



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the second reading today, St. Paul speaks to the Romans (and to us) about the Holy Spirit and prayer:

The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

Imagine that – we don't even know how to pray!

Think about it – prayer is communion with God. God is so *other* from us, so transcendent, that there is *no way* that we could reach Him on our own. To be in communion with God, it takes God reaching down to us! This, of course, He did in the Incarnation – when He took on flesh in the womb of Mary. But He also sends us His Holy Spirit so that we can have the union with the Father that Jesus (the Son) has with Him.

The gift of the Holy Spirit makes prayer possible because it is God within us praying to God. With the Holy Spirit, it is now *like* speaking to *like*, as it were. Our prayer actually is a partnership between the Holy Spirit and us ... and guess who the junior partner is! We need the Holy Spirit to pray within us to make prayer possible.

That prayer is possible does not mean that it is easy, though. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* dedicates an article to the "Battle of Prayer" (Part Four, Chapter 3, Article 2). It starts off by saying

Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. (CCC 2725)

Prayer is difficult. It is a battle! Anyone who has spent any time trying to pray recognizes this. Distractions come in – as if they were attacking us, drawing us away from our focus on God. Boredom can dishearten us. Dryness can make us wonder what we're doing wrong.

One of the things I often hear from people is that they are discouraged by their distractions in prayer, that they think they are doing something wrong. In reality, they are doing something *right!* They are praying! Prayer is a battle, and distractions *will* happen. The only time that prayer no longer is a battle is when God Himself takes over our prayer in the mystical marriage (this is when souls are so advanced, they are given over completely to God; this type of prayer is not something you can achieve by working at it, but only something to which you can open yourself, as God Himself takes over our prayer).

One of my favorite stories about this is from St. Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153). He was riding with another brother when the brother said, "I never have distractions in prayer." St. Bernard replied, "I have many! You get down from your horse, and if you can say the whole Our Father without a single distraction, I'll give you my horse." So the brother got down, and got to the words, "give us this day our ..." when he said, "Can I have the saddle, too?" We all have distractions.

The important thing about prayer is to pray! When we have distractions, we must not get discouraged with ourselves. Rather, at the moment we recognize the distraction, simply bring our attention back to God. Even if we get distracted again three seconds later (let's be honest... it happens more than we would like to admit!), when we recognize the distraction, simply and gently bring our attention back to God.

One good practice when we begin prayer is consciously to invite the Holy Spirit to be with us in our prayer. He is the one who comes to the aid in our weakness! So let us not get discouraged, but seek true communion with God in prayer, even through the battles we have to fight!