SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER - JUNE 1, 2025

It was just a few days ago that we celebrated Jesus' glorious and triumphant Ascension into Heaven. This time between the Ascension and the next great feast - Pentecost - has traditionally been a time of prayer. Like Mary and the apostles who waited and prayed for the gift of the Holy Spirit, we wait and pray. In particular, we are asking that the Father and Son pour out the Holy Spirit - who also is God - over us, over the Church, and over the world.

Because of that, let's take this time to focus on what prayer is and why it's so important for us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Now, there are probably many of you here today who are thinking, "I don't know how to pray." If that's the case, then you are just where Jesus needs you to be. Everyone comes to prayer as a beginner. No one is an expert. There are people who have a lot of experience in prayer. There are also people who have a lot of experience helping others to pray. But even they would admit that they are just beginners.

Take for instance the great Saint Paul. He spent many hours praying. The Risen Jesus once appeared to him, and he had other mystical visions in prayer as well. Yet, in his letter to the Romans he writes, "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom 8:26 NRSV). Notice that he doesn't say "YOU don't know how to pray as YOU ought." No, he says "WE do not know how to pray as WE ought." So, if the great Saint Paul doesn't know how to pray, then none of us can say we DO.

Does that mean that it's useless to pray and that we shouldn't even try? Of course not. Jesus wants us to pray. It is crucial for growing in our relationship with God. Remember, Jesus tells us that we need to become like children. So, like children, we need to always be spending time with our Heavenly Father, telling him about our day, and learning from Him.

How do children learn how to talk? By listening and by talking. In the same way, we learn how to pray by listening to God and by talking to Him.

Many of you have small children in your families. Do you ever get frustrated or scold them because they can't speak in complete sentences or sometimes use words incorrectly? Never. Instead, don't you laugh and think how clever they are. You might even tell them that they are smart because they used words that you didn't expect them to know, even if they don't use them correctly.

The same is true in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. He is delighted to listen to us, no matter what we say. He thinks we are interesting and clever. We might even impress Him from time to time with the insights and sentiments we express. That is because He loves us and He knows us through and through.

There is also a lesson for us to learn from the fact that Jesus tells the apostles to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. He doesn't tell them when the Holy Spirit will come. He just tells them to wait and pray.

Why is that? Because Jesus didn't want the apostles to think that there was some formula they could follow that would "conjure up" the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift that He wants to shower down upon us. It is not the result of something we've done. We don't receive it because we did x, y, and z in a certain order. It is simply His free gift that He bestows on us when He believes that we are ready.

The same is true of our prayer. It isn't so much about what we do as about what God does in us. When we sit down to pray, what we are really doing is waiting on God. We can speak and be confident that He hears us. However, we cannot do anything to get Him to speak to us. He will speak to us when He thinks the time is right and will reveal Himself to us in the way that He thinks will be best for us.

At the same time, prayer is always our response to God. We don't initiate the conversation. He does. Whenever we feel drawn to prayer, it is because God is knocking on the door of our hearts. And He waits for us to open the door and let Him in.

Father Mark-Mary Ames, a Franciscan priest who leads the Rosary In A Year podcast, has a beautiful definition for prayer. He calls it, "Looking up at the One who is already looking at me." We have God's full, undivided attention always. We just need to make time to stop and look up at Him. Sometimes our whole prayer might just be sitting in silence reflecting on how amazing it is that the God of the Universe is thinking of little, old me. Or we might have so much on our mind that we find it hard to sit still. Whatever state of mind we're in, God is happy to sit with us and simply be with us.

In today's gospel we get a glimpse of the intimate prayer life between Jesus and the Father. It takes place during the Last Supper, and we see what is on His heart as His death draws near. What does He pray for? That we be "completely one". That is, He prays that all of us who believe in Him will be united. What that means is that our prayer should always lead us to love others. Prayer is not just about ourselves. If it is truly God's love that we are experiencing when we pray, then it will naturally draw us to loving service of others. That is the way to measure whether we are growing in prayer - by our increased desire to care for our neighbor.

The time between Jesus' Ascension and Pentecost was spent by Mary and the apostles waiting in anticipation of God's gift of the Holy Spirit. We are also living in an "in-between time". That is, the time between Pentecost and the end of the world. It is a time when we are going out to all the world proclaiming the good news that Jesus has conquered sin and death. But it is also a time of waiting and prayer for Jesus to come again. That is why we raise our voice in prayer, as Saint John does in today's second reading, Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!