

Wednesday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time: October 9 (Fr. Kevin MacDonald, C.Ss.R.)

October 09, 2024

Jesus was a man of prayer. All throughout the Gospels we see him at prayer. He prays in a lonely place. He prays in the synagogue. Before ministry he prays. Before sending out the apostles he prays. He prays the great priestly prayer at the Last Supper. He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane - he even prays on the cross. And he gives us many prayer parables.

But when the apostles come to him and ask him to, "Teach us how to pray," Jesus only gives one form of prayer. He talks about prayer of petition. He says, "Seek...ask...knock," and then he teaches them the Our Father.

The Our Father is our Lord's lesson on prayer - and it is really made up of seven petitions. Shall we try it? Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. 1) Thy kingdom come. 2) Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 3) Give us this day our daily bread and 4) forgive us our trespasses 5) as we forgive those who trespass against us. And 6) lead us not into temptation, but 7) deliver us from evil.

A lot of us think that prayer of petition is something for children or not for the spiritually elite. We figure that it is a second class prayer, that we should move on. Maybe it was good for a starter, but to always say, "Give me, give me, give me," sounds self-serving. But Jesus is the one who recommends this prayer. He doesn't speak much about thanksgiving or praise and adoration - or even contrition. Any lesson he gives on prayer is prayer of petition. So we should keep at it. We should keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

A lot of people say, "I ask, but my prayer doesn't work." But we know that prayer is mainly a relationship, like the ones you have with your friends or family. For example, a friend will visit you that you haven't seen in a long time. You spend time with that friend. You might go out to lunch or go for a walk. You hang out together and catch up on the news in each other's lives. It's a relationship. And our relationship with Jesus is all we will take with us when we die.

I think the best definition of prayer is given by St. Teresa of Avila. She says that "prayer is spending time, frequently, with someone who loves you." Those three elements: spending time, frequently, with someone who loves you are the way we deal with all of our relationships. Time is the gauge; not our feelings, not the soft warm glow we might get. If you want to increase a relationship with someone, you spend more time with them. If you want to decrease a relationship, you spend less time. If you want to end a relationship, you spend no time at all.

So, time is the gauge. And it is good for us to ask, because it is natural. We ask people for directions. We ask advice of doctors and professionals. Why not ask God? Ask because it is the only lesson that Jesus gives: ask, seek, knock.

St. Alphonsus Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorists, said that prayer of petition is efficacious and is essential for our salvation. Prayer of petition is probably the easiest prayer we can say. All of us know how to ask. We have to keep asking. God is not deaf. And we do not change God's mind by our asking. We need to ask because we need to realize that God is in control, we are not. In any prayer we say, God always takes the initiative. God begins the prayer in us. St. Paul says in Romans 8: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us in groanings that cannot be expressed in speech.

Prayer of petition is understood by the poor - or by anyone who has a radical dependence upon God. When we pray, we are saying: "I am dependent. I am not in charge." Whenever we pray, we are saying: "I believe. I have faith. I have a relationship with God, there's a bond there."

So the lesson for us today is to keep praying. Be persistent in prayer. "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened for you." (Mt. 7:7-8)