

November 9, 2008

## **Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

One of the obvious reasons people pray is to be strengthened and comforted by the experience of doing so. Such comfort and strength derive sometimes from the words of the prayer, and sometimes from the sense of God's close presence, but perhaps more often from both together.

Beyond our ability to number them, men have approached prayer feeling depressed, anxious, weak, or desperate, but finish their prayer full of hope and with a sense of calm. If this were not the case rather often, I suspect, men would seldom pray.

Indeed, it makes sense to suppose the Lord confers grace on the habit of prayer precisely for the purpose of prompting us to pray resolutely, more often, and with greater persistence.

If this were not so, His Holy Spirit would hardly have inspired so many prayers in which we detect this pattern. Psalm 35 (Greek 34), for instance, is in large part taken up with sentiments of strife and desperation. Even as the psalmist struggles to attain the joy of salvation in verse 9, we still find him, even unto verse 15, asking, "Lord, how long will You look on?"

As he persists in his struggling prayer, nonetheless, this man devoted to God comes gradually to gain hope, peace, and strength for the very conflict that had driven him to pray. He finishes the psalm on the note of joy, determined to spend even more time at prayer: "my tongue shall speak of Your righteousness, of Your praise all the day long."

This is a common pattern of the Psalter. In those many psalms where we perceive a shift of mood, the change is usually from sorrow to joy, anxiety to hope, and frustration to courage.

Because this pattern in prayer is so common, it would be very easy to suppose it universal. That is to say, the man devoted to prayer may begin to anticipate the consolations of prayer simply as a matter of course, whenever he prays. When this does not happen, he may begin to feel that there was something wrong with his prayer.

This impression, nonetheless, is a temptation. Because the essential kernel of prayer is "Thy will be done," the man of prayer should sometimes expect the temptation to doubt the worth of his prayer. Even the most faithful prayer does

not invariably bring to the soul a sense of peace, hope, and comfort.

For this reason, the Holy Spirit took care, also, to give us examples of prayer in which anxiety is not alleviated and sorrow is not turned to joy.

Psalm 39 (Greek 38) is such a prayer. Verse by verse the psalmist fights against depression. He prays repeatedly for deliverance from sorrow and pain. He patiently urges his soul to place all trust in God. His psalm, nonetheless, does not end on a note of hope. On the contrary, this man devoted to God apparently finds himself in much the same state as when he began his prayer: "Remove Your gaze from me, that I may regain strength, / Before I go away and am no more."

A similar prayer is Psalm 88 (Greek 87), a meditation of Ethan the Ezrahite. This is a struggling prayer in which we detect no obvious signs of exultation or spiritual joy. The man devoted to God feels "adrift among the dead" and suffers from the terror of the divine wrath. Not once in this psalm is there a hint of joy. Feeling abandoned throughout his prayer, he is just as lonely at the end: "Loved one and friend You have put far from me, / my companions into darkness." It is very important to take note of such prayers, because they testify that the final purpose of prayer is not spiritual consolation. It is, rather, the gift of oneself to God-the placing of one's life in God's will.

Because the Lord confers so much joy on man's serious, disciplined quest for prayer, it can happen that the desire for spiritual comfort may replace the desire for God. A man may come to prayer, no longer to place himself in God's will, but in order simply to experience the joy of praying.

At various times in the life in Christ, the Lord will thwart prayer of this sort, because it has become just a subtler form of selfishness. The Holy Spirit will hold back the warm blessings normally attendant on prayer, precisely in order to concentrate a man's attention on God, and not on himself. When this happens, the man devoted to God must remember that he is not less pleasing to the Lord, and, if faithful, he will become even more pleasing.

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