



CHAPTER 1

The Power of Prayer
A Holy Invitation

Michele

And we have this confidence in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in regard to whatever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours.

—1 John 5:14–15

One hot summer day Emily and I sat in a small diner in Galena, Ohio, with our friend Angel. A sign on the wall read, “Life Is a Journey Filled with Unexpected Miracles.” We believed the truth of this statement, as we were sitting with a real-life miracle. “I used to come here all the time when I was going through chemo and radiation,” Angel said. “The waffles just melt in your mouth. It was the only thing I could eat sometimes.”

A red Holy Spirit medallion hung from Angel’s necklace, and its glimmer in the sunlight caught my eye. It was hard to believe we were with our friend; eighteen months had passed

since her doctor warned her that she had “maybe a year” to live.

Angel’s cancer journey was an amazing testament to the power of prayer. A cradle Catholic, Angel was the youngest of seven and had put herself through law school. She says that her career as an attorney soon began to define who she was as a person, and although she was well loved by her clients, her work atmosphere was toxic and stressful. She was a devout Catholic, and her faith was very important to her. Yet in recent years she had experienced a great deepening of her faith and prayer life. She had sensed God’s call to draw closer to him, so she began to seek him out.

In December 2016, Angel attended a retreat. She remembers going alone and feeling unworthy to be there. However, she met a priest who prayed over her. During this special time of intercessory prayer, she initially felt a tightening in her throat. It was a feeling she had experienced many times under stress. She began to cough incessantly and was barely able to breathe. Then, suddenly, she felt a rush of oxygen. “It was like electricity running up and down my body,” she remembers, a feeling of total peace. She knew she had encountered God at that moment.

On the way home from the event, she started feeling a lump in her throat that continued to get worse. On Christmas Eve, she noticed swallowing became more difficult. As a precaution her husband encouraged her to see a doctor, who ordered an endoscopy (a noninvasive procedure that allows the doctor to view your digestive tract with a camera). Angel and her husband knew from the look on the doctor’s face after the procedure was over that the findings had not been good. A tumor had been found and a biopsy was taken to be sent for further examination.

It was a cold February day when she and her husband sat down with the doctor to discuss the results of the biopsy, which showed that she had stage three esophageal cancer. The doctor

told her that if she started chemotherapy immediately, she had “maybe a year to live.” If she survived the complicated surgery, he said, she had about a 5 percent chance of living two years. In shock, Angel made her way out of the doctor’s office and stood in the parking lot feeling sick. At just that moment, her phone rang. It was the local Catholic radio station, St. Gabriel Radio, asking if she would participate the following Tuesday in the *From the Chair* program, a call-in show featuring the bishop. The topic that day was going to be, “Time is a gift. What are we to do with that time?”

She agreed to call in and put away her phone. Turning to her husband, she said, “God will have a message for me Tuesday at 5:30 p.m.”

At the appointed time she called in to speak to Bishop Campbell. “I was recently diagnosed with esophageal cancer,” she told him. “All cancer is bad, but this cancer is going to silence me. My time will be spent in pain and silence, not being able to speak. What do I do with this time, how do I offer up this pain?”

As she had anticipated, God had a message for her that day, speaking through Bishop Campbell to remind her that we are not to deny the suffering that we face but embrace it. “There will be times that we are tempted to want to curse—why me, why now?” he told Angel. “We can’t change it. But we can change our attitude toward it. How are we to face it? We face it with one of the great virtues: *Courage.*”

He reminded Angel not to look too far in the future. “The time we possess is the time right here, right now. How do we use that time? It’s up to us. Are we going to be paralyzed by fear, or do we use this time for good?”

“The Lord gives us the ability to deal with the distress we have through the hands of medical personnel and through the comfort of our family and friends,” the bishop continued. “We are not alone. Day by day, in each moment that we are given, pray that God encourage a stronger sense of his presence. Do

not be afraid of weakness. Rather, depend on the gift of others. Ask God for clarity and understanding, a sense of peace and the gift of acceptance." He also encouraged Angel to seek the intercession of St. John Henry Newman that she would be healed.¹

Angel took the bishop's words to heart and continued to pray. She was joined by numerous other friends who interceded on her behalf. Although the prognosis was grim, we all had hope for her physical and spiritual healing.

Hearing God's Voice in the Darkness

"How did your prayer life change after your diagnosis?" I asked Angel.

She smiled. "Michele, there is mechanical praying and then there is *praying*—when you speak to God and hear him. Hearing God's voice is imperative in growing in your prayer life. For me, the best way to hear God's voice is in eucharistic adoration." Angel has a designated time to go to adoration, every Thursday at 4:00 a.m. "It was in this place and time that I could hear God's voice the clearest."

Angel told me about a powerful time in prayer she experienced soon after her diagnosis. After beginning her hour with God with her usual prayer intention list, including all her friends and family, she heard in her heart, "Angel, you are going to be okay."

At first, she believed that the thought came from her own head, but then she heard it again. Like any attorney, she immediately put God in deposition mode. "God," she said, "I know what my okay is, but what is *your* okay?"

She laughed a little as she remembered that moment. Then she said to me, "You know, Michele, in that moment I knew, no matter what happened, if I lived or died, I was going to be okay. I had full acceptance of his will."

Angel began chemotherapy and radiation treatments to prepare her for surgery, which would involve relocating a major artery at the bottom of her stomach, removing most of her esophagus and part of her stomach, and moving her stomach up to the middle of her chest. The survival rate of this type of surgery was 50 percent. Amazingly, the operation was completed in two and a half hours, half the expected time. Even more surprising, the doctors said her organs and tissues were healthy, normal flesh, not damaged by radiation and chemo, as was expected. However, a short time later there was more bad news. In May 2018, a scan showed that the cancer had metastasized to the lungs. It was stage four esophageal cancer. She had just weeks to live.

Although the news was awful, Angel did not give up. “I know that God is with me—even in deepest despair and darkest moments. So often in the past I would look at my circumstances and feel hopeless. But the cancer was a kind of wake-up call, especially at work. I realized I needed to turn my anger at my coworkers and others to love, even when they were being jerks. I began to see my boss as a child of God, and I wanted to hug him instead of being angry with him. I wanted him to know how much he is loved by God.”

As the anger faded from Angel’s life, so did the cancer. At her next visit, the tumors in her lungs had shrunk 50 percent. In March 2019, just two years after the initial diagnosis, the CT scan showed the tumors were gone! Her doctor, a specialist in esophageal cancer, was shocked at the most recent scan report and told Angel he read it over multiple times, comparing it to the scan just three months prior, where the tumors were still present in her lungs. He had known only one other patient who survived two years with metastasized esophageal cancer.

Angel shared, “It is my belief that the reason I have been healed is because of all the intercessory prayers from my friends, family, and community. They are always with me, they don’t fade away.” She said, “I feel them more when I am

in adoration. I can feel the prayers, like the breath of the Holy Spirit, the breath of prayers." She believes that because of all these prayers, she was granted more time, more strength, more understanding, and was able to hear the voice of God and accept his will.

"I would be in despair without prayer," Angel went on. "My greatest desire now is to help people understand the importance of their relationship with God in a deep prayer life, and I don't want them to have to get cancer to learn this lesson. Now, I try to connect with people who have cancer to pray with them and pray for them. I want to help them, to teach them to pray and listen to God. I have been given great graces and I want to share these graces with them.

"I know I will have a shorter life because of this cancer," Angel acknowledged. "But I believe in the power of prayer, and I have been given the gift of time, the best gift God can give me."

Partnering with God in Prayer

Angel's touching story reminds us of God's ability to work through even the darkest moments of our lives in order to draw us closer to him and to motivate us to live with eternity in mind. When we are troubled—or when someone we care about is in need of prayer—it is easy to turn to God. And yet, God urgently wants us to come to him daily—not just when we are in need. He wants us to experience his friendship in prayer, so that when the troubles come, we can trust him to do what is best for us. In that way we become true partners in prayer.

How do we begin to cultivate this kind of relationship with God?

Fr. Larry Richards writes, "As with all other friendships in our lives, our friendship with Jesus takes time and commitment. It is a give and take and not just one-sided. The only way to have a true friend is to spend time with them. We do this

with Jesus when we pray. Do you have committed daily time with Jesus as your divine friend? He longs for you to be with him, and he calls you to this intimacy. And as with all friendship, we need to spend time with him each day.”²

This is what God taught our friend Angel, as she made her way through those dark moments following her diagnosis. Can you think of a dark time in your own life, when God was trying to help you draw close to him in a similar way?

Is there a part of Angel’s story that resonates with you? When was the last time God had your full attention? Write about it in the journaling space at the back of this book, or in your prayer journal.

Do You Have Time for God?

As busy women, we don’t always make time with God a priority. There can be many reasons for this. For some, there are too many things pressing for time. For others, we don’t know exactly what to say to God once we are alone with him. Sure, we find it easy to go to him when we need something, but he stands ready to offer us something even better: a true friendship with him. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “Yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response” (2567).

Do you know God is calling you? That he loves you and is paying attention to you? God wants to spend time with you. God is always drawing you closer and asking that you come closer to him. He wants a dialogue with you, not just a monologue where you do all the talking. Prayer is that invitation from God to you; he initiates the conversation and is waiting for your reply. Prayer involves more than just talking, though; it involves the heart.

As I pondered these thoughts on prayer, I read this beautiful meditation by Fr. John Bartunek, who writes as though Jesus is speaking to us:

Prayer is much simpler than you think. I am always with you, always at your side, and in your heart. I am always paying attention to you, thinking of you. I am always interested in what you are going through and what is in your mind and heart. Remember this, believe it, and prayer will become as natural as breathing. You never have to be alone. I am the one who knows you wholly and loves you no matter what. Live in the awareness of my presence; let me be your life's companion.³

Do you believe that?

Sometimes Catholics get a bad rap where prayer is concerned. I can remember working as a nurse at a crisis pregnancy center. Although it was founded by a devout Catholic, the volunteers were of many Christian faiths. One day two volunteers, not knowing I was Catholic, were chatting about a meeting they attended the previous evening. One woman spouted, "Then the funniest thing happened—they asked Bob to lead the prayer! You know Bob, he's *Catholic*, and well you know, those Catholics, they don't pray!"

I was shocked. *Of course Catholics pray!* I wanted to tell her. But I was young, and too shy to speak up—I couldn't even think of the words to respond. However, I knew that her impression couldn't be further from the truth. We pray all the time as Catholics, though we are often most comfortable with the rote prayers we learned as children. Yet God is calling us to so much more—he wants us to speak to him freely, from the heart.

Did you know that God wants to know your deepest desires? He wants to listen to your heartfelt cry and hear your honest response to what he asks of you. Of course, prayer can sometimes feel like a duty more than a friendship. There have

been times when my prayer life has consisted only of going to Sunday Mass, where I would check in with the holy water and the Sign of the Cross and find myself checking out with the bulletin without actually talking to God! It was like going to a party and not saying hello to the host.

Have you ever felt like that? If so, maybe you'd like to explore with me just a bit, so that you can start moving toward a better, more personal relationship with God.

Let's Pray: Rest in Jesus' Presence

So where do we begin? A couple of years ago, I attended Mass at the Dublin Irish Fest, where Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan of Ireland talked on prayer:

Where do we start? Just by talking to Jesus. Pour out your heart to him. Tell him everything—about your day, your family, your hopes, and your dreams. The more that you pray, the more that you will become attuned to the voice of God in your life. The more you talk to him and then *listen*, the more you will hear him. In moments of prayer, you may feel a calmness or a word of wisdom—that is Jesus. When you are at work and you feel that peace, that is Jesus. When you go to confession and feel that wave of mercy, that is Jesus. When you receive the Holy Eucharist and feel that presence, that is Jesus.⁴

Let's try it now, okay? Find a comfortable, quiet place (even if it's just a few minutes in the bathroom) to begin this divine dialogue. What is weighing on your mind and heart that you want the Lord to know about?

Don't be afraid to be honest. He knows it all anyway . . . but he wants to give you relief. He wants to lighten your burden. He wants to share your joy. So go ahead . . .

Tell Jesus what is on your mind. Or if you prefer, jot down a few things in the space at the back of this book, or in your prayer journal.

Okay, now that you've had a chance to let it all out, it's time for the second part: It's time to listen. Set down this book, close your eyes, take a deep breath . . . and as you let it out, invite Jesus to speak to you. Don't worry if nothing seems to happen. Just rest in his presence, and trust that he is at work in your heart even if you don't hear a word. Thank him for being with you, and ask him to continue to speak to you throughout the day. He does that in many ways—through other people, through circumstances, and especially through the scriptures.

Is this the first time you've ever thought about having a conversation with God?

Have you ever heard God speak to you? Write a bit about it in your journal.

Meet Your Heavenly Friend:

St. Gemma Galgani

God the Father, Jesus Christ, his mother Mary, and the angels are always present, although we cannot see them. The saints and angels are always praying for us and cheering us from the stands of heaven, which we read about in Hebrews 12: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:1–2).

The saints serve a special dual purpose in the life of the believer—not only do they pray for us with great understanding but they also provide useful examples for us to follow.

Throughout this book we have included stories of some of our favorite saints. Right now, I'd like to tell you about one of mine!

St. Gemma Galgani was born on March 12, 1878, in a small village near Lucca, Italy. Her mother was hesitant to call her Gemma since there was no saint with this name, yet the priest encouraged her, as there were many gems in heaven, and they hoped Gemma would someday join them.

Gemma's mother died when her daughter was only eight, and Gemma was sent to be raised by the Sisters of St. Zita. She was said to have a very "sanguine temperament and her blood was easily fired."⁵ And yet despite her faults, Gemma had a great desire to become a saint. According to her biography, Gemma grew to prefer informal prayer, just talking with God throughout her day, instead of reciting formal prayers. She learned that by talking to God through all hours of the day and night, she was always in the presence of God.

Gemma was humble and keenly aware of her sins and imperfections, and wrote in a letter, "Gemma alone can do nothing. But together Gemma and Jesus can do all things!"⁶

Gemma grew into a beautiful young woman, yet she wanted only Christ as her spouse. When she was sixteen, she began to experience severe pain in her back. She had violent headaches, became deaf, lost all of her hair, and became paralyzed. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis of the spine, which was extremely difficult to treat and cure at the time. Treatment brought little relief, and Gemma was in excruciating pain, yet she accepted her cross and used this time of suffering to draw closer to Jesus and abandon her will to the will of God. When things looked hopeless, a priest recommended praying a novena to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. At the end of the nine days, Gemma was miraculously and completely cured.

After her healing, Gemma progressed more deeply in prayer, especially by meditating on the Passion of Christ. Although she was denied entrance to the convent by the archbishop, she became a great mystic and received the stigmata

(the wounds of Christ). In 1903 she contracted tuberculosis and died on April 11 of that year, on Holy Saturday. She was only twenty-five years old. St. Gemma was canonized in 1940.

St. Gemma's story reminds us that the path to sanctity often involves following in the footsteps of the saints and asking for their intercession. Which saints do you most admire and why? What have you learned from their lives, writings, and prayers? Write down your thoughts in your journal.

Deepen Your Prayer Life: Advice from St. Gemma

Take time out of your day to spend time with Jesus.

“Let us go to Jesus. He is all alone and hardly anyone thinks of Him. Poor Jesus!”⁷

When you cannot sleep, use that time to talk to Jesus.

“See, oh Jesus, even at night, those hours, those hours! I sleep, but Jesus my heart does not sleep. It watches with Thee at all hours.”

When you first wake up in the morning, talk to Jesus. Take time to be near to his heart.

“Can You see that as soon as the day breaks I think of You? I am near You at every moment. . . . I love You, Jesus.”

Pray before the Blessed Sacrament and receive Jesus in Holy Communion often.

“Oh, what immense joy and happiness my heart feels before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament! . . . Jesus, soul of my soul, my