

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Friday, 32nd Week in Ordinary Time; Knights of Columbus Mid-Year Meeting

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November 17, 2017

In the wake of the mass killings at the Sutherland Springs Baptist Church in Texas, messages of prayerful condolence poured in from around the world. But some raised objections to these messages. What's the point of praying when such tragic events keep happening? One public person observed that the victims themselves were in fact praying but that did not protect them from violence. Watkins, in *Salon* magazine, wrote that the victims of the mass shootings "deserve justice and to be honored . . . not just tweets about prayer."

I thought of such reactions as I reflected on Jesus' words about the necessity of praying always. If prayer doesn't do any good and in fact is a distraction, why did Jesus himself pray? And why did he tell his followers to pray and instruct them in the art of prayer? Clearly, Jesus' teaching on prayer is a quite different than the notions of prayer that are floating around social media. This morning, let's have a look.

In the Our Father, Jesus tells us to seek God's will: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done." Today, however, many people think that prayer is all about getting God to do what we want him to do - "my kingdom come, my will be done."

Sometimes people may even think of God as a cosmic "ATM" machine. You don't need to have a relationship with an ATM machine. You just expect that it will work when you insert your debit card or pin number. And by the way, the money it produces is not a gift; it's your own money. For some, prayer is like that. We tell God what we want and think we need. His job is promptly to produce what we think is

rightfully ours.

Still others think of prayer as manipulating God ...sort of cajoling God to see it our way, convincing him to do what we want. A few years ago, someone told me that successful prayer manipulates “life-forces” and “cosmic energies” thus moving God to act in our favor. So, there are lots of other erroneous ways of thinking about prayer but let’s move on to a reflection on prayer that’s more wholesome.

Today’s Gospel leaves no doubt that Jesus wants us to pray, and to pray persistently. As a model for prayer he holds us the example of a widow who pestered an unjust judge so much that he rendered her a just decision. Many a saint prayed like that. St. Monica besought God day and night for the conversion of her son, St. Augustine. St. Therese of Lisieux prayed insistently to enter the Carmelite monastery. In fact, she pestered both God *and* Pope Leo XIII to enter the convent two years below the minimum age and she got her wish – the rest is history.

And, as the adopted sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, we pray for all kinds of very good intentions. We pray to be delivered from evil – the evil we so readily perpetrate and the evil that others perpetrate, sometimes on a tragic scale. We pray for peace in a violent world, for the protection of our families, for a good job, for health, for safety when we travel, for good weather. My mom storms heaven whenever I go up in an airplane and when I land safely she is convinced that God directly intervened.

I felt the same when I passed my calculus exam in high school. Yes, we are to persevere in prayer, hoping against hope.

But are we to think when our prayers seem to go unanswered or when, perhaps, the exact opposite of what we prayed for happens? Are we not tempted to regard prayer as a waste of time? Don’t we have to admit that the prayer critics on social media have a point? Well, to answer this, we have to go beyond the nagging widow in the Gospel and instead place ourselves next to the agonizing Savior in the Garden. Though sinless, he truly shared our humanity and thus he prayed that he be spared the cup of suffering, his death on the Cross for our sins. Never was a prayer poured out with such intensity, yet he added, ‘Not my will, O Father, but yours be done.’ What does this tell us about prayer and its true purpose in our lives?

Augustine, in his wonderful letter to a prominent woman named Proba, tells us that in praying we do not inform God of our needs; he already knows them. Instead, when we pray insistently and in spite of ourselves, we are enlarging the capacity of our hearts to receive what God wants to give us. And surely the gift the Father wants to give us is that we be more like his Son, the Word made flesh, and that always involves sharing in the Cross – sometimes in small ways and sometimes in dramatic ways. Only in dying to ourselves and to our sins do we become like Jesus and do our lives become a living sacrifice of praise as well as a gift to others. Thus, in his wisdom, God knows when to answer our prayers according to our wishes and when to answer our prayers in ways that go beyond our ability to understand.

When we are afflicted and God does not seem to answer our prayers, we do well humbly to admit that we may not know what to pray for but let us also be consoled by the thought that God never forgets us. When we patiently and lovingly endure evils and sufferings, we can be sure that God is preparing greater blessings than the relief we've asked for. In the end, his power shines forth more perfectly in our weakness.

So whether we are praying for holiness or wisdom or for our daily bread, or to be delivered from evils great and small, let us remember the ultimate aim of prayer: namely, that with hearts purified of all sin and evil, we might contemplate the Lord's glory and goodness forever in heaven. This is what the saints in heaven pray for, this what they long for, that one day we would join their company in heaven. Chief among those praying for us is Mary the Mother of God. O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee!