

THE POWER OF HOPE AND PRAYER

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Lately, as the result of a new book I am finishing, I have given a lot of thought to the power of hope and prayer. So when I heard about the travails of Bret Baier and his wife, I knew I had to read it; their very personal ordeal is truly inspiring. What follows is a small excerpt from my new book.

Bret Baier, the Fox News chief political anchor, and his wife Amy, know better than most what it is like to face adversity. Soon after their first child was born, they learned that Paulie had heart disease. "Heart disease can be simple or it can be complex," said the cardiologist. "Your son has a complex heart disease. He has a very complicated heart." The doctor then informed them that "If your son doesn't have surgery within the next two weeks, he's not going to make it."

Before the surgery, the Baiers had Paulie baptized. "Wiping away a few tears," Bret said, "I prayed, 'Dear Lord, thank you for all the blessings you have given us, and the biggest of our lives, the birth of our son, Paul Francis. We now turn him over to your care for his upcoming surgery and the recovery that will follow. Please be with all of us gathered here and help us get through this challenging time. Lord, please give us strength. Amen.'" Paulie survived, underwent many more heart operations, and is now a happy young boy. You can read about this marvelous story in Bret's book, *Special Heart: A Journey of Faith, Hope, Courage and Love*.

The Baiers are practicing Catholics. What would they have done had they been atheists? It must be tough going it alone, and indeed the evidence shows exactly that. But Bret and Amy were not alone—they were one with the Lord. Bret's prayer was quintessentially Catholic: he was not angry with God—he thanked the Lord for the gift of his son and asked for his

help. But most of all, he did not despair. By praying for Paulie's "recovery that will follow," he evinced optimism and hope.

Dr. Aaron Kheriaty, a Catholic psychiatrist, draws our attention to a biblical story on the subject of despair that is particularly enlightening. He notes that both St. Peter and Judas sinned against Jesus, but with different outcomes. "The contrast between St. Peter's repentance and Judas' despair illustrates this: both men sinned grievously, but Peter repented with tears of contrition. He did not abandon hope. Peter's repentance led him to become one of the greatest saints. Judas despaired, and this despair led him to take his own life."

"There are two things which kill the soul," wrote St. Augustine, "despair and presumption." Despair takes command when hope is jettisoned, when we give up on God. Presumption is more typically a characteristic of atheism, the conviction that we have no need of God, and are quite capable of going it alone. It is an expression of pride, a sin that carries with it the seeds of self-destruction. Both despair and presumption leave no room for hope. "To be utterly without hope is to be in a hellish state," notes Dr. Kheriaty. He reminds us what is written over the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno*: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Jesus said at the Last Supper, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy." How can this be? It is not something atheists can grasp. It eludes the secular mind. New York Archbishop Timothy Cardinal Dolan put it in a way that really drives home the essence of Jesus' words. He explored what he called "the theological reasons for laughter." Why are people of faith happy, he asked. "Here's my reason for joy: the cross. You heard me right: the cross of Christ!" The death of Jesus was not the last word. His resurrection was. After Christ was crucified, Dolan says, it "seemed we could never smile again...But, then came the Sunday called Easter! The

sun—S-U-N—came up, and the Son—S-O-N—came out as He rose from the dead. Guess who had the last word? God!” There is probably nothing more baffling to an atheist than this “theology of laughter.” It is a theology grounded in hope, and hope is the natural antidote to despair.

When Pope John Paul II died, I happened to be at the studios of the Fox News Network in New York City. I knew he was dying, but I had no idea that I would be the first guest to go on the air when he passed away. When asked by Shepard Smith what my thoughts were, I answered, “On the one hand, great sorrow. On the other hand, great joy. Sorrow that he’s no longer with us. Joy that he’s with God, with his Lord.”

How sad it is that atheists can only accept the first half of my response. Even more perplexing to them is what Mother Teresa said about a man who knew he was dying. He turned to her and said, “Sister, I’m going home to God.” She was more than moved by this—she exclaimed that she had never seen “such a radiant smile on a human face as the one I saw on that man’s face.” Tragically, no atheist could ever account for this man’s happiness.

We Catholics are so lucky. We face just as much adversity as anyone, but we have at our disposal the power of hope and prayer. If you want proof of how it works in real life, pick up a copy of *Special Heart*. You won’t be disappointed.