

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C  
October 19, 1986

There's no need to confess, it's so obvious that I don't write my homilies ahead of time. I've found in the past that following a script, I end up being somehow or other a servant to the text, rather than the other way around, so I take my chances. It has its good and bad points. One of them, of course, is length.

One of the good things, at least from my perspective, is that the homily can sort of grow and mature – which isn't the best news to the people at the 6:00 o'clock Mass on Saturday, who get the first version, but, after sharing some thoughts with them last night, Joe Wholey and his wife were here, and they told me a little story which I've now incorporated into the homily. But, of course, being an Irishman tried and true, I wouldn't be content just to tell it the way they told it, I have to add some flourishes. But the story goes more or less like this:

It's a story of the Abbott General of a contemplative order, one of those communities that are supposed to be given over to formal prayer most of the time. And he received the shocking news that the three monks in this little monastery on an island had fallen away from the formal prayer. They were not getting to chapel and doing those prayers as prescribed, regularly and faithfully each day. And so he decided, with a sense of righteousness and leadership, to go out there and get them straightened out and back to basics.

So he went out to the island where the people were by and large poor and illiterate, struggling to draw a living from the earth and from their livestock, and he went to the monastery and met the three monks, and was shocked to find out they were more or less as illiterate as the people, and he wondered how'd they ever gotten into the Order in the first place.

And, sure enough, his worst suspicions were confirmed, they often missed the formal prayers in chapel. He observed it himself. And he gave them a good scolding and let them know, at the next time of appointed prayer, he expected them to be there promptly and fervently.

And when the time came and he got to the chapel, there was no one else there. He was furious. And so, as soon as possible thereafter, he gathered them together and gave them quite a tongue lashing, and he said, "Where were you at the time of prayer?" And this one little monk, so humble and penitent, so ashamed of himself, he said, "Father Abbot, I was on my way to the chapel and I passed the barn and I heard the cow moaning. Her hour had come and so I went and helped to deliver the calf."

"Hm!" said the Abbot. And he looked to the next monk, and he said, "And you? Where were you when God was calling you to prayer?" He said, "Father Abbot, as I passed the door, I heard a faint knocking there and opened it, and there was a man, desperate, shaking, in fear and hunger, and he needed food. But, even more, he needed fellowship, he needed to have somebody remind him that he's important, that he's God's son. And," he said, "may God forgive me, I missed prayer to tend to him." And then the third monk had a similar story.

And the Abbott was just outraged. And he went back and tried to teach them from the basics the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Apostle's Creed, and all the rest of it. And he said, "Now you get those memorized." But he really in his heart had pretty much given up

on them. They were hopeless of ever learning to pray.

And so, in disgust, the Abbott left and he got into his little boat to head for the mainland. And he got some short distance, and he heard a voice shouting to him, and he turned and looked and here came the three humble monks, running on the water. And they said, "Oh, Father, forgive us. We already forgot those prayers."

And the Abbott bowed his head and, perhaps for the first time in his pious life, he realized that maybe it was he who did not know how to pray.

We, in religious life, priests, sisters and brothers, are thought by the Church in general, I guess, to be experts at prayer. We spend more time than the ordinary folks in formal prayer in churches and chapels. But those of us with a little seniority – which is a nice way to say older – remember well the days of our training when the Rule told us that some of our best prayers would be at — God save us! — 5:30 in the morning in a chapel which, in winter, was usually either over-heated or too cold. It was at a time that somebody else chose but we were all to be there, and this was God's will. And some of us must have the humility to admit that we sometimes fell asleep during that meditation and morning prayer.

My sister, Edna, for example, who is a Sister of Mercy, wearing the habit as was prescribed at that time with the big plastic "gamp" here, she fell so soundly asleep one time at morning prayer that she leaned over on herself and cracked that thing in half. She tried to find some appropriate prayerful gesture as she left chapel so that the Mother Superior wouldn't notice. But she was lucky. God save all the novices and sisters and seminarians and brothers who have literally fallen from the pew and hit their head in the aisle, falling asleep at morning prayer or meditation.

You know, in a very real sense, while we were doing a good thing and trying to give extra special attention and concentration to prayer, not just for ourselves but for the whole Church, we maybe learned a lesson that in its own way obscured for us the truth of prayer at its deepest meaning. Because prayer is, after all and always, the lifting of the mind and the heart to God, and putting ourselves, as far as we can at a given moment in our lives, in communion with God's plan for everything.

And so I know that you, especially you who worship here most often, know that those humble, illiterate monks were much more at prayer than the Abbott who was ensconced in the chapel. They were in communion with the Lord Jesus who said the final measure will be how did you respond to the one in need. They were in communion with the message of the Scripture from its beginning to end that says, "Let all creation give glory to God, and let that be the very fabric of your lives."

We need to be liberated from narrow understandings of prayer that make us feel it's a professional duty taken care of by monks and nuns and sisters and priests and brothers. It is a way of life for us all, and we should give thanks to God that there are contemplative communities that give themselves over in a special way, in our name, on our behalf, to the formal liturgical prayers of the Church, and become a kind of treasury reserve for us. One of the places and one of the expressions of the Church that we can come back to to be reminded of the priority of things in prayer. We are grateful for them.

But we must never believe that somehow or other they are the real prayers and we are somehow or other counterfeit. Yes, Jesus went and prayed in the desert for forty days, but he spent three years in the streets and the alleys and the hovels with the people. He did go to the garden to collect Himself as He made His profound surrender of Himself to the Father, not according to His preference but the Father's will. But His sandals were

very dusty from the streets where the real people live, and His back and His legs and His heart were tired from His involvement with those who were hurting and in pain.

And so it should be for us. We must never apologize to God for being good mothers and fathers, being good lovers, being good sisters and brothers, being good, hard, honest workers at our jobs. We must see all these things as a giving of praise to the God who created us and designed this whole fantastic reality. Prayer is putting ourselves into communion with God's plan for us. And if that calls us to drive long distances or work over a machine or repair a car or listen to someone else's complaints, or open our doors in hospitality and celebration, in all these things we are His people at prayer.

In today's liturgy, the first reading, by the way, was not somehow or other a call to battle in the literal, military sense. The battle between the two tribes is a symbol of the struggle and the conflict of God's people. And Moses is an expression of a dimension that was absolutely vital to them. He stood in a sense above it all and raised his arms in prayer to God, a sign that, whatever is going on in his human struggle, the goals, the objectives, the energies of the people must be expressed in communion with the way God designed it. That's what it's about.

And then there is such a beautiful touch to it, that humorous part that Moses, like the child being disciplined in school years ago, told to stand like this, Moses' arms grew heavy. In fact, sometimes they used to put books on them to be sure that the arms grew heavy. And as Moses' arms lapsed like this, the battle changed and his side started losing. And so then – and so then – his two brothers had to come and support his arms. Which is to say nobody can put creation or the human conflict or struggle in place all alone. We desperately need each other. We need people to help, as it were, support our arms when they are raised in prayer. Which really means we need each other to keep returning to this basic truth that everything should be as God designed it.

When we sit on a hillside and watch the sun set, we're not making excuses, we're telling the truth when we say, "That is prayer to me." Of course it is. And we should not allow anyone to intimidate us in proclaiming that. If we go running, jogging, in the morning, and wonder at the beauty of creation and just feel good that we got another day, that's prayer. Whatever we do that in our way is meant to harmonize with God's plan for us, we are at prayer. We are His prayerful people.

What we do here this morning is prayer. But it's prayer of another dimension or another kind. Because, just like Moses, we need somebody to support us. And while watching the sunset or listening to the song of the birds or marveling at the majesty of the mountain is prayer, good and true, authentic as can be, it may not be an answer to my prayer because I need you. I need each Sunday to have other people come, join with me, and assure me that what I believe really is true, and it does give meaning to the lives of other people. And so comes our liturgical prayer, the community gathering.

Maybe you will fulfill your personal prayerful needs in sunsets and birds' songs and lovely paintings, but you may not be meeting your responsibility to share in and strengthen my prayer because I'm your brother and you are my sisters and brothers, and we're in this together. We need to remind and celebrate together. And all of us, no matter how pure our prayer at sunset, no matter how heartfelt our response to that song of the bird or the wonder of the stars and the moon, no matter how rich and beautiful all these prayers, all of us need to have the humility to come back often to the perfect prayer of Jesus which, without any doubt or hesitation, without any stipulations, puts it all in order. Look now

how powerful is the Eucharistic liturgy.

Because no matter what very personal, maybe in a human sense selfish and immediate, needs and hopes we've brought to this liturgy -- some of us are worrying about a sick friend. Alice Lockett at the last Mass grieving for a father who died last night. Erin and Matt caught up in the joy of their new baby and probably finding it hard to listen to this lengthy preacher because their thoughts are all here. Whatever we've brought together, all of us, including the preacher, will be brought to the moment of truth in this liturgy when the preacher or prayer who prays on our behalf says, "Through Him, with Him, in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is Yours, Almighty God, always and forever." And we get the chance, no matter how distracted, no matter how personal or immediate or local the prayers that are in our hearts, we get the chance to leap out from ourselves and say, "Amen to that. That's what I really mean. My prayer, my deepest dream, my highest hope is that God's will be done, that all glory be to the Father, and it be through Jesus who taught us how to live and breathe and love and be."

And then, even though some of us would like to say, "Oh, God, let me get that job," "Oh, God, that salary increase, it wouldn't kill you to kind of push for me," "Oh, God, that that friend who's kind of mad at me will be my friend again," "Oh, Lord, that that person who is so mean gets what she deserves"-- whatever it is that we might be saying in our hearts and feeling in our personal experience, when we come together with the community in liturgical prayer we are required to take a step out of ourselves when the priest says, let us pray, not as we might if left to ourselves, let us pray, not just for as much as we personally think appropriate, but let us pray as Jesus taught us, and then say, together:

Our Father, in heaven, all glory and all direction of everything be to you. And while we're here in the struggle, don't spoil us, don't give us things we really don't need that will distract us from you. Give us just enough to make it for today, our daily bread. And Father, because we want to be yours and we want you to have the glory and us to be part of it, save us from sin and from final damnation, and that's enough.

You must know, as a Christian people, that everything a Christian does that is in harmony with the life and the example of Jesus is prayer, and it is authentic prayer, it is pure prayer, it is the very heart of prayer. We must, with the grace that God gives to every generation to bring faith to new levels and new dimensions, we must celebrate our capacity and our freedom today to understand and pray more fully. Lovers must know that loving, the deep encounter of love, the surrender to each other, is a pure and marvelous prayer, a reflection of the very prayer of Jesus, who surrendered Himself to His bride, the Church.

We must know that working hard at our jobs and being honest and fair, earning our daily bread, is a prayer if ever there was a prayer or is a prayer. We must know that everything we do that in our way is an attempt to get God's will done on earth and put a right order into things, is prayer.

We are pray-ers. And without even knowing it, so many of us have been praying so well and so hard and so fully and so richly. We ought to celebrate that this morning.

There was such a nice touch -- it wasn't in the homily earlier; it didn't strike me until the Scripture was actually being proclaimed here -- but these words for Amy. In the second reading it says, "From your infancy, you have known the sacred Scriptures, the source of wisdom which, through faith in Jesus, leads to salvation."

Do you hear that, Amy? Have you known the Scripture from your infancy? Well, in a very real sense, yes, right? Because it is the Scripture where you draw your nourish-

ment. You come back here every week to get your life, in whatever measure necessary, rearranged and put back in order in the light of what the Scripture says. And so, in a very real sense, Amy is already drinking in the truth of the Scripture. The way that you love her, the way that you care for her in the days ahead will be in the spirit of Jesus. She's already being nourished by His holy Word.

And we are now being renewed and strengthened at this table and from this book in a life of prayer. Hey! Do you understand? It's not something we're aiming at, something we're going toward? We are already praying. We need never feel inadequate or incapable when the Church invites us to prayer. Our whole lives are prayer.

My sisters and brothers, let us pray!

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