

"Why doesn't God answer my prayers?" When we say this what we really mean is: "why doesn't God do what I say?"

Too often in our despair we turn to God as comparative strangers. Unfortunately, we go to God not as His children being temples of the Holy Spirit. We go to Him as if we had control over Him and that God would magically make our desires fulfilled.

In today's Gospel a Canaanite woman came to Jesus and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." In other words she was not giving up. She was being persistent in her prayer to Jesus. She kept calling out to Jesus asking for help. We too must be persistent in our prayers as was this Canaanite woman.

We must be prepared to prove our sincerity in our prayers by persistence. We must throw our whole self into the prayer until the prayer becomes our "soul's sincere desire". St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, prayed 30 years for the conversion of her son. She did not give up but kept praying for years before her prayer was finally answered.

When Jesus finally responded to the Canaanites women's pleadings, he did not do what she was asking of him. Instead he said "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, you are not a Jew and therefore, I will not do as you have requested. He was testing her sincerity. She was not deterred when she heard Jesus deny her prayer. She kept saying "Lord, help me." And He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She did not take offense at this and begin to whine "Why won't you help me?" Instead she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Some of us think that we have a claim on God. We think to ourselves, "I go to church and say my prayers. I am neighborly and lead a decent life. Why shouldn't God grant me this prayer of mine." It's almost as if we expect God to do what we tell him to do. That we know what is best for us. God is only there to please us and to do what we ask of him. This is not what Christianity is. We don't go to church and we don't pray in order to please God so that he will obey us when we ask a request of him.

There is something greater, something better, something more, we pray: "Thy will be done, O Lord." We accept God's will, not our own.

Too often we give up too soon in discouragement and despair when we go to God in prayer. We are traveling down the road of life and we give up. We stop, losing our faith and trust in God. But God never lets a person down who trusts Him. But also, there is no guarantee that we will get exactly what we want. This woman did because she persisted. Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

In Luke it is written that Jesus said, "I tell you, keep asking, and it will be given you. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. Whoever seeks finds. To the one who knocks it will be opened. Jesus also told them a parable that they must always pray and not give up, saying, "In a certain city, there was a judge who did not fear God and did not care [about anyone]. A widow lived in that city, and she often came to him, saying: 'Defend me from my adversary!' For a time, he would not [do anything], but after a while, he said to himself, 'Although I neither fear God nor care for anyone, yet because this widow is bothering me, I will defend her, or else she will wear me out by her continual visits.'" The Lord said, "Listen to what the unrighteous judge has to say! Will not God grant justice to his elect who are crying out to him day and night?"

If we remember St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, wrote that he had a thorn in his flesh. He begged the Lord three times that it might depart from him, but the Lord replied to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Perhaps it's best that not all our prayers are answered the way we would want them to be.

God will never let us down. He will see us through to the end and beyond! When God seems to be deaf to our prayers, you can be assured that he is not. He is listening. And although he may not grant us the specific request that we are making, he will still answer. He will respond to every prayer that is offered in persistence and humble faith. Not always in the way we may expect or in the way that we want, but always in the way that is best. We can trust him.

When we pray, we do not just pray for our own needs, but also for others, just as the woman in today's Gospel did. She prayed for her daughter. There are several stories in the Gospels where someone prayed for another person. Jairus fell at Jesus's feet, and profusely begging him, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death! Please come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made healthy and live." Jesus heard his prayer and brought the child back to life.

Another healing that Jesus performed was healing the centurion servant. The centurion sent friends to Jesus asking Him to heal his servant, and Jesus did. These are all accounts of intercessory prayer on behalf of loved ones, especially parents praying for their children.

Such stories taught the followers of Christ about intercessory prayer. We note, that the petitions in these accounts are addressed to Jesus. Although in Jesus' specific teaching about prayer, the normal emphasis was on prayer addressed to the heavenly Father (Luke 11:2) in Jesus' name (John 15:16), the emphasis is different in these particular gospel stories.

They make clear the answer to a practical question that might arise among Christians, namely,

"If one of your children gets sick, is there some special Trinitarian protocol to follow, or is it all right just to take the problem right to Jesus?"

However, the idea of taking one's problems "right to Jesus" is surely not to be understood in the sense of foregoing asking others to pray for us. It is not as though the unique mediation of Jesus our Lord excludes Christians from mediating on behalf of other Christians, and these various Gospel stories are the proof of it. In fact, it is the entire point of these stories is to validate such mediation. This is called intercessory prayer.

To see how this works out, let us return to the story of the centurion pleading on behalf of his servant. In the Gospel of Luke the centurion himself does not approach Jesus directly. He sends some friends who will speak for him. Now this is interesting, because it introduces another level of mediation. The friends are interceding for the centurion, who is in turn interceding for his servant. We have here the beginnings of a prayer list.

Then, when Jesus starts moving towards the centurion's home, the latter dispatches still another group of friends, who will speak the famous words that characterize this story: "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof." It is surely significant that the centurion does not speak these words, deeply personal as they are, to Jesus directly. Others say them to Jesus on the centurion's behalf. In Luke's version of the story, in fact, there is no face-to-face encounter of the centurion with Jesus at all. The centurion's faith is conveyed by those he chooses to intercede for him.

We must pray for one another. This is why you find in the bulletin a listing of those who are sick or have some other need and we should pray for them. We should ask one another to pray for our needs, and very importantly you must be persistent in our prayer. Without persistence, without trusting God, and without faith our prayers will not be answered. This also includes asking the Theotokos and the other Saints for their prayers. We believe that the departed saints are still alive and hear our prayers. We believe that they will take these prayers before God and that God will answer them. Perhaps not the way we want them answered but in the way that God knows is best for us.