

Sean Fagan - 'I Carry You in my Prayer' - 'Nice to know that somebody talks to God about me'

Seán Fagan SM (1927-2016) taught moral theology for over forty years on three continents, and was the author of Has Sin Changed? and Does Morality Change?

I find it comforting to have the support of somebody's prayers, especially those of a friend who really cares and is concerned for my welfare. Christians often assure each other of a remembrance in prayer. It is nice to know that somebody talks to God about me. The little phrase 'With love and prayers' at the end of a letter can be quite heart-warming. But occasionally I wonder is it a promise and a real commitment, or just a conventional phrase. I would never want it to be mere words thoughtlessly uttered, or an automatic part of a template stored on the computer. For almost half a century now I have used a phrase that helps me to remember the promise I make with the assurance of prayer. When I pray for people, I carry them in my prayer. I owe the insight to a simple experience of almost half a century ago, in 1956, which I like to recall with fondness and deep gratitude.

I was editor of a religious periodical at the time and frequently received letters from readers commenting on something I wrote, or asking questions about theology or spirituality. A young Englishwoman wrote and continued to write until we became quite close penfriends; she was a kind of *anam chara* [soul friend] before the word became fashionable. We never met, and lost touch after a few years. She was born in England, but her parents were French and Italian, and she wrote all three languages not only perfectly, but beautifully, with a certain flair and great spontaneity. She would begin in English, and quite spontaneously swing into Italian or French and back again for no specific reason except the feeling of the moment. I returned the compliment. Her letters were delightful, as she poured out her heart, moving from one language to another naturally and unselfconsciously.

She was married to an Australian engineer, and they had one child. When he changed his job, she moved with him to the jungle of Papua New Guinea. It was an exciting time for her, and I could live some of that excitement vicariously as she vividly described her new experiences. She wrote to tell me that she was expecting her second child, and she asked for a special remembrance in prayer. She mentioned that the previous child had been born in England, surrounded by the best of hospital services. She wondered what the second birth would be like, out in the wild, with only the assurance of special help in an emergency. Apart from this quite natural concern, she wrote beautifully of her feelings, of the mystery of life, love, sex, the power of nature, and the extraordinary privilege of being Mother Nature to her unborn baby.

Surrounded by the immensity of the wild untamed forests and mountains, she was quite lyrical about what was happening to her, and with the rich mix of the different languages she talked of her experience of being in touch with primal feelings from the early days of humanity, recalling the beautiful freshness of creation, when the world was young, and the first humans were just a small group. She talked of the new life stirring within her, and how she felt connected with the whole of creation powerfully throbbing with life around her. The mood put her in touch with the mystery and wonder of the deeper meaning of the first chapters of the Bible, and with God's extraordinary love incarnate in the flesh and blood of everyday living.

She was running out of space on her last page, and she rushed into French with the concluding phrase *Je te porte dans ma prière* - I carry you in my prayer. Her statement touched me deeply, with its simplicity and directness, enriched and given meaning by the context of her thinking and feeling. Since that moment, that is how I think of praying for people. They are not just mentioned in my list of petitions (although they are indeed registered there). Instead, I think about them, with feeling, passionately and compassionately, and bring them into my conversation with God. To be carried in somebody's prayer is rather like being in the warmth, safety and love surrounding the baby waiting to be born, part of a loving protective presence. We are all carried like that in God's love, from all eternity and for all eternity. We are carried like that in the love and prayer of Jesus to his Father. For my friends I pray that the Lord will let them know how much I carry them lovingly in my prayer. I thank God for those who do the same for me, especially for those soul-friends who carried me all through their lives and whose prayer is all the more powerful now that they are at home with the Lord who carries all of us in his love.