

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (July 23, 2023)

Today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans is very brief—only two verses. But you know the old saying: 'big things come in small packages', and that is certainly the case here. Paul addresses an essential part of the life of a follower of Christ—and that is prayer. St. Therese (the Little Flower) described prayer as 'a simple look turned toward heaven', and St. John Damascene called it 'the raising of one's mind and heart to God'. Countless books have been written about prayer over the centuries, but these two saints help us get to the basics—prayer keeps us mindful of the God who created and redeemed us out of sheer undeserved love and who wants to be in a bond, a communion of love with every one of us.

Sounds simple and easy, doesn't it? So then: why does Paul say that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought'? Because our own experience of prayer can so often seem like a whole lot of frustration—whether because of distraction, dryness ('I don't get anything out of prayer'), or a perceived lack of time or—if we're honest with ourselves—a lack of will on our part. But there really is a basic simplicity; as the saints I mentioned said, prayer is calling God to mind, remembering his love and desire for us, and connecting with this God of love. Just as we connect with our loved ones (spouse, family, friends and others) and in many ways and for different reasons, so we can and need to connect with God in many ways and for different reasons.

Let's briefly consider two important and powerful kinds of prayer:

1. the prayer of gratitude: everything that we have, everything that we are is the result of God's incredible generosity in giving us life and existence. Of course, our parents had a major role in this, but God is the One who brought everything into being in the first place, including the way that new life is brought into the world. I've talked about the importance of the prayer of gratitude before, and I'm doing so again because it's way too easy to take for granted what we have. We were all taught as children to say 'thank you' to anyone who gave us something, and that lesson is still important no matter our age.

What do you thank God for every day? When you take a moment or two to think about it, the list can get long pretty quickly—life, faith, family, friends, food, clothing, home, laughter, love, beauty hope...and countless other blessings and countless examples of each of those blessings. Do you thank God every day? If not, then start today—it really is as simple as that. There is no one exclusively 'correct' way to offer your thanks to God; just do so as your heart moves you. And if you can't think of anything you are grateful for, then think again and more honestly. You will be amazed at the power of the prayer of thanks to help you learn more and more just how much God loves you and how that can change your attitude about so many things—especially if you are in the midst of tough times.

2. the prayer of presence: last month, on the feast of Corpus Christi, I spoke about how we want to be with the ones we love and that Jesus desires the same thing—to be with those he loves, which is every one of us. We know that he is present to us in many ways,

but most powerfully and most intimately in the Eucharist which is in itself directly connected with thanksgiving since the word “Eucharist” comes from a Greek word meaning precisely ‘thanksgiving’, ‘to give thanks.’ Jesus offers us his very own Body and Blood, his very Self, so that we can receive him into our own bodies for our spiritual nourishment.

And Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist does not end at the conclusion of Holy Mass; that divine presence remains in our tabernacles where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved both for others to receive and for our adoration. The practice, the prayer of Eucharistic Adoration has a long and venerable history in the Church. And, thanks be to God, it is growing in popularity in our own time. More and more people are finding peace and strength in being in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist exposed for adoration on our altars. I recently read an interview with Jonathan Roumie who portrays the role of Jesus in “The Chosen”, and he tells what it means to him:

“There’s a sense of peace that I get from just sitting with...Jesus in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. I never quite understood that until actually doing it. If you just go and sit in front of the Blessed Sacrament...and focus on Christ, it’s going to affect you in ways you can’t anticipate.”

During Totus Tuus this past week, our young people had some quiet time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. It was a real blessing for me to see how they maintained that quiet time of prayer...even the first and second-graders who, during the rest of the week, showed they were filled with their usual levels of energy and more energy!

If you have taken part in Eucharistic Adoration, then you know the blessing and peace that come from doing so. If not, I invite you to do so—we have it on the second Tuesday of every month in our cluster churches on a rotating basis. By the way, we can also be in Jesus’ Eucharistic presence simply by taking some time for quiet prayer in any Catholic church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle. He is present to us in that way no less than when the Eucharist is exposed on the altar for our adoration.

Our lives are all frantically busy and filled with noise and distractions of every kind. But we are not helpless in the midst of all that frantic noise. We can, and we need to take some time every once in a while for quiet and for being with Jesus, and for raising our hearts, minds, and lives to him. He wants to be with those he loves—and that includes you and me. He makes himself available to us in a very special way in the Eucharist—to receive his Body and Blood into our own bodies, and to worship, praise, and thank him in Eucharistic Adoration. How blessed we are to have this gift of Jesus’ Presence offered to us!