

Praying Without Ceasing

There have been a few instances where I had the honor and pleasure of seeing a sneak preview of a movie before it was released in theaters. A few years back, one of those movies included “The Nativity Story.”

The movie, of course, is the retelling some of the earlier chapters of the Gospel of Luke where Mary and Joseph travel toward the Christmas moment of the birth of Christ. What was unique about that evening, however, was the audience. I sat in a theater full of Catholic bishops who had been especially invited to the preview.

In “The Nativity Story,” there was a scene that created a great disruption amongst the church leadership sitting in the dark quiet. In the movie as well as in Lk 1, Mary goes to Judah to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who is also “with child.” Elizabeth greets her with lines that we would all recognize from the prayer “Hail Mary.”

What caused the bishops to be outwardly startled, however, is that Mary’s prayer, “the Magnificat,” did not constitute the very next portion of the script. The producers of “The Nativity Story” made an artistic choice and saved Mary’s prayer until the very end of the movie.

That choice utilizes the Magnificat as a perspective on Mary’s whole life, not just the moment of her encounter with Elizabeth. Mary’s soul proclaimed the greatness of the Lord always; her spirit consistently rejoiced in God her savior. Mary always recognized that the mighty one had done great things for her, and holy is his name. Mary was in a covenant relationship with the Lord and she remembered the promise that the Lord made to “our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

In Mary’s role as a parent, she must have taught the same comprehensive style of prayer to her son. When Jesus teaches us the Lord’s Prayer, we find that our prayer takes us beyond the moment and leads to a way of life.

Jesus prays but he also lives in such a manner that respected the hallowedness of the Lord’s name. The life of Jesus, not just his prayer, called for God’s reign to come and God’s will to be done. Through our prayer as well as through our lives, Jesus is asking us to seek the Lord’s aid and forgiveness while actively being agents of the

same in the world.

Both Mary and Jesus, by their example, contradict that concept that God awaits our prayers so that creator of all things might personally address our individual needs and wants for wish fulfillment. Both Mary and Jesus, by their example, show that our prayer leads toward following one who is greater than ourselves; submitting to one whose plan is superior than our own petty ways.

Ghandi has suggested that “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” In the movie “Bruce Almighty,” Jim Carrey’s character suggested that we all “be the miracle.” Christians understand they have a role to play within their own prayer - not only must we pray it, we must live it.

In 1 Thes 5, Paul encourages that Christians should “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. (And) in all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”

Prayer without ceasing does not relegate prayer to the weekend within church, to the beginning or end of the day, nor to those times of crisis or despair. Prayer without ceasing calls for us to rejoice always and in all circumstances give thanks. With each breath, our souls rejoice and thank God for the great things done for us. In all circumstances, we give thanks to a Lord who gives us this day our daily bread.