

Reflection for the Sixteenth Sunday of the Church's Year

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” These words of St Paul from today's second reading put us in touch with the challenge of prayer and the difficulties we all experience around it. I have often heard in confession, or at a sick person's bedside, that they are struggling to pray. Yet St Paul reassures us that this very struggle is in itself a prayer. It is the Spirit groaning within us reaching out to God. In the words of St John Damascene “prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God”¹. St Therese of Lisieux described prayer “as a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and love, embracing both trial and joy.”²

We often have unrealistic expectations in respect of prayer. We expect it to make us feel cosy, to make pain and fear go away. We expect it to get easier with practise, to become distraction free and more focused with the passage of time, but we soon find out that this is generally not the case. Contemplative monks and nuns who daily spend hours in prayer will struggle with focus, attention and distraction. They too rely on the Spirit groaning within when they cannot find the words. The benchmark we should apply to prayer are those words of St John Damascene and St Therese. We succeed in prayer if we raise our hearts and minds to God. We succeed in prayer if we have a surge of the heart towards God, a simple look turned towards heaven.

No matter how difficult we sometimes find prayer to be, we should maintain a good discipline towards it. We should seek to pray regularly through the day, just creating little moments to think of God in order to raise our hearts and minds to him, to glance towards heaven and let our hearts surge towards him there. We can do this anywhere and at any time – on the bus or in the car, during a lull in the day, the traditional morning or night times. And we don't have to fill prayer time with lots of words although the words of traditional, much-loved prayers can help. The best words, of course, are those of Jesus himself from the prayer he taught his disciples – the Our Father. There we find a rich treasury to help us as we enter into the presence of God.

Moreover, we need to be open in prayer. It is not uncommon for people who pray to expect God to agree with them, endorse their views, put things right, make bad things go away and so they can be disappointed, or feel prayer is a waste of time, when these things do not happen. We are right to “pray for” our needs, our sick relatives/friends etc., but making demands of God in prayer is not the raising of heart and mind to God or a glance towards heaven.

There are many more things we could say about prayer but the words of St Paul today, *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”* are an important and comforting lesson we need to grasp.

¹ De Fide Orth: 3, 24

² Manusrits