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St. Scholastica's Priory
Manila

EDITORIAL

September, 2008

Dear Sisters,

The Gospel for the First Sunday of September ends with the reassuring paragraph:

“If on earth, two of you are united in asking for anything, it will be granted to you by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am there among them.” (Mt. 18:20)

We believe in the power of one. But this promise has even greater power. It underlines the fact that we are called by Jesus not only individually but in solidarity with one another and the bond that binds us in this discipleship is LOVE according to the 2nd reading in Romans 13. That is why it is so powerful because LOVE is stronger than death and that of many waters. And so Jesus promises that if two of us bound by love are together, God is with us and therefore anything we ask will be granted to us. This is so important to us today in our society which is infected with hopelessness, numbness, indifference, malaise, and battle-fatigue. Poverty is widespread. Corruption is rampant and pervasive. Those in power use all the means they have—which are sometimes overwhelming—to ram down our throats decisions that are not only not helpful to us but cause harm like the present MOA in Mindanao, the “executive privilege,” the impending CHA CHA, etc. etc. It is true some of us gather to express our protest and our rejection of these impositions. But maybe we are not gathering IN GOD’S NAME!

Tomorrow, Friday, August 22, many of us will gather in GOD’S NAME for a TRUTH FESTIVAL in Baywalk, Roxas Boulevard. We will listen to truth-telling accompanied by songs, drums, dances and prayers. We believe that God will be with us because we will be at least 50,000 and we will all commit ourselves to the RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF TRUTH IN OUR COUNTRY. Join us wherever you are and whenever you receive this message.

Lovingly yours,

S. Mary John Manangan OSB
Sister Mary John Manangan, OSB

S T A T I O C O N F E R E N C E

PRAYER: BONDING WITH GOD

by Sister Lucy Togle, OSB

Introduction

The well recognized multi-awarded writer Philip Yancey quotes a conversation between a Princeton University graduate student and Albert Einstein:

Student: What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?

Einstein: Find out about prayer. Somebody must find out about prayer.

This was what I tried to do – find out about prayer. And really prayed hard, for Sr. Lumen assigned me to write on PRAYER for the September CONVERSATIO. Seeing my hesitancy, she added, “Just write about your prayer experience; then include something from our Constitutions and other documents.”

I did. So here it is – a feeble attempt at sharing the little I know and my experience as a pray-er.

Praising and Thanking God Together

When I decided to enter the convent, it was not so much to know more about prayer as to really pray. “You made the right choice; it is a very solid congregation,” remarked my spiritual director when I told him I wanted to be a Missionary Benedictine Sister. He was assured I would be living a balanced life of prayer and work as religious in community.

It was at Vespers when I first entered the chapel of SSC-Manila with my groupmates as candidate. From a seemingly angelic choir of sisters flowed light, mellifluous strains of “Veni, Creator Spiritus” – so beautiful I felt being lifted heaven-high. Then in my heart I cried out, “Lord, this is where I belong.”

This is where we all belong – a community of sisters constantly singing God’s praise and thanking him who has poured out his love into our hearts. (Const., III, 1). We know that in this praying together, “we are united as Church with all people, giving voice to their praise and thanksgiving, supplication, and repentance.” (Const. III, 6). Adding to the merit of our praying together is a reminder from Benedict’s Holy Rule: “Let us be sure, however without a moment’s doubt that his presence to us is never so strong as when we are celebrating the work of God at the oratory.” (RB 19:2) Following this, we cannot but heed Benedict’s exhortation to “sing the Lord’s praises with skill and relish.” (RB 19:4)

Remembering all these adds to my joy in singing the Divine Office and Mass with the sisters, though I am not such a good singer. In small communities when we sometimes go off-key, recalling a Cistercian monk's optimistic, encouraging remark helps. He says: "I went to sing Prime. I thought the pitch high and the choir flat; and I was angry. But then that did not really matter. I was singing with the angels."

Alone with God

Not only does our Lord invite us to common prayer with our Sisters. He also expects us to spend time with him alone, and in the presence of his Father. It is true that ever since his adolescence, Jesus would take part in the prayers of his people. He would be often seen in the temple, "going about his Father's business." Yet many a time he would go off alone, leaving his disciples behind. Keep company with God alone seems to be what he is telling us.

All the Evangelists made the similar observation that "In the morning before dawn, he got up and left the house and went to a lonely place and prayed there," (Mark 1:35). Clearly seeing his Master's example, Matthew could confidently advise, "When you pray, go to your private room and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father, who is in that secret place, and the Father, who sees all that is done in secret, will reward you" (Matt. 4:5-6).

Roger Nikolas Visseaux of Münsterschwarzach shares his idea that the heart is the habitat of prayer. It is in our innermost heart that prayer can bring us to meet God. There he touches us directly and continually wherever we are – in our room, in chapel, in the garden, or in the street. Visseaux goes on to say that "deep within us is an inborn, hidden longing for God, a latent longing to encounter him." But do we allow this encounter to happen? Do we bond with the Lord as we do with a friend or loved one? Our answer may be NO sometimes. Or is it most of the time?

A Time and a Place for God

Henri Nouwen believes that we need to create space for God to act. This God-space we have to protect to prevent our lives from being filled up with so many other things – schoolwork, entertainment, trips, seminars, texting, and the like.

In his wisdom our Holy Father Pope John Paul II advises every woman religious, "to stand before the Lord at least for an hour to tell him of her love, and above all, to let herself be loved by him." A busy wife and mother of three, wanting such intimacy with God was heard to have said: "The Lord does not want a hired servant; he wants a bride." We, each one of us, the Lord's consecrated bride, should be more of a Mary than a Martha. Norm 305:1 of our Constitutions provides that "Each Sister should have at least one hour of daily lectio," which intensifies and strengthens our relationship with Christ. This is meant to, I suppose, protect this relationship. I see it as a safeguard against giving up our God – space in favor of trivial and more mundane matters.

Prayer as Gift

Left to ourselves we cannot pray. St. Teresa of Avila has this to say: “For however much I may desire and seek and strive, I play no part in obtaining even a spark of it, save when God so desires.” It is beyond our capacity to place ourselves in the right relationship with God. And yet Jesus asks us to pray without ceasing. Moved by the Spirit, Jesus himself prayed and promised us the Spirit who comes to our aid. Prayer in the Spirit is therefore a grace, which we cannot just summon by ourselves alone. We can, however, create the proper environment for the reception of this gift, like humility, patient waiting, and the advent attitude.

In prayer God sometimes gives us evidence of our relationship with him. Sometimes he does not. At times there are tangible experiences revealing to us this untouchable reality. More often there is nothing but a gap, an emptiness.

He did reveal to me once such a palpable experience. That was on my First Profession Day in Marikina. It was a joyful, grace-filled day for me and my companions. My cup was filling to the brim and running over. I was sitting at the chapel, talking with the Lord after Compline. I was thanking him for all the wonderful things that day. Then as in a flash-back, images of me as a child, a teen-ager, a teacher, and a sister came parading before my mind’s eyes. I clearly saw my happy childhood days, my satisfying years as a student, then my fulfillment as a professional, all the manifold blessings I was enjoying even till then. And in one sweeping moment, I felt the Lord warmly embracing me. It was so overpowering, I could not contain that joy. Then I broke into sobs. Not to disturb the handful of sisters still praying, I ran out of the chapel and into the corridor still sobbing, Sr. Lydia, so amazed by what she saw and heard, gently shook me.

Sr. Lydia: Lucy, what happened? Why are you crying? Would you want to talk about it?
What’s wrong?

Me: Nothing. (still sobbing). I am just so happy.

Sr. Lydia: Thank God! ‘Yon lang, pala. Akala ko napaano ka na.

I knew then that there really are tears of joy. And one can cry from happiness. And yes, God does gift us with peak experiences sometimes.

More often though, God seems so far away – so aloof and uncaring. My prayer is in the pits,” one would say, or “I am on a dry patch;” another would complain about what others consider their wilderness experience. One time or the other we might find ourselves impatient if not discouraged, getting no response from a silent God. It is a situation akin to that of a Jew narrated by Philip Yancey. A Jewish man was praying in front of Jerusalem’s “Wailing Wall.” He was rocking back and forth, his eyes closed, beating his breast, sometimes raising his hands. A curious tourist approached him:

Tourist: What do you pray for?

Jew: I pray for righteousness, I pray for my family. I pray for peace, especially in Jerusalem.

Tourist: Does it work? Is it effective?

Jew: It is like talking to a wall.

There might even be times we would chide God, or as we Filipinos would – “*make tampo*” with God like Tevye of “Fiddler on the Roof.” He was sitting desolate on the wayside, his lame horse on the road. “Lord, I can understand,” he said, “if You punish me, because I have been bad; or my wife, because she talks too much; or my daughter, because she wants to run off and marry a Gentile; but...What have You got against my horse?” With us, Sisters, it can even be... “Why me? What have you got against me?”

My experience was worse. I lost my faith in prayer. It was on a year toward the end of martial law. The election year was approaching. I kept praying for months, nay, for more than a year for God to end martial law. “Let him lose the election,” I fervently prayed. “Let him be President no longer. My people have suffered for so long. Twenty years is more than enough. Please, please deliver us, Lord.” I kept repeating the prayer, though not in the same words. I was not even asking for the ruler to be banished forever from the earth, or for evil to befall him. None of that sort, “Just let him lose, Lord and end martial law.”

Came the elections. The dictator won. My prayer was not answered and I was devastated. I questioned God no end. “Why can You not grant my request? It was not for me but for my people. Why do You want to prolong their agony? Do You love the dictator more than the millions of Filipinos? Why don’t You do something? Do you hear? Are You listening? Why are You so uncaring?” I was like the psalmist crying out to high heavens. But still – SILENCE.

I stopped praying. Never again did I talk to God. This went on for days and days. Then EDSA I came and People Power reverberated throughout the world. To my utter shame I saw the miracle on TV at my boarding house with the Italian Sisters in Via del’Arancio, Rome. Never was I more ashamed of myself before God. Feeling so small, yet convinced of God’s mercy, I asked God’s forgiveness. Never again would I doubt him, never again would I question his wisdom. I must heed Simon Tugwell’s invitation “to take a holiday, to stop being God for a while and let him be God. To let God be God means going down my executive chair of control.”

Difficulties of Prayer

Thomas Merton describes us as a gap, an emptiness that calls for fulfillment. And prayer is an expression of who we are. If this is true, then we understand why we keep praying for a lot of things, why we are sorry for what should not have been, or why we are thankful for the good that comes or happens. But sometimes we cannot adequately express who we are, what we want. “We do not know how to pray as we ought,” we are told. So the Holy Spirit is there to help us.

But even with the Holy Spirit around, why is it difficult to pray? Or why can't we even pray? Why the feeling of emptiness or distance from God? Fr. Paul Wallis lists some factors, like exhaustion, stress, sickness, bereavement, natural body cycles and the like. From experience we know all these to be true. Aside from these we have to battle temptations, hardships, busyness, boredom and so on. So what do we do? The Holy Spirit helps us, but we have to help ourselves, too. Here are some words of wisdom from:

1. Julian of Norwich (from God) – “Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does good even though you think you are doing nothing. For when you are dry, empty, weak, or sick; at such time your prayer is most pleasing to me.”
2. Meister Eckhart – Silence your body, your heart, especially your mind. “The quieter the mind, the more powerful, worthier, deeper and more perfect the prayer is.”
3. Paredes Garcia – The quality and integrity of our prayers are indicated by how we live, not by how we feel.
4. St. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians 5:16 – Do not be sad. Pray anyway. “Always be joyful. Keep on praying. No matter what happens, always be thankful.”

Conclusion

As a congregation our unity is expressed in common prayer. Together we constantly thank God and praise him in response to his love poured out for us. While we come in union as Church, the Lord also calls us to be alone with him sometimes in intimate relationship just as he was with his Father.

Such bonding, however, can take place only when we give God space in which to act. We need to give him some time, too, to love us and for us to love him in return.

Recognizing that prayer is a gift, we do not program it. We can only create the proper environment for its reception. To a pray-er God gives some tangible experiences sometimes. At other times he does not.

Most if not all of us meet problems and experience difficulties in prayer. But mystics disciples, other people close to God give us some tips, bits of their wisdom. Heeding their advice and overcoming our difficulties as individual pray-ers, we are not far from being able to carry out what Romans 15:6 wants us to do: “Then all of you can come together, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Guide Questions for Group Sharing:

1. Do you agree that as Missionary Benedictines we do have a balance of prayer and work? How do you explain this balance to people who do not know us?
2. How is prayer a gift?
3. Share with the group any of your problems or difficulties (only one or two) in prayer. How do you help yourself or overcome such?

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WOMEN LEADERS IN SCRIPTURE **by Marianne Race, C.S.J.**

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I love to dance. Whether participating or observing, a delightful aspect of a wedding reception is the dancing. Young and old, agile awkward are drawn to music, put inhibitions aside, and celebrate with their whole body. In the freedom and laughter of the dance, family and friendship bonds are strengthened. The action of linking arms together as in a circle dance assures us we are stronger together. We can count on one another for whatever lies ahead. In Eastern theology the relationship among the Trinity is described as an eternal divine round dance (*perichoresis*). The leader of the dance energizes, empowers, and unites those who join in wholeheartedly. In the biblical story, Miriam is the most renowned leader of dance (Exod. 15:20)

Miriam, Dancer Extraordinaire

In her childhood years, it was Miriam's poise and intelligence that saved Moses' life (Exod 2:1-10). The king's daughter found the basket containing a Hebrew baby floating down the river. Miriam appeared, out of nowhere it seems. She sensed that the Egyptian woman's maternal instinct was superceding all political dictates as well as ethnic, religious, and class differences. Miriam understood what was happening and boldly offered to find a nurse for the child, his own mother. The story of how Moses came to be raised among the royal household is a familiar one. That miraculous saving of his life sets the stage for the significant role Moses is to play in the story of the Hebrew people. These ten verses of Exodus also introduce an extraordinary woman.

Miriam, that spunky, clever, young risk taker who helped rescue her baby brother, later becomes part of the liberation team. We don't meet her again until the dramatic scene of escape from the Egyptian through the Red Sea is complete. The Hebrews praise God's saving power in a canticle that has become part of Christian liturgy (Exod 15:1-21). Miriam is introduced here as the prophetess. She has grown from the child who asked the right questions to an adult leader, revered and respected by her people. Miriam takes up her tambourine and leads the women in song and dance. There is more than frolic and celebration here. The fearless, free spirit Miriam knows that they are on the edge of a desert and unknown future. She captures the energy and exhilaration of their newly acquired freedom and magnifies it into a whole body experience.

The Hebrew people will need the memory of the dance to sustain them in the desert years ahead. They become a new people at this moment, ready for a new set of values. Their deepened faith and confidence in God are the foundation stones of this desert community. Miriam's strength and courage is a support to Moses and Aaron, while together they lead the chosen people through a time of trial and transformation.

Miriam's story is not without failure. She challenges Moses' leadership and is punished for it with a skin disease that excludes her from the people (Numbers 12). Yet Moses' love for her and the community's decision to wait for her before they move on are indications of their reverence and loyalty to one of their great leaders. Miriam's fourth and final appearance in this story takes place in the Wilderness of Zin (Num 20:1). Like Moses and Aaron, Miriam did not reach the Promised Land. Her leadership was needed for the time of transition. She died in the wilderness, but her song of freedom, "Sing unto the Lord," lives on in the hearts and the dance of her people.

Ruth and Naomi

A good leader has a positive vision and is able to influence others with this perspective. Assisting another to become aware of an empowering view of reality rather than a discouraging one is to give that person life. How does one look at the current situation and make choices for the future? Is our experience a burden or an opportunity? Or perhaps a better question is, can this burden become an opportunity? The story of Ruth and Naomi is a marvelous example of this quality of leadership. Encouraged by Ruth's incredible love for her, Naomi decided to choose life.

Ruth is one of the most lovable women in the Bible. Her devotion and loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, at a time of great personal loss for both of them is a very moving story. Her expression of commitment to Naomi is among the most tender scenes in Scripture: "Wherever you, I will go, wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Naomi's husband and two sons had died. The family now consisted of three widows. She was living in a land foreign to her and longed to go home to her own people. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and start a new life. One did.

Ruth, concerned that her mother-in-law was alone and without resources, accompanied her to Bethlehem. Their arrival was a surprise. Naomi was grieving because "I went away with abundance, but the Lord has brought me back destitute" (Ruth 1:21). What could be more desperate than these two women without money or a household to take them in? One is old and weary, the other a foreigner. They are widows living in poverty. They come from different generations, different families, different cultures, and different religions. Any one of these differences could provide enough tension to dissolve a relationship. Yet together they begin a complete reframing of their situation.

From Survival to a Future of Promise

Lenient is transformed into loyalty; there is no time for self-pity, only a determination to survive. Following the reapers to gather up the fragments of grain which were left behind for the poor was not too lowly a task for Ruth. But there is cleverness here, too. It is no accident that Ruth seems to be in the right place at the right time. Naomi sends Ruth to a field owned by Boaz, a distant relative who was capable of taking her into his own household. They meet. Boaz indicates a deep respect and admiration for Ruth because of the care she has shown for her

mother-in-law. Naomi hears of this positive regard and proposes a bold move. Ruth is to make herself attractive and, at the right moment, present herself to Boaz, in a way appropriate to the culture, as an honor due him. This action was equivalent to a legal call on Boaz, as a kinsman of the family, to fulfill the duty of that relationship. Boaz responds with gratitude and takes Ruth as his wife. The lovely stranger in Bethlehem becomes the wife of a wealthy land owner.

A beautiful love story? Yes, but much more than that. Ruth and Naomi believed in and created a future for themselves. Behind their sweet and gentle dispositions, both women showed courage, strength, faithfulness, loyalty, humility, selfless love, boldness, and wisdom—qualities that allowed their situation to move from despair to hope, from obscurity and poverty to influence and prosperity. It is the good stock of these ancestors and from this marriage that begins the lineage of the House of David. The book of Ruth is placed just after Judges to which it is closely related because of the time of its action, and just before Samuel for which it is an excellent introduction since it traces the ancestry of the Davidic dynasty.

Lydia

In a short passage Luke introduces another remarkable woman (Acts 16:14-15). In just two verses Paul encounters and converts Lydia and her companions. We learn that Lydia offered her home as accommodation to Paul. What is implied is that a house church was established there. Because nothing more is said of Lydia in Scripture, one might conclude that Luke's idea of women's contribution to the missionary Church is to provide housing and economic resources. He doesn't credit Lydia in this brief appearance with leadership qualities. However, a closer look and a little exegesis provide a broader picture of Lydia's role.

Paul had crossed the Aegean Sea from Troas in Asia Minor and was in new territory. It is outside the city of Philippi that Paul encounters Lydia. He and his companion, Silas, were looking for a place to pray on the Sabbath. Apparently there were no synagogues, perhaps no Jews, in Philippi. Lydia and a group of women were also outside the city at a peaceful place along a river. Paul, passionate missionary that he was, made use of this chance meeting to tell the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He probably gave witness to his own story of conversion and how he was now driven by the Spirit to carry the message of the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.

Many would say this was no chance of encounter. Who was this woman? Lydia was a business woman, a "seller of purple" indicating material used by royalty. She was from Thyatira, in Asia Minor, one of five large cities that made up the old kingdom of Lydia. All the cities were located near rivers and were connected to coastal cities by good roads. These connections made possible a valuable trade throughout the Greco-Roman world. Lydia's personal name was actually that of her native province. The common name suggests she was also allied with the successful business of Lydia. This urban area was a gateway between the East and West making it also a crossroads of ideas, culture, and business. Lydia was no doubt an educated, sophisticated woman, now conducting business in Philippi.

Builder and Sustainer of Community

Paul tells us Lydia “already revered God, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying” (Acts 16:14). Perhaps she and the other women were gathered in this peaceful place to pray. After listening to Paul, Lydia was baptized, forever distinguishing her as the first Christian convert in Europe, since Philippi is in Macedonia. Did Lydia give any thought to what this conversion would mean to her business? Her customers would have been buyers for Babylonia temple curtains, members of the Roman imperial family, or those dressing various idols. It appears she made her decision without hesitation. The Gospel became primary in her life, all else secondary. Others, who already valued her good judgment and ability to choose the right course of action, followed her example and were also baptized.

Lydia’s success in business made her a prominent figure. Other women were drawn to her. She was good at relationship building and friendship. Through trust and respect she invited people in and created a community among them. Perhaps she shared ideas and aspects of culture that were new to them. In so doing she was opening to them a whole new way of thinking about the world. Lydia was absolutely the perfect person for Paul to meet on this Sabbath day. In partnership with Paul she implanted Christianity in Europe.

Paul’s Letter to Philippi was written from prison. It is an epistle of joy, full of gratitude and praise for the community. Imagine Lydia’s community listening to Paul’s letter at one of their greetings. How proud he was of them. The role of Lydia, then as well as the Lydias of today, is to teach us to draw strength from one another, to be open to new ideas, to risk thinking new thoughts in order to become the best that we can be, and to provide the environment for community to be formed and lived. Yes, Paul met a very extraordinary woman that day by the river.

Models of Leadership

A sister, a daughter, a friend, none of these is an extraordinary position. There are no queens, rulers, great warriors, or judges in this mix of women. Yet each one participated significantly in the journey of our faith. Leadership may emerge in grandiose fashion; indeed, charismatic leaders are needed at times. Often true leadership comes in quieter ways through persons of courage and conviction, insight and integrity, compassion and good communication. When we meet people with these qualities, they are likely to have a profound influence on the course of our lives. Miriam, who helped her people face the chaos and create a new meta-narrative; Ruth and Naomi, whose positive vision produced a future full of promise; and Lydia, builder and sustainer of community, are true models of leadership in the biblical story.

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