

The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Prayer and Action, The Two Poles of Christian Life July 21, 2024.

Jesus' apostles had completed their first successful missionary endeavour. After being with Jesus for a long time, under his guidance, they had been sent out to be his ambassadors, to announce his message and testify to its truth. Now they returned to report their progress. We know from the other evangelists that this moment of reunion was full of rejoicing and energy - they had experienced the power of God working through them, moving people's hearts through their words and deeds. Jesus knows the importance of finding a quiet spot in their lives when they can be alone with him to rest and pray and so he takes them aside to rest, to be with him again in the quiet intimacy of their small community. The lesson is clear for us too, but so hard to put into practice: active apostles, Christians who are energetically engaged in evangelizing the world around them, need to balance their activity with contemplation, with time spent in personal conversation with the Lord. Sometimes we can wonder why we get so emotionally and spiritually exhausted by the busy-ness of our lives. It's because we aren't recharging our spiritual batteries. Stress, discouragement, and other crippling emotions can wear us out if we aren't daily reinforcing our faith in Jesus Christ. Only our friendship with Christ can supply us with the strength and wisdom we need to be truly successful, successful not just in the roles we play, but in who we are beneath those roles. Without prayer, study, and time alone with God, our well will soon run dry - we will have nothing substantial to offer others. But without action, without giving freely to others what we have freely received from God, our spiritual waters will become stagnant, lifeless - like a lake with no outlet. Contemplation and action, prayer and work - such was Christ's way, so such should be every Christian's way.

This is true for the spiritual life, but it's also a principle of human nature in general. As human beings we are body and mind, flesh and spirit. And so, everything we do has a material aspect - work, effort, action - and also a spiritual aspect - planning, vision, long-term goals. Think of the Edmonton Oilers hockey team playing the NHL Stanley Cup final. The players are experts in action, no questions about it - fast action, hard-hitting action, speed and power and dexterity. But when a hockey team goes onto the ice, how does it organize and direct all that physical potential? By following a game plan, a strategy, a vision for victory. For every one minute on the ice during a game, the team invests hours and hours of practice, film analysis, discussion, and strategic thinking. That's what keeps the players united, focused, and motivated during the heat of the competition: they know what they are there for, what challenges they will be facing, what path to take to come out victorious. Sometimes it even happens that the bigger, faster, stronger team loses, because the other team had a better game plan, a better vision, and executed it better. A similar pattern occurs in our spiritual life. Every day we are out there battling against temptations, difficulties, and obstacles in fulfilling our life mission in Christ. And it is easy for us to get worn down and confused by the struggle. But if we spend time with the Lord in prayer, if we meet regularly with the Holy Spirit, our head coach and personal trainer, we will be able to win those battles. Alone in the Lord's presence, we should ask ourselves where we are going and what we are trying to achieve. We need to make space for God in our lives and we need to accept our Lord's loving invitation to come apart and rest a while to pray. In prayer our faith-vision is renewed, our injuries are healed, our weaknesses are strengthened, and our victory is assured. As Pope Benedict XVI put it: "One who prays is not afraid; one who prays is never alone; one who prays is saved!" (Wednesday audience, 1 July 2009).

Our society tends to stress the importance of action more than prayer, but the two really are meant to go together. Jesus taught this not only in the way he treated his closest followers, as in today's Gospel, but also by the example of his own life. Towards the beginning of his public ministry, he and his apostles visited Simon Peter's house, where he cured Peter's mother-in-law and then spent the evening curing the

sick and exorcising devils from the neighbours. The next morning, the apostles got up early to start what they knew would be a very busy day. But when they looked around for Jesus, they couldn't find him. They searched all around and finally located him up in the hills outside of town, praying. And when they told him that people were already lining up outside the house to see him, he said to them that it was time to move on to other towns. Jesus always places the needs of others before his own. If there is no rest for Jesus, there can be no rest for his followers either. By virtue of our baptismal calling, all of us have christian responsibilities and a certain amount of shepherding to do. Jesus knew too well that a busy day lay before him, but he also knew that in order to get through it productively, he had to start off with prayer. The same thing happened on the night before his passion. Knowing that he was in for the most gruelling action of his life - the trial, flagellation, and crucifixion - he went to the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed. Jesus himself led a full and active life, but that activity was inspired by his prayer - and if that's the case for him, the Son of God, how much more should it be the case for us, his adopted brothers and sisters!

St Benedict of Nursia, the father of monasticism in the West, used a motto that sums up perfectly this Lesson: *Ora et labora*. "Ora" is Latin for "pray." And "labora" is Latin for "work." We are called to become close friends of Jesus Christ, each one of us, and we can only do that if we develop our prayer life. But we are also called to be his fellow soldiers, ambassadors and agents of his everlasting Kingdom, and that means we should be putting our talents, time, energy, and creativity into doing things that will make this world a better place, a place more worthy of our King. As we go to our Sunday Mass, praying from our hearts and receiving the bread of life that will strengthen us for this coming week's work and battles, we should ask ourselves an important question. Have I found the right balance between "ora" and "labora" in my life? Some Catholics only pray when they come to Mass on Sunday. The rest of the week they barely even think about God. Other Catholics are in the chapel so much that they neglect their other responsibilities. Some Catholics try to leave all the Kingdom-building activity to the nuns and missionaries. They don't stay on the lookout for opportunities to help others discover the one thing worth discovering in this life: friendship and companionship with Jesus Christ. Other Catholics are constantly trying to force-feed everyone they meet with the Gospel, violating common sense and common courtesy. Each one of us needs to find the balance that goes with our personality and life-circumstances. God will help us, but it's up to us to get the ball rolling.

Prayer and action - these are like the two sides of the coin of our Christian life. But even though both are equally important for our spiritual maturity, in today's world one of them is harder than the other. Today's society is so focused on getting things done, on task lists and action points and bottom lines, that many people have actually lost sight of which things are really worthwhile doing and why. The fast and superficial pace of life in the digital world makes prayer harder and harder, because prayer requires internal discipline and depth. These weeks of the Church year, the liturgical season of Ordinary Time that falls between Easter and Advent, are the perfect time to improve our prayer life. And God will certainly help us, if we just give him the chance. And one way to do that is to make a commitment to a regular prayer life, not one that shifts with our moods. We need to pray daily, to have a daily quiet time when we can speak to Christ, pray for our loved ones, reflect on the scriptures, or read some good, solid spiritual book. That means carving out the time. It doesn't have to be a lot of time - ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes at night is a good start - but it has to be consistent, and that means self-discipline.