

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

We come to church to pray, but once we're here, many of us discover we're not praying the way we imagined. We are prone to distractions. Our motivations get cloudy. Our needs and desires pull us in different directions. Strong emotions get in the way—anger, lust, envy, resentment or despair. It takes concentration to be present to every moment of the Mass.

Daily we may find even more challenges. We may be too tired or too sick, with plenty of time but no energy to pray; or we may be juggling other demands, with plenty of will to pray, but little time. When you pray at home, your attention may drift to household responsibilities. If you watch Mass on livestream, you may have a blend of these experiences: It may be easier to set aside a specific day and time for prayer, but you may dress casually, eat a meal, or catch up on other projects as the Mass airs. It may be harder to concentrate at Mass while watching it online, but many people find it spiritually rewarding, and it is better than not participating in Mass at all.

It is always worthwhile to try to pray, even when we are dissatisfied with the results. We receive benefits even when the effort doesn't seem to go very well.

Saint Paul describes this phenomenon in today's second reading. He says it straightforward: "we do not know how to pray as we ought." He identifies a further difficulty with prayer: God wants to hear from us, but we don't know what God wants us to say. Several years ago while at a meeting in Rome, I learned that I would be part of a small group at a private audience with Pope Francis, able to shake his hand. I was like, "Really? I'm going to have 30 seconds one on one with the pope? What am I supposed to say?" Even when it happened, I felt like I was just babbling. That's how St. Paul describes our time at prayer. Given the privilege to talk to God, we aren't sure what is the most important thing to say.

At those times, the one who rescues us is the Holy Spirit. Paul says, "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness.... The Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit." Paul portrays a dialogue between the Holy Spirit and the Father taking place within us. It doesn't matter if we cannot find the words, the Holy Spirit communicates to the Father with these inexpressible groanings.

When you study for an oral exam, you prepare as best you can, but the moment comes when you have to speak; your questioners may not ask what you expected. But if you studied well, you'll know what to say. Parents experience this with their kids. At times you say just the right thing, and you don't know where that came from. Well, it comes from proper inner formation.

In general St. Paul encourages us to live "in Christ," to shape our lives by his commands. If Christ rules us, our decisions will be good, our words will be correct, and our prayers will be heard even if we don't know what to say.

So, whenever you struggle with prayer at church, at home, or watching a livestream, do not despair. You're in the right place. You've made the right time. You've got the right intention. Even if you feel you haven't done your best, you may still feel relief because the Holy Spirit prays within you.

Sunday, July 19, 2020