

St Pius & St Anthony 17th Sunday Ordinary Time Year C(2025) Luke

Like ever the Good Teacher He is, Jesus responds to one of His Jesus' disciples request in today's reading, "Teach us to pray." I'd say that's the real student of prayer on road to becoming master, because He will get there. He has the desire to grow his prayer life, to deepen His relationship to God. The question reflects a motivation to improve. If you wonder sometimes too, "What can I do to better my prayer?" then, you are in good company. All the saints bemoan that they are not where they should be in spiritual progress. So many, of them after years and years of faithful discipline continue to say that they are still working on it, and wishing to deepen their prayer. I think of that as like any good artist who always looks for more time in the gallery in front of canvases, or a budding basketball star, always around the court working on their game, or great musicians always looking for more good studio time to practice and work at it.

Many of us when we pray, might feel like this: Do you remember the old classic toy, the PlaySkool 'Sit n/Spin'. It was like a miniature, personal merry go round. You sat on a circle with a stand in the center that you grabbed and turned and you would spin around in place. Many people find their prayer like that at times (even the saints did). But all three of Jesus' responses or approaches to prayer in the gospel, deliver the same message – Keep at it, Keep coming back. Be persistent in your discipline of prayer.

Notice Jesus first words about prayer. He responds, "**When** you pray, say...." **When**, not **if** you pray, so Jesus first lesson is "Stay with it." It is not HOW you pray that matters, but the very fact that you ARE praying. When I was in seminary the story was told about a seminarian who went to his director and asked, "Can I chew bubble gum while I pray?" The spiritual director thought that could be a distraction for him, so he said, "Oh no, don't do that." To which the seminarian thought for a minute and then asked back, "Well, can I *pray* whenever I am chewing bubble gum?" Two things (?) going on, 1) persistence and 2) not getting hung up on method. Again, the most important thing about prayer is not the HOW of it, that will develop with use over time, but the WHEN of it, the simple fact of persistently taking it up. Applying oneself and giving the time. God is already there, but we have to engage and attend to experience Him and have relationship.

After offering a formula of prayer, Jesus advances to tell a parable of a persistent neighbor requesting bread from a friend in the middle of the night. I caution us against just taking the parable as a push toward 'blind or harassing persistence' from the petitioner (like a 'squeaky wheel' approach). Because our persistence shouldn't be a nagging, but a purposeful persistence. I am struck that in the parable the word for 'friend', Jesus uses it four times. And notice that the request is not for any personal gain, the neighbor is asking for bread 'for a friend'. I think the interceding friend in the parable is Jesus, the model as our mediator

before the Father, like the persistent bargaining of Abraham in the first reading (Genesis 18:20-32). Pope Francis often spoke about the comfort of knowing we have such a mediator in Christ, who like Abraham and Moses keep going back and back, to plead for the people to God (*& the need for pastors who pray like them!*).

And Jesus is a model of persistence in prayer for us. Luke's gospel especially spotlights the importance of prayer, both personal prayer time and communal prayer time. Among the four gospels, Luke portrays Jesus in prayer-settings the most (*by one count, John's describes 4 scenes, Mark 8, Matthew 9 and Luke's 15 - clearly more concerned to portray ahead! – for example, Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:29; 11:1-3, 22:32; 22:39-46; 23:46*). Luke emphasizes the persistence and routine of prayer for Jesus. He sets the example of keeping regular times for both personal prayer and also regularly participating in a public expression of prayer/worship. For example, in Lk 4:16, we hear that “**as was His custom**, Jesus entered synagogue on sabbath” and then in Luke 5:16, that Jesus “would withdraw to deserted places to pray.”

Again, the most important part of praying, is actually doing it – putting in the time to cultivate our relationship to God, and to receive the restorative and reparative effects of prayer on our hearts. Everything needs maintenance in life. Our vehicles have routine maintenance, every part of our body has its own specialist physician for checkups (eyes, ears and so I just visited my tooth doctor this past week) so, even our soul doctor who is Jesus, we should check in with every day, and we call that PRAYER.

Finally, in today's gospel Jesus reinforces the persistence needed in prayer by telling us to ‘ask, seek and knock’ (Lk 11:9). Some people see a process of development in his threefold steps here. First, we ‘ask’ in prayer – we lay out our claim or request from God by sharing our heart's need (Luke 11:8 said ‘need’ not ‘want’!). Then the second step is to ‘seek’. Start looking around. Maybe our prayer is being answered before we realize it. Maybe God has tied in our answer to another's around us, but we have to be seeking to discover that. Maybe we need to fine tune or clarify our request or see all through it – is my request the best? Jesus' call for us to trust is emphasized by his examples that no human father would give a son a snake or scorpion when they requested a fish or egg, so we should rest in the confidence that whatever comes of our request, God gives best. And then the third step is to ‘knock’. While the first two steps were vocal (ask) and mental (seek) exercises, this step brings us to action ‘knock’. Jesus intends for us to act on our good direction. The classic example of this is that if I pray for rain, I should carry an umbrella. If I want to be a great football player, then I need to be in the gym or on the field training. Act toward, what we are praying for. Lean into our prayer and show faith in the goodness of what I am praying for.

But above all, we don't want to make prayer too complicated. Again, it is more important **that** we are praying than hanging up, on **How** we pray. So if you

are praying regularly, then good, keep at it. If you have slacked off, then get started again, or if you are feeling stuck/stagnant, then change it up and try something new, new prayer form or new time. It can look different for different people:

- 1) Start by setting a dedicated time (if you have hard time, squeezing it in, I've heard of the trick of actually writing into your calendar. In Whatever time slot, actually writing in God's name-they say "Who would stand up God? So dedicate at least 5-10 minutes to start, sitting silently with God- no machines, no devices no sounds. We have to put in the listening time. If we complain that we never hear God, God doesn't speak to me, then I have to ask, "Have I given him any chance to?" I have to set time to listen.
- 2) After that silence, try any traditional prayer form, maybe a rosary, chaplet, of cross. Pick up a bible and pray some psalms, or read 10-20 verses of gospel each day. Or journal, a lot of saints wrote – and they found God responded through it-God spoke through their ruminations as they journaled in response. St John of Cross wrote poetry, St Ignatius Loyola, wrote out his prayer regimen "The Spiritual Exercises". The fruit of many saints' prayer resulted in their writings, the Little Flower Therese' autobiography "Story of a Soul" or Augustine's Confessions, Cdl Henry Newman 'Apologia Sua Vita'. So maybe pick up a spiritual classic to read or ask me for a reference. Or maybe try music, maybe art, or start from the ground and simply explore silence with God. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:6, "Go to your inner room..."

The most important part is showing up and being persistent. Keep coming back and God will lead us from there.