shalom*, a reconciling peace where lion and lamb, friend and foe stand together as one family.

Easter peace sinks its roots deep into the marrow of our bones and disperses racism, grudges and dark thoughts of despair, revenge and sadness which often hide in shame. By being heralds of peace and agents of love, pardon, faith, hope, light and joy, we bring a

foretaste of the Resurrection to the new millennium.

### American Challenge

A major obstacle to this peace is the self-centeredness which the American "me-generation" epitomizes. Like honeybees, we flit here and there, obsessing with being stroked, known, appreciated and loved.

The second half of the Peace Prayer reminds me that my fixation with being consoled is satisfied by giving to others, my need to be understood by pardoning others, my craving for love by forgetting myself. The key to happiness is all about *giving*, not *getting*. Indeed, life is a paradox where I find my center of gravity by dying to "me" and living for "thee."

The Peace Prayer calls forth not only what is best in the human condition but also what any authentic disciple of Jesus aspires to be. A

**NEXT MONTH: 'Lord and Divine Master'**