

Sunday, December 14, 2014

Third Sunday of Advent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

(Isaiah 61:1-2,10-11; Luke 1:46-50,53-54 (Responsorial Psalm); 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28)

What it Means to Pray without Ceasing

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Without ceasing? At all times? Obviously, Paul is not talking about praying all day long. Rather, he is calling us to faithfulness in prayer and asking us to develop a prayerful disposition for our lives. Paul knows that prayer is the best way to stay close to God, so it's worth scheduling time every day to make sure we are coming into God's presence.

Think about the way you breathe. Your lungs work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They never stop, whether you are aware of them or not. If your lungs were to fail, you would die. Likewise, if you lose your prayerfulness, you will die. If external residue, like smoke, enters your lungs, breathing becomes more difficult. Similarly, when sin comes into us, it makes prayer more difficult. That's why repentance is so valuable. It clears up the damage caused by sin and makes prayer easier.

Praying without ceasing means getting into the habit of praying a few times during the day: when you wake up, when you go to Mass, before lunch and dinner, and before bed. One psalm even tells us to pray seven times a day (Psalm 119:164)! Of course, this doesn't always have to be a structured prayer time! Rather, it means trying to maintain a spirit of prayer. If we could just stop a few times during our day and turn to the Lord, we would be amazed at the difference it makes. Jesus is our best example of this. Whether he was performing a miracle, preaching a sermon, or arguing with his opponents, he kept his mind on his Father.

Finally, praying without ceasing means living in a way that is consistent with our prayer. Caring for others, being just, developing our talents, doing good for other people, and helping the poor—these are all valid ways that we can continue to pray without ceasing.

That doesn't seem too hard!

"Lord, help us become a praying people. May we stay close to you in all circumstances until you come in glory!"

(Many thanks to *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org) for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission. *The Word Among Us* Mass Edition contains all the Mass readings and prayers, and a meditation for each of the daily and Sunday Masses.)

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. We know that Jesus applied Isaiah 61:1-2 (the first reading) to his own ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus was anointed by the Spirit “to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” In what ways do you believe that we, as Catholics, are also anointed by the Spirit to do the same?
2. In what ways have you personally experienced the Holy Spirit’s anointing in serving the Lord and “to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners”?
3. The Responsorial Psalm uses the Magnificat of Mary in Luke 1:46-54 to reflect Mary’s unique anointing by the Holy Spirit. Through this anointing she “proclaims the greatness of the Lord” and “rejoices in God my Savior.” In what way does this anointing apply to us as well – especially in our proclaiming the greatness of the Lord and in rejoicing in God our Savior? How often do you do this? How often should you do this?
4. In the second reading, St. Paul, similar to Mary’s Magnificat, exhorts all of us to “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). At first glance this may seem impossible, especially if we try to do it on our strength apart from God’s grace and the Holy Spirit. Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit as your source of strength, what steps can you take to make these words of Paul a greater reality in your life?
5. In the Gospel reading, John the Baptist is called by God to “make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23). What do these words mean to you? In what ways do you believe that you are also called to do the same?
6. The meditation describes the importance of “faithfulness in prayer” and in having “a prayerful disposition for our lives.” It also describes what it means to “pray without ceasing.” How well are you doing in praying without ceasing? What steps can you take during this Advent season of grace to do even better?
7. Take some time now to pray for the grace to be “a praying people.” Use the prayer at the end of the meditation as the starting point.

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, a member of the NSC Council and a director of partner relations for **The Word Among Us Partners**, (<http://www.waupartners.org/>), a ministry of **The Word Among Us** (www.wau.org) to the Military, Prisoners, and women with crisis pregnancies or who have had abortions. Maurice was also the founding Executive Director of the **National Fellowship of Catholic Men** (<http://www.nfcmusa.org/>), for which he is currently a Trustee. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com].