

Homily - 17th Sunday of the Year C

“Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.” Beloved, what a good request! We all need to yearn to pray better. We need to grow in our prayer life. Do you already think that your prayer life is perfect? No need for improvement? The Word of God says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27). This implies that in the “lifting up of our hearts and minds to God” in prayer, our human wills always need to be aligned with the Will of God. That is what it means to pray properly. In God’s Will is our peace, reconciliation, success and fulfillment.

In our Gospel passage (Lk 11:1-13), Christ provides us a model of how to pray in the “Our Father” prayer. To many of us who are sometimes discouraged and do not like to pray any longer or who find it really hard to pray or to make time for prayer, he encourages and assures us not to give up in these words,

“And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.... If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

What other guarantee do we need! Brothers and sisters, this does not imply that we give God deadlines. Not at all! We must allow God to be God; “His Will be done.” Nevertheless, Jesus invites us to pray with persistence and unyielding faith until, if possible, God “gets tired” of our pestering and grant us what we want. He reassures us that we will certainly receive. If this is the case, then what is wrong with Abraham’s persistent prayer in our First Reading (Gen 18:20-32). Abraham prayed and prayed against the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but to no avail: “[God] will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? ... Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?” “Let not my Lord grow impatient if I go on.... Please, let not my Lord grow angry if I speak up this last time...” “Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place...? Suppose there are only forty five... thirty... twenty.... ten.”

How much more persistent can one be! Yet Abraham

did not receive. What is the problem? Have you ever prayed and asked God, “O my God, what have I done to deserve these problems of life?” “Why should this be happening to me?” Is that the way you pray? Beloved, when we pray, we must never ask God to deal with us justly, according to our deeds. On this ground, we do not stand any chance. Scripture says, “If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” (Ps 130:3). Again, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isa 64:6). So we should always approach God on the grounds of mercy, forgiveness and love.

Abraham discovered this truth too late in praying for Sodom and Gomorrah. Based on justice, none can be saved. Everyone sins; it is only a matter of degree. Hence, during funerals in the Catholic Church, we always appeal to God for mercy and forgiveness for the salvation of our loved ones. Here is a word of advice for our Protestant and Evangelical brothers and sisters about their own approach. In the First Eucharistic Prayer, the Church prays rightly to the Almighty God saying, “Though we are sinners, we trust in your mercy and love. Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness.” That is one reason why the Divine Mercy prayer devotion is so important in our time.

Nevertheless, the Word God gave Abraham remains true today: “If I find fifty ... forty-five... forty... thirty... twenty... ten [even one] innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” Our entire world typifies Sodom and Gomorrah. God would have destroyed all. But God found that one righteous person, Jesus Christ, among us and spared all peoples. Hence the point of our second reading (Col 2:12-14), that “even when you were dead in transgressions ... he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions....” Simply put, by grace we are saved; not on merit.

On the whole, Jesus teaches us the proper template for prayer: “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us, and do not subject us to the final test.” This means that in our persistent prayer, we must praise God, glorify Him, and ask for His Mercy and Love. It also means we must forgive those who offended us. Finally, we must depend on God’s benevolence, remembering that God is not in debt to us; we are in debt to Him. May our prayers win favor in God’s sight through Christ our Lord. Amen.