

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – July 28, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

Both the first reading and the gospel speak to us about a persistent, persevering, litany-like form of prayer. Litanies are not unknown to us: for example, at the beginning of Mass we ask God for mercy not once but three times after the Confiteor; we pray similarly at the Agnus Dei before communion. There are several approved litanies of the Church in which we ask the Lord, our Blessed Mother, or other saints repeatedly for certain things like for mercy or for intercession. This repetitive, persistent form of prayer is indeed not unknown to us: but the question arises, Why does God have us pray this way?

Whenever we consider questions about prayer, we should first recall, with firm conviction, St. Paul's teaching from his letter to the Romans: "We do not know how to pray as we ought".¹ We really don't! Then, we should make our own the petition of the disciples from today's gospel: "Lord, teach us to pray". Prayer is first and foremost God's work in us. St. Paul says in that same passage just referenced that the Spirit prays in and through us, making up for our "weakness" – our inability to "do it right", as it were. The humble recognition of our need – of our inability – is the proper starting point for prayer.

We can think of prayer like ballroom dancing: to do it right, one person has to lead, the other must be led. Prayer is a sort of dance with God – and he is the one who leads us. So much of our frustration with prayer arises from confusion about roles, with the spiritual equivalent of stepping on each other's toes. This especially happens whenever we might fall into the trap of relying on prayer "methods" – technical solutions that can never substitute for a personal relationship with the Lord. No, a big part of prayer is really coming to believe, "I do not know how this works" – then turning to our Lord to lead.

The disciples sensed their lack of savoir faire and so asked Jesus to teach them; and that is when he not only gave them a specific prayer but then told the parable about persistence. "These are the kinds of things you should seek," – he effectively says – "and you need to keep asking until you get them". So we return to our question: Why does God have us pray this way? Why does he not answer us immediately? After all, he did teach us what to ask for; why should we have to ask more than once? Indeed, sometimes the "dance with God" that is prayer seems to go on for a very long time and we may grow tired.

The story of Abraham's pleading and bargaining with God from the first reading gives us one insight into our question: namely, that repeatedly seeking things from the Lord is a way to get to know him better. Abraham did not realize how deep God's patience and mercy were, but in repeatedly asking God about them he became more firmly established in them. Not only do we "not know how to pray as we ought", but we really do not know our Lord himself all that well. As we plead and even bargain for the things that we desire or need, it opens up a space in which he may more fully disclose to us who he is.

A quick negative answer to our prayers would almost certainly bring discouragement. But a persistent process of pleading for our petitions might bring the more salutary effect of preparing our hearts for the negative answer that God might well will to give. In a converse manner, think of the importune man in the gospel who kept pounding on his friend's door in the middle of the night: he had to work to get what he needed, thus he appreciated it more fully. If the Lord were to give us what we asked for the minute we asked for it, we might take it for granted; we might indeed not value it as we should.

Persistent, even repetitive prayer opens up a space for us to get to know God and his plans for us better; it also prepares us for the answers that he intends to give. If you'll indulge

¹ Romans 8:26.

another application of the dance analogy, persistent prayer helps us to learn as we go: the more we do it, the more we see how God is leading. Then hopefully, we let him take the lead – though he never forces. So we need to keep coming back to that petition, “Lord teach us to pray”, for “We do not know how to pray as we ought”. Humility is the key. And may we not grow weary when the dance goes long, but always persevere.