

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 17, 2010 C

PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

When it comes to prayer, all of us are called to persist or “hang in there.” This is especially true when we are praying for a particular intention. *Persistence* is the message found in all three readings in today’s Liturgy of the Word.

Moses—A Powerful Example of a Prayer Warrior

In the First Reading, the Israelites, led by Moses and Joshua, are making their way through the desert heading for the Promised Land. As they journey, they are often attacked by their enemy, Amalek, and his army. Moses orders Joshua to take some men to battle the Amalekites. Moses positions himself up on a hill where he can watch the fighting, and there, he also prays for victory. When Moses perseveres in prayer, all goes well for his people, but when he slackens off, they fail miserably. Moses has Aaron and Hur to support him in prayer.

This reading tells us of the importance of reinforcing our prayer with action and vice versa. The following story told by Fr. Flor McCarthy helps to underline the importance of combining prayer with action and action with prayer.

Three men were trapped in a dark cellar which had no doors or windows. How did they react to their predicament?

The first was a writer by the name of George. He had no faith. He just sat there cursing the darkness. "There's nothing we can do," he said despairingly. "We might as well resign ourselves to our fate."

The second was Peter, who was a very religious man. He prayed for a long time. When he had finished, he sat back and waited for a miracle.

The third man was a bricklayer by the name of Ivan. He was quite religious in his own way. But he was also a very practical man. He had a small chisel in his pocket. With the light of a match he found a small stone. Using this as a hammer he began to chip away at the wall.

The work was slow, monotonous and extremely tiring. He got dust in his eyes, and blisters on his hands.

Neither of the other two showed any inclination to help him. George sat in one corner smoking. Peter sat in another corner praying. From time to time Ivan too prayed: "Dear God, I believe that with your help we can make it out of here. So help us now."

Finally, after hours of painful work, a big stone dislodged itself and light streamed in from next door. He began to shout for joy, praising and thanking God at the same time. His two companions helped him to widen the hole, and eventually all three crawled through and were free.

Here we see three different attitudes to prayer. For George, it was a waste of time. Since he had no faith, his attitude was logical. If you don't believe in God, who can you pray to? For Peter, prayer was a substitute for action. Once he had prayed, he sat back and waited for God to come to his rescue. A lot of our prayer is like that, especially our prayer on behalf of others. It's just words, and an excuse for doing nothing.

Ivan believed in prayer, not, however, as a substitute for action, but as a spur to action. Having prayed, he immediately took whatever action he could. His prayer served the purpose of keeping up his courage and hope. It also gave him a sense of God's nearness, and an assurance that God had not abandoned him. He drew great strength from this.

If we look at the First Reading, we see Ivan's prayer in action. On their journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites were set upon by the Amalekites. In their struggle, they relied on the prayer of Moses, not as an excuse for doing nothing, but a spur to action. In the Gospel, Jesus urges us to pray continually and never lose heart.

Prayer does make a difference—it sustains us. Those who rarely pray or never pray tend to lose heart easily. When we turn our thoughts to God, we feel a new strength in our soul, in our entire being. "Without divine assistance I cannot succeed; with it I cannot fail" (Abraham Lincoln).

We might say that perhaps the reason God is not answering our prayer is because we do not back it up with action. Similarly, the reason God does not bless

our action is because it is not reinforced by prayer. In the above story, Ivan beautifully combines action with prayer.

Timothy, Preacher of the Word

In the Second Reading, Paul exhorts Timothy to be faithful to Scripture and to the ministry of teaching and preaching. Paul uses these powerful and strong words in addressing Timothy: *“I charge you in the presence of God and Jesus.... To proclaim the Word be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching.”*

As a church, as a priest, as a lay person, we are all called to be faithful to God's Word. We are charged to preach the truth about life, justice, sexuality and other issues—whether politically correct or not. Sometimes our witness or preaching may be rejected or resented, but it doesn't matter; we must continue to do and speak the truth.

A Relentless Widow

In the Gospel, a little powerless but persistent widow is seeking justice from a godless, incorrupt judge. In the end, the judge adjudicates in favor of the woman not because she is justified, but because he wants to get her off his back. Her one resource in the face of stagnant bureaucracies and lazy tribunals is her sheer relentlessness.

One of the best known models of persistent prayer is St. Monica who pleaded with God for 20+ years for the conversion of her wayward son, Augustine. *“Can't,”* a popular word with children and adults did not exist in the vocabulary of Moses, Timothy, the poor widow or St. Monica. Today, all of us who are disciples of Jesus are challenged to purge *“can't”* from our vocabulary and replace it with prayerful, faith-filled perseverance. Speaking of persistence, Harry Truman once said: *“Nothing in the world can take its place. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with great talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence, determination alone are paramount.”*

The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer

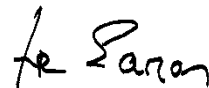
It would seem that some prayers go unanswered. Why? Really only God knows—the God who says: *“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways”* (Isaiah 55:8). The following reflection by Fr. Basil Pennington may help us as we struggle with what

appears to be unanswered prayer. He writes: *“God will give us whatever we want, asking in prayer—what we truly want, not what we say we want or even think we want. God listens to the heart, not to the lips. He knows, too, how limited is our understanding and knowledge. He sees our truest desires and knows how they can best be fulfilled. And this is what he grants. We may not see it at the moment, but we will in time.... If God seems to be saying “No” to some prayers, it is because he is saying “Yes” to the deepest prayer of our hearts.”*

Mahatma Gandhi on Prayer

I am neither a man of letters nor of science, but I humbly claim to be a man of prayer. It is prayer that has saved my life. Without it I would have lost my reason long ago. If I did not lose my peace of soul in the midst of my many trials, it is because of the peace that came to me through prayer. One can live several days without food, but not without prayer. Prayer is the key to each morning, and the lock to each evening. It is a sacred alliance between God and us. Let everyone try this experience, and they will find that daily prayer will add something new to their lives, something which cannot be found elsewhere.

Have a blessed week,



PRAYER OF SURRENDER

**Lord Jesus, I give you my hands
to do your work.
I give you my feet to go your way.
I give you my eyes to see as you do.
I give you my tongue
to speak your words.
I give you my mind
that you may think in me.
I give you my spirit
that you may pray in me.
Above all, I give you my heart
that you may love in me
your Father and all humanity.
I give you my whole self
that you may grow in me,
so that it is you, Lord,
who live and work and pray in me.
Amen.**