

October 23 – XXX Sunday in Ordinary Time

The main theme of today's Gospel is that true humility and repentance for our sins must be the hallmark of our prayers. However, the central focus of today's parable is not on prayer itself, but rather on the evil of pride, the need for true humility, and the role of God's grace in our salvation.

The first reading, from Sirach, is a perfect companion piece to the Gospel parable. In one striking image from Sirach, the writer declares "the prayer of the lowly, pierces the clouds to reach the unseen throne of God." Such prayers are heard because they come from the hearts of people who know how much they need God. Although God has no favorites and answers the prayers of all, the oppressed, the orphans, the widows, and those who can least help themselves are His special concern. The best prayer is humble and selfless service. In the second reading, the former Pharisee Paul, like the publican in the Gospel parable, humbly acknowledges his work as accomplished by the grace of God, and he thanks God for enabling him to fight a good battle — to run a good race while keeping his Faith intact and proclaiming it. In today's Gospel parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus reminds us that God hears the prayers of one who approaches Him in humility with a repentant heart. God did not hear the prayer of this Pharisee because he exalted himself. In his prayer he was praising himself and thanking God because he was not as evil as other people. He announced to God his freedom from sin and detailed his fidelity in observing the prescribed fast and in giving tithes. The tax collector's prayer, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner," was heard because he humbled himself, acknowledging his sins and requesting God's mercy.

The humble prayer of the tax collector implied all the formalities of repentance, restitution and change of life, and framed them in his awareness of his total unworthiness compared to the holiness of God. And so, as Jesus tells his audience and us, as a result of, and as a reward for, his humble prayer for mercy, the tax collector received mercy and went home truly "justified," i.e., "reconciled to God." St. Paul reminds Titus: "Not because of any righteous deeds we have done but because of His mercy, He has saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Ti 3:5). The last words of the Gospel reading are a warning to us all: "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted."

All of us have a Pharisee and a publican within us. Let us evict the Pharisee and revive the publican in each of us. We become the proud Pharisee when we brag about our

achievements giving no credit to God, when we seek praise and recognition from others for our accomplishments, and when we degrade others with insensitive comments, hurting their feelings. In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to imitate the humble publican (tax collector) by acknowledging our total dependence on God and His grace for all our achievements and blessings; by confessing to God daily our sinfulness and asking for His pardon and forgiveness; by praying for God's continued daily support through His grace; by asking God for strengthening through the daily anointing of His Holy Spirit living within us; and by becoming more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, serving Jesus in them as best as we can.

Let us include all the necessary ingredients in our prayers. Our personal prayers must include our request for pardon and forgiveness for our sins; our thanksgiving for the numerous blessings we receive daily from God; our praise and worship of God as we surrender to Him our lives and all our activities completely and unconditionally; our acknowledgement of our weakness and of our total dependence on God, and finally, in our presentation of our needs and petitions, accompanied by the fervent request for God's strengthening of us in our weakness and temptations by the daily anointing of His Holy Spirit. Let us pray every day: "Be merciful to me, a sinner."

Let us rid ourselves of self-justification. It is a tragedy that those who justify themselves leave no room to receive grace. Morally they may be living exemplary lives, yet their self-justification leaves no room for the grace of God to take hold. God cannot give grace to them because they are not ready to receive it; they are too full. If we are proud and complacent, there is not much room for God. On the other hand, if we are truly humble, we will find grace, mercy and peace. There must be a space in our lives for grace to enter and work its miracle. One lesson of the parable for us is that we must keep our focus entirely on God and our relationship with Him, recognizing that we are constantly in need of His mercy and forgiveness.

Let us ask for God's unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy during the Holy Mass. When we participate in the Holy Mass, let us first admit our sinfulness before God by saying "I have greatly sinned ... through my most grievous fault," and let us beat our breasts in sincere repentance. Then we will be ready to receive God's grace that He showers during this Holy Mass.