

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken about prayer in my homilies. Sometimes people look at prayer and say, “Well, that sounds good, and I do want to have a regular prayer life, but I just never seem to be able to do it.” There always seems to be something in the way. Wouldn’t you think that praying would be easy? Shouldn’t it be that we could do it without any problems?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) has a whole article on what it calls, “The Battle of Prayer.” It says, “**The great figures of prayer ... all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does *all he can* to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God**” (CCC paragraph 2725, emphasis added). Hopefully if you have ever struggled with prayer, this will come as a relief: you are not alone in the struggle; it is not your fault that it is hard.

In the Gospel this weekend, we hear about the temptations of Jesus. Unlike in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which enumerate the temptations, in Mark’s Gospel we hear only that “*he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan*” (Mark 1:13). Jesus, too, was tempted during prayer; He struggled with prayer. The good news is that He conquered those struggles and has given us the Holy Spirit to help us conquer them, too.

So what are some of the struggles which create the “Battle of Prayer”? One of the biggest struggles with prayer is ***distraction***. This seems to affect everyone! St. Bernard tells about how he was out riding with a friend. His friend claimed never to have distractions in prayer. St. Bernard, knowing well the Battle of Prayer, said, “If you get off your horse and pray one “Our Father” without a single distraction, you can have my horse.” His friend got off the horse, and got up to the words, “Give us this day our...” when he said, “Can I have the saddle, too?” Whether we are praying an “Our Father,” reading and meditating on a Scripture passage, or gazing upon a crucifix, it is so easy for our minds to wander and to lose track of where we are. It can be discouraging, too, when we find that our minds have wandered off not even *ten seconds* after we have drawn ourselves back to prayer!

So how do we deal with distractions? First, we need to find exterior silence. We have to shut off the phone (or at least put it in a place where it won’t be a distraction – yes, even texts!), and the iPod. We need to step away from the TV, and other things that will most likely try to steal our attention. Sometimes this is not possible, but to dedicate time to God, we need to make sure we can really give Him that time.

Second, when (note that it is not “if”) distractions arise, we must gently bring ourselves back to our prayer and thinking about God. It does us no good to get angry at ourselves, our weakness, and our inability to keep focused – that is also a distraction! As many times as we find our minds wandering, gently, but determinedly, bring our minds back to our Lord. (I think, maybe, that God so delights in the times when we return our attention to Him, that He allows our distractions just so that He can have the pleasure of us turning back to Him!)

Third, see distractions as an opportunity to grow closer to God. The Catechism says this: “**a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to, and this humble awareness before the Lord should awaken our preferential love for him and lead us resolutely to offer him our heart to be purified**” (CCC 2729). What is this saying? Distractions can show us what is holding us back from having a better relationship with God. We then get to ***choose*** to turn away from those other things – things of lesser importance – and give God our attention and love. The Catechism continues: “**Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve**” (CCC 2729). So there you have it, distractions actually give us the opportunity to show God that we will serve Him, that we love Him above all!

There are, of course, many other struggles in the Battle of Prayer. I invite you to read more from the Catechism about this (2725-2745). For now, let us seek time every day to be with our Lord, to raise our hearts and minds to God (CCC 2559). Let us be vigilant in our prayer that we may give this time wholly and wholeheartedly to Almighty God. Let us not grow weary of the distractions in the Battle of Prayer, but continue to tell God, by our choices, that we love Him first and above all!