



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



## HOMILY FOR 29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF YEAR C

### ON INTERCESSORY PRAYER

**By Fr. Ambrose Bennett**

In today's gospel, our Savior tells us to be constant in prayer, assuring us that our Father in heaven will hear our persevering prayer. And we, hearing Jesus' assurance of the efficacy of prayer, are likely to wonder why it is that we pray for many things that seems good and fitting to us, and yet we do not receive the answer for which we hope. Now St. Thomas Aquinas answered these objections to intercessory prayer many centuries ago—and they were ancient criticisms even then! St. Thomas says that there are three objections to the efficacy of petitionary prayer. Some people say that everything is determined by a natural series of causes, so there is no point in praying for particular blessings and graces. Others say that God has already determined everything, and so there is no point in asking him. And still others do affirm that petitionary prayer is useful, but they think that they have to change God's mind in order to make him benevolent.

But St. Thomas refutes all of these arguments. He says that prayer, like our other free choices and actions, is taken into account by God, through Christ, from all eternity. And we don't need to change God's mind, nor do we need to make God benevolent, for God is already supremely benevolent; and in the death and resurrection of Christ, the barriers of human finitude and human sinfulness are overcome; rather prayer is the means by which God imparts the gifts that his Providence has already willed to give us. We do not practice intercessory prayer because God needs to be informed of our needs but rather so that we ourselves may be reminded of the need to have constant recourse to the grace of God. Jesus himself tells us in Matthew 6:

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well (Mt 6.31-33).

In the eleventh chapter of St. Luke's gospel, Christ has already assured his followers of this, when he tells them that "if you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Lk 11.13).

For the efficacy of prayer depends on faith, as the human response to God's gift of the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul says,

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we know not how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



he who searches the heart of man knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8.26-27).

This, then, is the key to the efficacy of intercessory prayer: it is itself the Holy Spirit within us that inspires us to pray as we ought, in faith, and seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. That is why St. Thomas says that when we pray, we ought principally to ask to be united to God, echoing the words of Psalm 27:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after;  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD,  
and to inquire in his temple (Ps 27.4).

So we pray first that, as St. Benedict says in his rule, God may be glorified in all things: “Hallowed be Thy name.” Then we pray that we ourselves may be transformed by the Holy Spirit interceding within us: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” And only then do we bring our petitions and lay them on the altar of Christ, as instrumental to the glory of God and to our own salvation. And in this perspective, we persevere in prayer and in faith, trusting that our prayer is heard and that it is fruitful, even when we cannot know God’s timetable, or the hour when his mercy will manifest itself to us. And so we hope and we trust, and persevere in prayer.

We see a living icon of this prayer of faith in our first reading. Whenever Moses had his arms uplifted in prayer, the children of Israel had the better of the battle; but when he tired and let his arms down, Israelites started to be overwhelmed by their enemies, the Amalekites. The Catechism of the Catholic Church comments on this very passage:

From this intimacy with the faithful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, Moses drew strength and determination for his intercession. He does not pray for himself but for the people whom God made his own. Moses already intercedes for them during the battle with the Amalekites and prays to obtain healing for Miriam. But it is chiefly after their apostasy that Moses “stands in the breach” before God in order to save the people. The arguments of his prayer—for intercession is also a mysterious battle—will inspire the boldness of the great intercessors among the Jewish people and in the Church: God is love; he is therefore righteous and faithful; he cannot contradict himself; he must remember his marvelous deeds, since his glory is at stake, and he cannot forsake this people that bears his name (CCC 2577).

That is the sort of prayer that our Lord commends: if even the unjust judge at last heard the poor widow’s plea, “will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night” Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



justice is done for them speedily.” Think for a moment of Moses’ posture, his arms outstretched: it is the same posture as that of Jesus on the Cross, wholly surrendering himself into the Father’s hands.