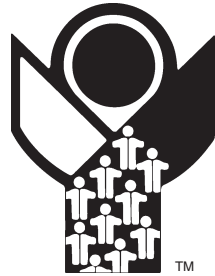


DISCIPLES IN MISSION PRAY



IF LENT HAS ANY PURPOSE AT ALL, SURELY IT'S TO OPEN OUR HEARTS TO GOD. FOR THIS REASON LENT IS CLOSELY CONNECTED TO PRAYER. BECAUSE THROUGH PRAYER WE OPEN OUR VERY SELVES UP TO GOD. AS THIS SEASON COMES TO AN END, NOTICE THE IMPACT IT HAS ON OUR ABILITY TO PRAY.

Prayer

The image of Jesus falling down in prayer at Gethsemane, which reminds us in a way of Jesus' temptations in the desert, must disturb every Christian. When we see the intensity of Jesus' prayer, it makes us think about the blandness of our own prayer. If Jesus who was God's Son prayed so intensely to the One he knew, why are we so lukewarm in our own prayer?

Prayer and Evangelization

Prayer often takes the form of asking. We want something, we need something, so we pray. We've all heard the joke about the pilot who in an emergency urges the passengers to pray. "Is it really that bad?" one passenger says. We pray to ask for things, particularly when we can't get them any other way. We pray when we're desperate.

But isn't this okay? Jesus in fact encouraged us to pray with a spirit of asking. "Ask and you will receive" (Luke 11:9), he told his disciples. And he didn't hesitate to ask his heavenly Father, as in the garden the night before his pas-

sion: "Father...take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Can't asking out of desperation lead to something deeper? Jesus in his agony goes from dreading his impending death to affirming the centrality of God the Father in his life. The prayer in the garden leads to the prayer from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

When our hearts are so totally open to God that we put our whole selves in God's hands, then we have heard the Gospel most deeply and are closest to the kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate. This is our deepest level of prayer—and it is also our deepest evangelization.

We might think about our deepest moments of prayer—whether from desperation, from joy, from fear, or from hope—and reflect on what they said about us. Almost without exception, these were moments when existence was torn open to reveal the God who holds everything up and together. At these moments we, like Moses, almost feel we see God face to face.

Praying for Evangelization

Evangelization can't happen without prayer, especially without the great prayer that Jesus left us in the Eucharist—when we gather in his name, read his word, and feed on the food which is his body and blood.

Those people who absolve themselves from worship because they “can speak directly to God,” as they put it, deprive themselves of the very experience that Jesus gave us by which we can have union with God. The faithful Catholics who worship weekly know the presence of God with an intimacy and regularity that others must struggle even to approach.

Evangelization, which the Holy Spirit does, can happen only when we open ourselves completely to the kingdom and pray with all our hearts for that kingdom to fully come upon us.

“Without prayer, the Good News of Jesus Christ cannot be understood, spread, or accepted. [Our] goals can be accomplished only by opening our hearts to God, who gives to his children everything they seek, who responds when we knock, and who answers when we persevere in asking...The moment we stop praying for the grace to spread the Good News of Jesus will be the moment when we lose the power to evangelize” (*Go and Make Disciples*, p. 12).

We're sometimes tempted to think of evangelization as slick marketing, with lots of advertising and noise. However, we know that any effort in prayer, no matter how small, will far outweigh the greatest effort in salesmanship.

This isn't to say that we should neglect the need to invite. Rather it speaks about the absolute necessity of prayer. Prayer undergirds invitation. Only prayer, after all, opens us and changes us so we can respond freely to God's action in our lives. We know this. Every time a prayer has been answered, it's because prayer's power—in the Spirit—has led us to a place where God can act on us and through us.

The story of St. Monica praying for her son St. Augustine is repeated again and again in our own experience. The young man who was able to give up drugs, the wife who found the courage to go through a difficult pregnancy, the middle-aged couple who found the strength to care for their in-laws, the employer who found the generosity to share the profits with the employees, the person who began to see the dignity of all people despite a prejudiced upbringing—these people experienced true conversions as a result of openness and growth caused by prayer.

One wonders what would happen if the whole Catholic world would truly bow down in humble need before God, place itself totally in God's hands, and pray wholeheartedly for the coming of the kingdom. What *would* happen?

Reflection

Think about the meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer in which we pray, *Lord, remember those who take part in this offering, those here present and all your people, and all who seek you with a sincere heart*. Consider how prayer enables us to bring others closer to God, especially those who are searching.

Action

Set aside a specific time and place to pray, every day this week. Make the focus of this prayer simply being open to the presence and love of God.

Prayer

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE YOU NAME. YOUR KINGDOM COME. YOUR WILL BE DONE. ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD, AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS, AND DO NOT SUBJECT US TO THE FINAL TEST, BUT DELIVER US FROM THE EVIL ONE. (MATTHEW 6:9-13)

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