

What the St. Andrew Christmas Novena taught me this year



A few months ago, I shared [some of my family's favorite Christmas traditions](#) that, years from now, I hope my children look back on with the fondest of memories.

One tradition I didn't write about was the St. Andrew Christmas Novena. Many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with the prayer, which begins on the Nov. 30 feast day of St. Andrew and is prayed 15 times a day until Christmas. The prayer is rhythmic and beautiful. "Hail and blessed be the hour and moment in which the Son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in the piercing cold. In that hour, vouchsafe, O my God, to hear my prayer and grant my desires, through the merits of Our Savior Jesus Christ, and of his Blessed Mother. Amen." We've prayed it so often that I'll have it memorized for as long as I live.

There are stretches of time where our family's prayer life is lackadaisical, but for those amazing nights of Advent, we all gather around the living room and pray the prayer in succession – each for his or her own special intention. This year, I prayed for the full healing and recovery for all of those I know who have been hospitalized with COVID-19. It's a terrible virus, and I can no longer count all of my friends and family who have either been infected with it or affected by it.

My novena took a particular focus when my wife's sweet but physically fragile mother was hospitalized in early December. While her symptoms originally were mild, they admitted her because of her age and underlying health conditions. She would have good days and bad days, but for almost two weeks she seemed stable, and we were optimistic that she'd pull through.

Part of my confidence stemmed from the incredible results I've had over the years in praying the St. Andrew Novena, which has never failed to resolve my intentions.

Until this year.

My mother-in-law's oxygen levels became enough of a concern that her care team was planning on putting her on a ventilator, but shortly after we got that news, her nurses urged her children to get to the hospital as quickly as they could. She was dying. For those who knew Helene Spieth of Monroeville, Indiana, it wouldn't come as a surprise to hear that she fought to stay alive for hours until each of her 10 children made it to her bedside – two at a time, because of COVID precautions – and held her hand, prayed the Rosary with her and said their final goodbyes.

After my wife got home, heartbroken, I mentioned that I was surprised that the hospital was letting family members up to see her, given its restrictions on visitors for COVID patients. A nurse told her that it was the first time since COVID reared its ugly head in March that a patient was able to be surrounded by loved ones as she passed. And while we'll forever mourn the loss of this faithful, caring, selfless mother of 10, grandmother of 35 and great-grandmother of 21, we all recognized this for what it was: a true blessing from God.

The night of her passing, just a few days before Christmas, our family gathered once again to pray the St. Andrew's Novena. As we got about halfway through the 15 prayers, I started to cry as I thought about how this year, for the first time, my prayer went unanswered – or so I thought, in my own arrogance. But then I remembered what our 3-year-old, Gemma, told her mom and her uncle earlier that day after they got the call to rush to the hospital. She told them, with the sweetness and innocence only a child could manage: "Don't cry. Grandma will get a new body in heaven."

And so perhaps God answered our prayers in his own way – “not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). Because of our faith, we take solace in the hope that our mother and grandmother will rest peacefully with Christ, fully recovered and fully healed. Forever.

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