



Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time October 20, 2013 C

PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER

Persistence in Prayer is a message found in all three readings today.

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.

If we look at the First Reading, we see Ivan's prayer in action. On their journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites are set upon by the Amalekites. In their struggle, they rely 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 persistent in his preaching of God's Word. 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.

In his book of homilies, *The Word Received*, Fr. William Byron, S.J., tells the following story about persistence. It is the story of two Jesuit priests: Walter Ciszek and Ed McCauley.

In 1938 Fr. Ciszek was working in Poland as a priest. After the Russians invaded Poland and closed his mission, Fr. Ciszek crossed into Russia posing as an auto mechanic, hoping to be able to offer priestly service to those who had been deported to lumber camps in the Ural Mountains. He was arrested in June 1941 as a "Vatican spy" and sent to Moscow's Lubianka prison and subsequently sentenced to fifteen years of hard labor. Transferred to prison camps in Siberia after World War II, he was presumed dead by his family and the Jesuit order, but not by his friend Ed McCauley who was persistent in trying to locate him. In 1955, Ed McCauley received an indication that a package he had sent to his friend was received. Fr. McCauley, based in Washington at Gonzaga High School, began to contact the State Department and the Department of Justice with repeated reminders that a Jesuit priest, an American citizen, was being held against his will by the Soviets. One day in October 1963, Ed McCauley received a telephone call from Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy who said, "Your friend is going to arrive at Idlewild Airport tomorrow night." Kennedy had arranged a prisoner swap and gained Fr. Ciszek's freedom in return for the release of two Soviet agents who were being held by the United States.

Because a good friend would not give up, Wally Ciszek came back home where he lived another twenty-one years giving lectures, retreats, spiritual direction, and writing books that have inspired thousands of people.

A Riddle about Prayer

Fr. Eugene Lauer writes:

Here is a riddle about prayer: at what point does every prayer go unanswered? Think about that for a minute before you go on to the next paragraph. I believe

that there is a serious biblical content to this riddle that can make a difference in the way that any Christian prays. Do you give up? Then go on to the next paragraph.

Every prayer goes unanswered when we decide to stop praying. If we decide that God hasn't answered us and will not answer us, then our prayer ends unanswered. Conversely, if we continue to pray, if we continue to hope, then we cannot pronounce our prayer "unanswered." it is still in process, it is still bringing us closer to a divine conclusion.

The little old widow in the Gospel of Luke understood this riddle very well. The blasé and disinterested judge had said no to her many times, had probably ignored her many times (and didn't return her phone calls!). But she never gave up, she never got to the point of saying, "What's the use?" as long as she was still beseeching and demanding, making new trips down to the judge's office day and night, then she must have never arrived at that moment when she decided that her petitions were of no avail.

In a sophisticated modern society there is a tendency to call people who never give up, who keep on struggling even when there seems to be no reasonable hope of success, fools. "Be realistic. Why waste your time and energy that way?" Many fine people in the racial justice movement, the women's movement, the Third World liberation movement, seem to be "foolish" in this way. Perhaps they are fools, "fools for the sake of the kingdom of God."

And they know the answer to the riddle.

Fr. Flor McCarthy writes: "A prayer is answered not when we get what we are asking for, but when we sense God's nearness."

He also says: *When we learn how to pray, we learn not just how to recite words, but how to open the heart. The practice that nourishes one most is quiet prayer of the heart. Just sitting very quietly and opening the heart and letting God in."*

Have a blessed week,

