

## Petitionary Prayer

*Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary.*

This Sunday, the Church, the Bride and Body of Christ, invites us to contemplate persistence in petitionary prayer.

I admit, to preach on prayer is an intimidating task. One of my favorite saints, Pope Saint Gregory the Great, once asked a congregation, how could he preach the truth he was commanded without hypocrisy, since he so evidently failed to live what he preached? My mind goes to Gregory because I am not an expert or master of prayer by any means; I fail constantly in making sincere prayer. Yet, Jesus Christ, through the Church, has given us this mystery of His, the mystery of petitionary prayer, to contemplate today, so we will trust in His mercy to guide us.

We might start with a very simple question: what is prayer? When we pray, what is it that we are actually doing?

Various saints and great teachers have identified different kinds and ways of prayer. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, though, his answer seems to begin with the kind of prayer presented to us in the Scriptures today. Jesus taught us to pray the Our Father, and the Our Father is in large part a prayer of petition, of asking, like the widow in Our Lord's parable asking for justice against her adversary, or like Moses raising his arms in prayer for victory in battle.

So again, when we pray, what is it that we are actually doing? One of the great teachers of the faith and spiritual life, St. Thomas Aquinas, had a very simple answer to this question: Prayer is speech addressed to God.

Speech addressed to God. There are some important implications of that. First of all, we can see that prayer is an act, a work of our mind, our reason, our

intellect. There are two basic sides to the human soul: the will—our capacity to want, love, desire—and the intellect—our capacity to understand, to reason, and to chart a course toward what we desire. Prayer in a certain sense springs from the first part of our souls—we desire, we groan for, we want something good—but prayer then is the act of taking that desire and doing something about it. It is speaking in a way so that what we desire can actually come to pass.

So prayer doesn't mean just sitting in our emotions, wallowing in either good feelings or tragically beautiful sad feelings. Prayer has a certain giddy-up to it. Like the widow in our parable, like the woman sweeping her house for the lost coin, like the one who asks, seeks, knocks.

Prayer is speech addressed to God; speaking so that what we desire can actually come to pass. Now, there are different ways that speaking can make something happen. If we speak as someone with authority, our word has the power of command, to bring something about by necessity.

This is not the way that prayer works. We do not have that power to command God. Rather, we speak in prayer not as the authority, but as the supplicant, as the petitioner. In this kind of speech, we acknowledge that the one we are addressing is above us, and that he has power and authority that we do not. And so, like the widow, like Moses seeking victory for God's people, we come as one in need, a beggar, poor in spirit.

Notice though how this poverty is our wealth. When we come to God as a petitioner, a supplicant, we simultaneously open ourselves to receive the blessings of His power, His wealth, His goodness which we do not have on our own. And God, it seems, does not want us to be shy about asking for His good gifts. *Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily.*

Prayer is speech addressed to God, speech addressed not as one who commands, but as a suppliant, who acknowledges and trusts in the power and goodness of God.

We might ask, very practically, how to make this speech toward God. Here, the prayer of the Church is our teacher. The Church is the Body and Bride of Christ; in her formal, official, public prayer, she speaks with the Spirit of Christ Himself. We learn to pray by being members of this Body, the Church, praying with and through her. When we pray privately, our prayers will echo the pattern we learn in the Church's own prayer—sometimes literally when we recite the prayers of the Church like the Our Father, or praying the Psalms and the other words of the Scriptures, given to us through the Church. Even when we compose our own private prayers that are tailor-made to our unique circumstances, though, the pattern of the Church's prayer will shine through. We learn the speech of communion with other human beings through the pattern of our parents and others taking root in us. We learn the speech of communion with God through the pattern of Church.

We notice that the prayers of the Church tend to follow a certain 3-part shape—the Our Father or the Collect prayers we pray at the beginning of each Mass are a good example. These prayers begin by addressing God—often one of the Three Divine Persons, the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit—and acknowledging the truth of Who He Is. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Or from the Collect this morning: *Almighty, everliving God.* Next, the Church—we, her members—ask. We ask for any and every good thing, but we do so with reasons, reasons that indicate what we seek is for the good and glory of God's kingdom. There is great peace in this. We are guided in our thinking to consider things in the light of eternity, not merely time, to trust God's goodness, even in the face of what looks like disaster to the world, and to seek the good of God which is our own greatest good as well. Third and finally, we bind up our prayer, offering it in the name of Jesus Christ, our

Lord. A beautiful sign of this is that Catholics all over know by instinct to say “Amen,” when prayer is offered in this Name.

This is the perfect place to conclude our contemplation of petitionary prayer. We offer all prayer in the name of Jesus Christ because He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the one mediator, the bridge, the gateway, between God and man. He is One Divine Person, with two natures, God and man. And so, all true prayer goes up to God through Him, and all gifts and blessings of God come to the world through Him as well. *Bless us O Lord...*

When Moses held the *staff of God* aloft above his head, planted on a stone on a hilltop to pray for Joshua—whose name in Greek is *Jesus*—and victory for the people of God, he stood as a prophetic sign of the prayer that would give us victory over our enemies of sin and death. When Jesus was lifted up on the beam of the Cross, arms outstretched, he offered to the Father the perfect prayer and sacrifice, in atonement for our sins and their penalty of death, and as the source of all blessings now and into eternal life.

We unite ourselves to this one perfect prayer each time we devoutly attend Mass and receive Holy Communion, not just with our mouth, but with our whole heart, joining our whole life to Jesus Christ. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: *The Eucharist contains and expresses all forms of prayer.* We bring our prayers under the wings of his perfect prayer, and—joined to him—we receive His own blessing of eternal life, life that begins now as a seed in time, nourished for growth by prayer and sacraments, until the time when, please God, we meet Our Lord face to face in the eternal kingdom. Amen.