

Commentary to the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)



A priest was at a boxing match. The man next to him watched a boxer make the Sign of the Cross. He asked the priest, "Will that help him?" "Yes." replied the cleric, "if he can box." Jesus is teaching us today about prayer in this famous story. The judge taking bribes is browbeaten by a widow into giving justice without benefit of his usual baksheesh. So, Jesus is asking, will not the indulgent Father, who has no need of bribes, give us all the tender loving care we need? Does this mean that all we have to do is send a fax and God will send our request by same day Federal Express? Negative. Like everything else, prayer has certain ground-rules. Firstly, we need faith. There is hardly much point in praying if we are at the same time programming what to do when our prayers are denied. It is not, says James Tahaney, our prayers that God hears but our confidence. Say you pray for a sunny day for your holiday. Well, be sure that you take sun glasses and sun lotion when you exit your house.

Secondly, we have got to give God a helping hand. When we are praying to move that memorable mountain spoken of in Mt. 17,20, says Sr Ruth Fox, we have got to remember also to bring a shovel. She says there are two kinds of faith - a blue denim variety and a rocking chair one. With the former, we say we are willing to use the shovel to help get the job done. The latter says we expect God to do all the heavy lifting. The ideal then is to pray as though everything depends on God and work as though everything depends on us. The boxer opening our homily can hardly expect God's help if he has not gotten into good physical shape.

Thirdly, it is hardly cricket of me to expect that I will get everything I pray for. Nothing in life works that way.

Furthermore, if I can turn down another person's request, why cannot God do the same to me? God always answers my prayer, but sometimes He is going to say no. But the good news we are told is that delay is not necessarily denial. So, keep praying. Babe Ruth tells us it's hard to beat a person who never gives up. But the record shows too that oftentimes I have been lucky when God turned me down flat. I prayed for a particular job. God gave me a thumbs down. Subsequently, I realized that had I gotten the job, it would have not been a happy fit. It would have been the pits.

In my case, Oscar Wilde was on target. "The worst thing in the world is to get nothing you want, but the next to worst thing is to get everything you want." And it was Truman Capote, the enfant terrible of American letters, who reminded us of the advice of St Therese in his controversial work *Answered Prayers*. "More tears are shed over answered prayers than over unanswered ones." My experience teaches me also that when God slams the door shut, He oftentimes very cutely leaves a window of opportunity open. So He writes straight, as we like to say, with crooked lines. He proves to me that though His response is negative, His reasoning can be quite affirmative. Fourthly, prayer has to be on the level. It is not recommended to attempt to pull God's leg.

After all, it's His territory we're working, not ours. So, when you pray, do not use qualifying clauses. Leave the "ifs, ands, buts" at home. It is very possible to pray for something and not really want it. Think of St Augustine, "Make me chaste but not quite yet." Or Prince Hamlet praying but still determined to get his revenge: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go." The boy that is Huckleberry Finn reminds all of us, "You cannot pray a lie." Finally, we must learn to turn our backs on, what William Barclay calls, the world's most common prayer, "My will be done." and learn to say, "Thy will be done." The object of prayer, says John Castelot, is not to force God to change His mind but to bring ours into line with His own.

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