

HOMILY – 17th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 25, 2010

Father Jim Carini

“Lord, teach us how to pray”

So, our topic this weekend is prayer. What can be more important than prayer in our lives? St. Paul thought it was so important that in his first letter to the people of Thessalonica he said, *“Pray without ceasing.”* Our whole life should be one of prayer. Is this realistic? Well, if our relationship with God is the most important relationship we have, then communicating with God is really important.

Now there is another aspect about our prayer life that we are encouraged to follow in today’s Gospel. After teaching his disciples how to pray Jesus tells them to be persistent in their prayer. Jesus says, *“Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”* Don’t give up! Believe that whatever you ask of God God will give you. God will answer you. Do you approach your prayer with such conviction? Do you find that what Jesus says is true? Does God answer your prayers?

People often tell me that they have been praying for this or that and they are still waiting for God to grant their request. *“You know, Father, it seems as though God isn’t really listening. Why bother to ask if God doesn’t respond?”* That’s a good question. Why doesn’t prayer always work? Sometimes we do pray for something, we pray for it in Jesus’ name as God asks us to do, and our request isn’t granted. Sometimes we literally storm heaven with our prayers and heaven seems shut against us. Did Jesus make an idle promise to us?

Spiritual writers through the ages have offered answers to this question: Maybe our prayer wasn’t answered because we asked for the wrong thing. Would a loving parent give his/her little child a knife to play with? Or perhaps our prayer was answered, but at a deeper level and only in time will we understand that answer. C.S. Lewis once quipped that we will spend most of eternity thanking God for those prayers of ours that he didn’t answer.

A renowned scripture scholar, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, suggests that our prayer of petition is linked to concrete charitable actions. In other words, to pray truly for someone involves also reaching out concretely to help that person. If we truly pray for justice and peace to come in our world we must be involved in working actively for justice and peace. When we pray *“through Christ”* we pray not just through the

resurrected Christ in heaven but also through the “body of Christ” on earth, ourselves. We need to be involved in helping to answer our own prayers.

There are other questions that I have heard people ask about prayer. If God is all knowing, God already knows all our thoughts and deepest desires – so why should we have to speak of them in prayer? God also knows every human suffering and is aware of every act of hatred, injustice, violence and war, so why make petitions to God to help with these human tragedies? God knows the future, so what purpose do we serve by praying about what lies ahead? And God certainly doesn't need our praise, gratitude or repentance, so what good are such prayers?

The answer is that we pray not for God's sake but for our own. We pray because voicing our praise, expressing our need and offering our thanks helps us to know who we are before God and others. We don't pray to inform God of anything but to sensitize our own hearts, minds and souls to the many ways God touches our lives. We pray to cultivate a disposition of welcome and trust. We pray to acknowledge that we are not the center of the universe. We pray to surrender ourselves to the Creator, who brought us to life, and to our Redeemer who has saved us from death.

Finally, how, when or where should we pray? Some people like to pray kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament, one of the most sacred places for prayer and a very profound gesture of humility and trust. Others like to pray to God through Mary with her statue before them or another saint to intercede for them. Some find morning hours the best time, others the quiet of the evening. We need not always be formal in our prayer. No one time is best, because God is always listening. Pray at midnight; pray at dawn. Pray when you are happy and when you are sad. Pray especially when you are mad and fed up. Pray kneeling, standing, sitting or lying down.

That reminds me of the story of three preachers who were standing out on the street arguing about the best posture for praying. A telephone repair man up on a pole nearby listened in on the conversation. The first preacher said, *“The best position is kneeling down in a posture of deep respect.”* “No,” said the second one, *“the best way is to stand up with arms outstretched to the heavens in supplication.”* The third one disagreed and said, *“No, no, the best position is to lie prostrate on the ground in an attitude of profound humility.”* Finally the repair man on the pole couldn't stand it any longer, he said, *“Hey fellas, I found myself doing the best prayin' in my life one day when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole.”*

So, let Jesus teach you to pray. He invites you to enter his life with the Father through your daily prayer. Know that he wants you to pray to the Father as he did. Be persistent, never give up. God waits to respond to your needs.