

Homily Sun 17C: 28 July 2013: HT-W/XII-PC

One of the most difficult trials for a sincere Catholic is the ordeal of the unanswered prayer. As we pass many years in the Lord's company, faithfully attending Mass, regularly going to Confession, praying daily, supporting the Church's works, we come to trust in the Lord's providential care. So we feel justified in asking favors of God, esp. when the petitions are for genuinely good objectives: that the life or health of a friend be restored, that a fallen away relative return to the faith, that a new ministry succeeds, that a campaign to raise funds for a new church meet its goals. Yet history shows that these petitions are not always granted. The loved one remains ill or dies, the errant sinner continues to wander astray, the new ministry fails, the campaign comes up short. When our petitions are denied, it may provoke a crisis of faith. We question: is our God not listening, does he not care, where is he in this moment of defeat? As one very human saint once exclaimed in frustration: Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them! I wish to offer a few words on the nature of Christian prayer, because these concerns are perennially relevant, and also because the Scriptures today center on the theme of prayer.

The first point is that prayer is a kind of conversation between the Lord and the disciple. The first reading about Abraham's wrangling w/ the Lord is an excellent illustration. A couple corollaries appear. First, since we are approaching God, the all-holy, almighty Lord of the universe, humility and reverence are called for. This incidentally is why ministers at Mass, in particular the priest, wear special vestments: they betoken the importance of the liturgical prayer and the holiness of the deity who is being prayed to. So also in the more informal forum of daily prayer, we ought to begin our conversation w/ a humble confession of our sin and acknowledgement of God's majesty before we start asking for favors. Second, since conversation is a two way street, we have to be prepared to listen at prayer. In prayer we are conversing w/ another sovereign, free being who has a mind and will distinct from our own: out of respect for him, we must give him opportunity to speak. In fact, the Lord has very important things to say to us--but we have to silence our hearts to receive what he offers.

The second point about prayer is that it is an occasion for God to reveal himself to us. In the case of Abraham, God reveals the abundant depths of his merciful love. Abraham desires that Sodom be spared from destruction. He has a personal interest in its fate, for his nephew Lot and his family dwell there. So Abraham haggles w/ the Lord, getting him to agree to spare the city if merely 10 innocent souls can be found therein. Those familiar w/ the tale know that Sodom ends up being destroyed: it's so wicked that the inhabitants try to molest the Lord's own messengers. But the Lord's mercy is revealed in that he would have spared the town had he found at least 10 righteous souls; moreover, he does allow Lot and his family to escape. So also when we listen to God in prayer he may manifest an aspect of himself to us--his tender mercy, his providential

care, his consoling peace, and so forth. We come to know and love the Lord better thru the regular discipline of praying to him.

The third and final point about prayer: in prayer, God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit in fuller measure. When we pray, we don't know exactly what we should be asking for. That's part of the reason the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how. And the Lord gave them the Our Father as well as an extended lesson on the need to persevere in prayer. The Lord doesn't promise we will always get precisely what we ask for. The fact of the matter is that we don't always know what is best for our salvation, no matter how mature and intelligent we may think ourselves to be. Even death, sickness, sorrow, and failure can serve to bring God's kingdom in fuller measure, both in our hearts and in the world at large: just consider the wondrous fruits of Christ's death on the cross! Unanswered prayers can help us grow in Christian virtues like compassion, humility, selflessness, and so forth; sometimes unanswered prayers help us grow more than getting what we want. So when we pray, we always do so in the spirit of the Lord's Prayer, as children who trust our loving Father to grant us the ultimate good that we ask and seek, namely, the Holy Spirit who gives us a fuller share in God's life.