

This year for my annual retreat, I went to a retreat house run by a group of cloistered Passionist nuns in Kentucky. The Passionists are a religious order founded by St. Paul of the Cross who, as the name implies, derive their charism from the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I saw this lived out in a very particular way by these nuns who, twice a week, stretch their arms out in a cross for seven minutes, imploring that the Passion of Our Lord will pour out mercy upon the world.

At first, I was embarrassed to try praying this way with them, but when I finally did I was amazed at how powerful, and how difficult, it truly was. It was powerful to be imitating Our Lord on the cross, sharing in His Passion and imploring His mercy. It was difficult because after only a few short minutes, my arms started to burn and I wasn't sure how much longer I would be able to hold them up.

This experience gave me new appreciation for the story of Moses told in our first reading. The Israelites went to battle with their enemies, and Moses stood at the top of a hill overseeing the battle. As long as he kept his arms held out from his sides, Israel had the better of the fight, but as soon as he let them down Israel began to lose. So, he persevered through the pain as long as he could until eventually he asked those around him to help him hold up his hands. This lasted for hours until Israel was eventually victorious in the battle.

Since the dawn of humankind, we have been fighting a battle unsuccessfully until that day when God sent His own Son to fight on our behalf. Like Moses, Jesus also went up to the top of a hill to oversee this battle. This battle, however, was not between flesh and blood, but with the principalities, with the world rulers of this present darkness and the evil spirits in the heavens. In order to defeat this enemy, Jesus also willingly held out His hands, but He knew that this would take more than a few short hours. So, He eternally fixed them to the cross so that all who fight under His banner might be victorious unto eternal life.

As Christians, we are invited to fight in this battle and share in Our Lord's victory over sin and death. We do this through the threefold path of prayer, obedience, and sacrifice. As with all soldiers in battle, we must listen to the commands of our general. We don't do this through a walkie-talkie, however, but through prayer. Prayer teaches us to hear the words of our Lord and understand His commands. Prayer allows us to receive the love of our Lord and come to love Him in return. Perhaps, most importantly prayer enters us into a personal relationship with our Savior which is indispensable if we want to be saved. Think back to the teaching of Jesus about those who will come knocking on their master's door after it has been shut. "Lord, Lord, did we not do mighty deeds in your name?" He will reply, "I never knew you. Depart from me you evildoers."

A second important aspect in our victory is obedience. Just as soldiers must be obedient to the commands of their superior, we must be obedient to the command of our Lord. He has told us the way to live and the things that we cannot do. As Paul said, "Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers... will inherit the Kingdom of God." We must stop doing evil, and above all else live by the golden rule, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself." And in those times when we violate God's laws, we must return to Him with all our hearts, confess our sins, and receive His forgiveness.

This leads us to the third requirement for victory which is sacrifice. No battle can be won when the soldiers retreat from the field in fear. It is only when soldiers are willing to die that a battle can be won. In order to live out God's commands, we must learn to sacrifice, to give up those things which keep us from God. We must learn to share what we have with others. We must learn to hold to the truth even

when it is denied by the world around us. These things are not easy, and they require us to suffer some in this life, but it is only through this sacrifice that we can win the battle over sin and death and be preserved for the life to come.

Our Gospel highlights the fact that this threefold path of salvation requires perseverance. The victory is not won in a single day. It is not enough to simply pray and be obedient and sacrifice for a moment in time. Instead we must do this every single day without end until the day when we are finally called home from this world to the kingdom of our Savior. We must be like the widow in today's Gospel who was persistent with the unjust judge until he rendered a fair decision. Jesus uses this example to teach us that we must pray always without becoming weary, struggling against this unjust world until we are finally set free from our chains.

Those sisters that I encountered in Kentucky did not stretch out their arms in prayer as an empty pious gesture. In this prayer, the suffering of their body reminded them of the suffering of Our Lord on the Cross and of the fact that they must obediently embrace their own crosses as an act of love. While we may not need to extend our arms in prayer like them, we too must learn to embrace our personal crosses through lives of prayer and obedience and sacrifice, prayerfully offering up our sacrifices to the Lord in obedience to His commands so that the mercy of His Passion might fill our souls and usher us into eternal life.