

Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, C – August 11, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 8:30 & 11:00am Sunday Masses – 850 words

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a rather intimidating book, but it is truly a treasure trove for reflective meditation that I encourage you to pick up and page through from time to time. One of the richest parts of it is precisely the section on prayer.¹ Our readings have the theme of vigilant waiting: the children of Israel who awaited deliverance in the first reading; our great forefathers in faith who “saw... and greeted... from afar” God’s promises, awaiting them patiently, in the second reading; the Lord’s injunction about being vigilant and waiting for the Master in the gospel. And the psalm sums everything up in its aspiration, “Our soul waits for the Lord,... our help and our shield”. But what does vigilant waiting look like in prayer?

The part on “humble vigilance of heart” in the Catechism section on prayer divides things into two categories. First, there are the difficulties in prayer.² These are primarily distractions and dryness – I would wager that most of us know these rather well, or at least have known them. The second category is one that might surprise, however – and this is what I would like to spend a bit of time on: it concerns the temptations in prayer;³ and these are, on the one hand, lack of faith, and on the other, what is known by the technical term of “acedia” or “sloth” – a sort of spiritual depression or laziness. These, as I said, may surprise – for if we set about praying, does that not imply that we do have faith and that we are not spiritually lazy?

Christ says in the gospel of John, “Apart from me, you can do nothing”.⁴ But not all of us are necessarily convinced of that fact; we all need a deeper conversion. We still rely on ourselves to some extent or another. This is what the lack of faith in prayer is. It does not really seek to lay everything down at our Lord’s feet, awaiting his help. I often think of it as, well, “thinking in the presence of God”: rather than speaking to him about some issue, I might rather spend time in his presence thinking about how *I* will solve it! The Catechism says that this is “the most common yet... most hidden temptation” in prayer, and it reveals what our true love is.⁵ Is Jesus Christ my true love? Am I entirely focused on him when I pray? O Lord, increase my faith!

Christ says in the gospel of Matthew, “The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak”.⁶ Sometimes we rather fancy the idea of prayer. Or at least we know that we should do it. In the end, however, we might not make sufficient time for it; or, if we do, we might still abandon it sooner than we should. Our true priorities are thus laid bare, and the Lord is not at the top of the list. This is what we mean by “acedia” or “sloth”. It sometimes arises from discouragement – perhaps at the seeming lack of results in our spiritual quest or a struggle with sin. Occasionally it is connected with presumption – with the idea that even if one does not live fully the way God commands or does not give him his due, yet God will somehow still reward that person.⁷

Both the lack of faith and acedia or sloth inhibit our capacity to be truly vigilant in prayer: to wait for the Lord, who indeed is our help and our shield. Lurking behind both of these temptations is a certain impatience. With lack of faith, the impatience is precisely about waiting on God to guide: we think he takes too long; we fall into the trap of believing we can get things done quicker or better. Some of us are “sadder but wiser” from that approach: we have learned the hard way that God’s way is not only best but is worth the wait. Some of us still have some

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2558-2865 – that is, the entire final section of the book.

² *Ibid.*, nos. 2729-2731.

³ *Ibid.*, nos. 2732-2733.

⁴ John 15:5.

⁵ *Catechism*, no. 2732.

⁶ Matthew 26:41.

⁷ *Catechism*, no. 2733.

learning to do. With acedia, the impatience is often connected with our frustration about our spiritual struggle. It is all so difficult; we want fast and easy results – but that is not how the Lord works.

Let's turn the tables, though. Does God not watch and wait for us with vigilance? He is always there; he sees all. He does not approve of all, but he loves us nonetheless and continually reaches out to help us improve. How many years now has he been waiting for you and for me? "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you",⁸ he said to the prophet Jeremiah – indeed, he says to each of us. He has been waiting for us for all eternity. He continues to wait with vigilance. What does vigilant prayer look like? It is full of faith, dutiful, and devout. May our good Lord give us the eyes to see any lack of faith and acedia or sloth that may be affecting our prayer and draw us closer to himself in patient waiting – he who is our help and our shield.

⁸ Jeremiah 1:5.