

Fifth Sunday after Easter

Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, He will give it to you.

Dearly Beloved,

Today is the last Sunday before the Ascension, and as the Church has been doing for the past three weeks, She prepares us for that mystery by taking the Gospel from John, where he reports what Our Lord said at the Last Supper. Today's selection is principally about prayer, with Jesus telling the Apostles that now their prayer will be particularly efficacious, for it will be made in Jesus' name, and since those who pray in His name love Him, the Father loves them and readily grants their petitions.

Those of us who have real experience of prayer know that this Gospel message is a hard one to understand. The meaning itself is rather straightforward--God hears the prayers of those who pray in Jesus' name—but the actual lived experience of this message is different. It seems God does not answer our prayers, even good, selfless prayers; prayers begged for someone else's good or for something we need that is necessary or seems necessary for our salvation. And as Our Lord says in the parable of the Sower, many fall away in time of temptation—they lose the faith precisely because they feel their prayers go unanswered.

So how can we best accept this saying of the Lord, "Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, He will give it to you"?

First of all, we must read this verse in conjunction with the rest of the Lord's teaching on prayer. Three passages come to mind: the Our Father, Martha and Mary, and the egg and the scorpion. The Our Father is the only prayer that Jesus taught His disciples and so it functions as His greatest teaching on prayer. All its petitions are of a spiritual nature: we ask that God's kingdom come to fruition, that all would honor His name, that we be forgiven our sins and be delivered from temptation and evil. The request for our daily bread, the only petition which seems worldly, has been interpreted by the Fathers as referring to the Eucharist. Even if someone would argue it refers to our daily bodily needs, it is still the case that the great majority of the petitions concern spiritual needs, not material needs. And a third of the petitions concern the glory of God, not us.

With Martha and Mary, we see one person busily working at worldly concerns and the other person sitting quietly with Him. When Martha asks for the Lord to do something about that, He replies that Mary has chosen the better part and will not be deprived of it. He does not honor Martha's request because it is asked badly and she has not prioritized properly. In contrast, the Lord listened to Mary, for the Church says on her feast day that it was her tears, not Martha's, that moved Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead. Because she sat at the feet of the Lord and listened carefully, rather than deciding that earthly considerations were more important, Mary learned how to ask the Lord for what she needed or wanted. Thus we learn from these two sisters that our petitions must be grounded in time spent with the Lord; contemplation must precede petition, because otherwise we will ask badly and then misunderstand when prayers seemingly go unanswered.

Finally, there is the egg and the scorpion. In the 11th chapter of Luke, Jesus says, "What father among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone; instead of a fish give him a serpent; or instead of an egg, give him a scorpion?" This is a key passage on prayer, and an important complement to Our Lord's words in today's Gospel. The son asks his father for something that will nourish him: he asks for the bread, the fish and the egg because he is hungry and needs to be fed. Likewise we ask Our Father for things we need in order to survive bodily and spiritually. When we ask for such things, the Father will give something appropriate; He may not give bread when we ask for it, but He will give something nourishing and not give something wholly contrary or destructive. To chew on a stone would break our teeth, and snakes and scorpions can bite and kill us. But maybe we don't need bread, but a salad, because we eat too many carbs; or we have high cholesterol, so instead of an egg, He offers us tofu. He gives us something good, but it not might be what we wanted.

We can now apply these teachings on prayer to three very common petitions we make in the Lord's name, petitions that often seem to go unanswered. First, our material needs. Many of you have very legitimate material needs: we have mouths to fill, bills to pay. Some of you have continual suffering in this realm. So why does the Lord allow us to remain in this state? The answer here is hopefully obvious: asking for financial security is akin to asking for a scorpion. Being comfortable in our finances is almost always a corrosive agent for our faith. The first world, where many people are wealthy enough to live comfortably, is where the faith has been lost; where people continue to struggle to obtain what they need, the faith flourishes. Those who are rich can control their lives, and so think they have no need of God. The typical American couple with two kids, four cars and lavish vacations all made possible by the habitual use of birth control illustrates this fact. They have no time for God. As St. James says in his letter: "Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Having kids makes us poor, but that is what life is about—living our vows in a way in which we become more reliant upon God, not less reliant. Vows help us to find out who we really are and thereby we also learn who God really is.

Thus we should not pray for financial security, but for sufficient means that we do not live in constant distress over money, for that can also trouble us enough that we struggle to pray. As it says in Proverbs, "Give me neither beggary, nor riches: give me only the necessities of life: Lest perhaps being filled, I should be tempted to deny, and say: Who is the Lord? or being compelled by poverty, I should steal, and forswear the name of my God." Should God will, however, that we remain in this kind of poverty, we should rejoice, for He has made us worthy of the Beatitudes. He said, Blessed are you poor, and Woe to you rich, and so for any way in which we share in the cross of financial worry we should be thankful, because it shows God does not want us to lose our souls over love of money and comfort.

A second type of petition is that for the conversion of sinners, especially sinners in our own families and among our friends. This is of course a very worthy prayer and one that has no downside to it from our own motivation in uttering it. God infallibly hears this kind of prayer and sends grace to the sinner to convert his will to good, but the sinner does not always allow his will to be converted. Each of us knows what it is like to reject God's grace, and the sinners for whom we pray, those who have fallen away from the faith or who have not yet believed, all such sinners can also reject God's grace. Thus with our prayers for them, we must persevere. We can think of our prayers as being the cause of God sending grace, and each time we pray, we hope that the defense of the sinner against God grows weaker and weaker until finally he or she is overcome. It is like the sunlight gradually melting ice and snow; if we did not pray for their conversion, such persons would remain in the shadow, untouched by the rays of the sun. In this type of prayer, then, it is not a case of God not answering our prayers, but of the divine respect for human freedom, and the sinner's ability to fight against God despite His grace given at our request.

A final type of petition is for our own conversion. This too is a worthy prayer, that we should no longer sin, change our bad habits, and grow in holiness. Two things should be said here: first, sometimes God allows weakness and even sin to remain in a person's life for the sake of that person's humility. God knows that if he were sinless, he would be bloated with conceit, and thus it is better to allow him to fall into habitual sin rather than be overcome with the worst sin, that of pride, for nothing separates us from God as thoroughly as pride does. When we fall into sin, we learn how to have mercy on others, and how to rely upon God, two lessons without which we cannot be saved. Second, our desire for something grows the more we must ask for it, and it is not uncommon that when we begin asking for some grace or growth in virtue, we ask rather weakly, without much effort, hoping that because we are asking for something good, God will grant it quickly. So in order that we will not despise His gifts or underestimate His goodness, He makes us work for it. As St. Jude says, we are like "waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn"; so being forced to pray for perseverance is itself a gift from God.

Tied to this is asking for the means to live a holy life; for instance, asking for a spouse. If prayer to grow in holiness is good, this prayer seems even better, for we ask for the means by which certain occasions of sin will be taken away, occasions like loneliness, despair, apathy. Why does God not answer such prayers? There is no easy answer here, but we should consider that many times God postpones a natural gift to give a supernatural one; He thwarts a natural desire to provoke a supernatural one. Marriage stems from a natural desire for love, for intimacy, for support, for companionship; the blessing of children also stems from a natural desire. Sometimes God does not allow these things to take place because He is doing something more wonderful; He is not giving us a salad in place of bread or tofu in place of an egg, but a fine wine or a perfectly cooked steak or real Italian gelato. God is our Father, and He knows how to give good gifts to His children. If He is keeping natural happiness from us, He is storing up supernatural happiness; if He has denied us a natural relationship we rightly desire, there is a supernatural one He is causing to grow that would not otherwise be. If we do not yet understand, we should not busy ourselves like Martha in seeking an answer, but spend time at His feet like Mary. She received all the answers she ever desired by drawing near to Christ, and when she wanted nothing more than Him, finally her life made sense and she was filled with His peace.

So, in our struggle to understand God's will for our lives and to trust in His providence, let us call upon these two blessed sisters who knew the Lord in this life and who now both sit at His feet in paradise, that they will teach us how to pray well and with perseverance. Though He rebuked Martha, He loved her dearly and caused her to be one of pillars upon whom the Church in France grew to such great heights. And His love for Mary is well known, she who washed His feet with her tears and stayed beside Him throughout His Passion. May their prayers strengthen and teach us that the Father will indeed grant anything we ask in Jesus' name in accordance with His wisdom and with our supernatural good in mind. And then in heaven Martha and Mary will show us all the ways in which our prayers were answered and we didn't see or understand, and our gratitude and love for God shall know no end.