

March 13, 2016  
Cheesefare Sunday

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In His instruction on prayer, Jesus tells us, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Mt.7:7-8; Lk 11:9).

This triple exhortation to prayer contains what may be understood as suggesting a classification, as it were, of the different places—the varying states—in which the prayer is rendered. The souls of men, when they turn to God, do not stand equally distant from Him. A man's “distance” from God may qualify, in some degree, the form and spirit his prayer will take.

Thus, when Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you,” the instruction may suppose that the hearer knows how to ask. He is already aware of his access to God. He is comfortable with the grammar of prayer. He easily follows Isaiah's exhortation to “call upon Him while He is near” (55:6). Such a one remembers the bold assertion of the Psalmist, “The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” 145:18).

Such a man prays with the assurance that in Christ he has “access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:18). He knows that in Christ, and through faith in Him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence” (3:12).

The man who receives the exhortation to “ask” is so familiar with the Lord that his prayer may be nearly effortless. He is accustomed to prayer. He prays continually, perhaps. God is ever at hand and simply waits for him to pray. His is a prayer of familiarity and comfortable audacity.

Some people do not come to prayer from this standing. Perhaps they beseech the Lord less often. It may be the case that their prayer has become a bit irregular. The words—and especially the sentiments—of prayer have grown less familiar. To such a one the Lord says, “knock and the door will be opened to you.” That is to say, this person's prayer may require a bit more effort and emphasis. It is obliged to be more vigorous and insistent.

Knocking on a door is a step beyond simply asking, because a closed door stands in the way. This prayer is not so familiar. The soul's habit of faith seems weakened. Because he no longer prays by cultivated habit, this man is less certain of the words, less secure in his confidence, not so robust in his faith. Such a one is less inclined to pray. He must knock. Because his heart has grown cold, his prayer demands a more strenuous effort. Knocking on the door may cause his hand to bruise.

At least, however, the one who knocks apparently knows the location of the door. He yet remembers where the Lord is to be found. He is clear about where to knock. Although he may not be on intimate terms with the Lord—the wild vines of worldliness and distraction may have overgrown the door— but he has not lost memory of the door's location. His prayer seems more distant, but it need not be less certain. Like the younger son who strayed far from home in Luke 15, such a one still knows the Father's address. So, as he prays, he may start to recognize some features of the neighborhood.

On the other hand, the man whose prayer is obliged to “knock” appears to have some advantage over the one who is told, “seek and you will find.” He is not only not on familiar terms with the Lord, he is not really sure about the location of the door. Such a one is not told to ask, nor does he even know where even to knock. His immediate task is, rather, to seek. His prayer will take the form of a quest. He must first find the door on which to knock. Perhaps he strayed so far from God that he is not aware there is a door.

This man, if he is to pray, is ordered to undertake a search for God. He will not search in vain, of course, but he has no guarantee the search will be easy. Indeed, his prayer may demand even more effort than the man who knocks on the door. When such a one is prompted to pray, this impulse marks the beginning of a quest.

Not all men are in the same place with respect to prayer, but all are told to pray, and a like promise attends them all. The difference is in the form of the prayer, not the manner in which God hears the prayer. None of these prayers are refused. To one it will be granted, to another it will be opened, and the third is sure to find.

Men experience God at various distances, but in truth He is nigh unto them all. The variations in prayer are differences among men, not a difference in God, who graciously hears every voice directed to Him, whether by a close friend, an occasional acquaintance, or a distant seeker. The Lord is a God of universal suffrage. He is eager to hear from all of us.