

A Homily given on the occasion of Sister Monica Clare's Installation
As Sister Superior of the Community of Saint John Baptist
December 17, 2024 at 10:00 am
By the Rt. Rev. Mary D. Glasspool

The Gospel lesson we have just heard is part of Jesus' response to his disciples' request: "Lord, teach us to pray." So on this wonderful occasion of *The Blessing and Installation of Sister Monica Clare as Sister Superior* – and without diminishing any part of that, I see this service as a celebration of the entire Community of St. John Baptist – past, present, and future – I invite us all to reflect on *prayer*.

Think back with me for a moment, about your first experience of prayer. Probably it was when you were a child. When I think back, I remember the nightly ritual of kneeling by my bed and saying prayers to God. The content of those prayers took the basic shape of asking for things. When I prayed to God it was to ask for certain things or for certain things to be done. It seems to me I began, as children often do, with things that I wanted for myself. I can remember, specifically, asking every night for God to grant me a brand-new bicycle with training wheels to replace my rusty old tricycle.

As we grow older, though, we learn to be a bit more sophisticated in what it is that we pray for - that is to say, our prayer repertoire, so to speak, extends to include other people. When I began to realize that my prayer for a red bicycle was not being answered when and where I wanted it - I began to pray for my next-door neighbor to be given a red bicycle, in the hope that maybe that was more likely, and I might vicariously enjoy the answer to my own prayer.

As we continue to grow, so too, usually, do our prayers. We learn that it is a good thing to pray for others as well as ourselves, and so we ask God's blessing on other people. Or we ask for God's help with a problem. Or we ask God to cure a sick person. Or we even get so sophisticated as to truly ask God for God's Will to be done - and not our own. Whatever we ask for, however sophisticated the content of our prayers becomes, we are all too often left with the notion that prayer is *up to us*. When it comes to communication with God, *we* have to, and are supposed to, take the initiative - so we think.

But if we believe that prayer is totally up to us - even if only in taking the initiative - then we have managed to obscure the most fundamental fact about prayer. And that is this: *In prayer, the first step is God's*. Prayer is not initiated by humanity - it depends ultimately on a prior activity of God. God begins - and has already begun - the relationship with us. So from our perspective, prayer is *our response to God*.

All of our lives God has been trying in and through all the experiences of our lives to touch us, so that we will begin to turn to God and end by loving God. Not only through the out-of-the-ordinary experiences we might think of as *religious experiences* in our lives, but in *all* the events and relationships of our lives, whether they be of love and peace, sorrow and death, guilt and sin, or beauty and joy. There is no experience that has not been a means by which God has been trying to communicate with us. Our prayer is our response. It is the *second* step. God has already taken the first step.

So our prayers might begin: *Oh God, you have given me such and such - and I thank you. or God, you have permitted this particular event and it appears evil to me. What is your purpose and what would you have me do in these circumstances?*

Praise. Thanksgiving. Confession. Intercession. Petition. All of these are *kinds* of prayer - and all of them are prayed in response to God's already having *done* something, and our recognition of that fact.

A second extremely important thing in prayer is to bring *ourselves* to the relationship or enterprise. We need to be ourselves and begin right where we are.

Another kind of stage I remember going through in my own prayer life is what I term the *Pretending to be Francis of Assisi Syndrome*. The *Pretending to be Francis of Assisi Syndrome*

means that before I can have a good relationship with God through prayer I must give up all my possessions, be in constant and perfect communion with nature, and devote my life entirely to the *untouchable people* of society - preferably lepers or nowadays, people with some dreadfully contagious disease. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these things - if that's who I really am before God. What's wrong is my setting up any kind of preclusive, often romantic, prerequisites to prayer. The sole prerequisite to prayer is to *be yourself* - be truly who you are. And then *bring yourself* to the relationship with God.

There is a side issue here which I think we Episcopalians may have to deal with more than other denominations, and it has to do with *how* we pray - the actual words we use. We are blessed with a very beautiful Prayer Book which contains prayers for just about every situation conceivable in life - and they are, most of them, beautifully written. Contained in the Book of Common Prayer is the Old Testament Prayer Book - the Book of Psalms - which again, provides beautifully written expressions of just about every aspect of life offered directly to God.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with using these prayers in your personal prayer life. The point is - they should not take the place of your own. Your prayers and my prayers should be direct, personal conversation with God. And if we are truly ourselves, we should speak naturally and easily as we would to a friend. Use the words that rise most simply to your lips.

You may find, shortly, as I usually do, that you eventually need help in your prayers. You will sooner or later say all you think you have to say. You may become repetitious and you may be afraid of getting bogged down. This is the time to turn to the prayers of others for help. Whatever you do, to whatever sources you turn (and there are many), do this: make these prayers your own. Do not just read them, but take and remake them so that, as they give you material direction, they become yours. Make these prayers your own.

Does prayer work? Well, if we measure whether or not prayer works by whether or not a person gets what she or he asks for; then prayer works sometimes and not others. But if, instead, we understand prayer as our response to God's initiative, then we have a different sense of what works when we pray.

- Prayer works when it gives us a greater sense of the majesty and glory of God.
- Prayer works when it leads us to true repentance after a confession of sin.
- Prayer works when it arouses in us an awesome sense of the forgiving grace of God.
- Prayer works when it engenders profound thanks for every day we live and makes us realize that life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage.
- Prayer works when it leads us to pray for others.
- Prayer works when it impels us to action on behalf of our sisters and brothers in this world.
- Prayer works when it leads to new commitments in our Christian pilgrimage.
- Prayer works when along with our asking, it leads to our giving.

Prayer is our response to God. We must be and bring ourselves - our true selves - in this relationship. Prayer does work.

Jesus prayed at many different times in his life - on fact, one can be reasonably certain that prayer was a daily activity for Jesus. But more importantly, the life of Jesus was, and is, itself, a prayer. Jesus does what he sees God do and speaks what he hears God say. Jesus' will is to do God's will - and so his whole life is an offering - a prayer to God. And we are called to follow Jesus.

The spiritual writer Paul Tournier decided to put one hour a day aside for prayer. The first time he did it he thought the hour would never end. Restlessly he looked at his watch again and again, hoping that the time would pass more quickly. At the end of the hour he felt like a child let out of school. But he resisted the temptation to leave immediately. No longer was the pressure on. And in these moments after the hour of prayer he was transformed. Tournier is convinced that the first hour was God's test of obedience and the real prayer was the whole day that followed, which, he said, seemed to be infused with a sense of God.

Lord, teach us to pray ... God has already taken the first step. It is ours to respond, authentically. Prayer works - so keep at it. And finally, and most importantly, the offering of our own life to God is, for us, the final act of prayer.