

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Perseverance in our Prayer Life”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, have you ever had a moment in life when you simply asked God, “Lord, give me a straight answer”? Whether it is puzzling over an important life decision that must be made, or how we are going to approach a problem at work, or how to best mend a relationship, or how to conquer a vice, the list goes on, we can find ourselves asking Jesus, “Please give me a clear answer”. I don’t know about you, but what happens with me when I ask Jesus for clarity, say, during a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament, I feel like Jesus is really and truly present to me. I feel him. I see him in the Host. He sees me back. I feel him smiling, he loves it that I am there, but he has very, very tight lips. It is like he knows the answer but won’t give it to me. As an aside, if you are having trouble feeling God at all when you pray, I recommend start scheduling an hour of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament somewhere. If you spend enough time before the Host, Jesus will start looking back. It’s a wonderful experience when that happens. However, even for those of us who have no problem feeling God in our lives, I think most of us have experienced at times God holding back on us with the answers we want.

That frustrating experience can stand in contrast with what Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading, that if we ask, we will receive, if we seek, we will find, and if we knock a door will open. However, here is the small print. Notice that Jesus does not say that we will always receive an answer right away. He just says we will receive. What we receive is up to him. The answer he will give us is the one he knows we need most. Remember, he is God. We are not. Jesus also doesn’t guarantee what we will find. Again, what we will find is up to him. Jesus also tells us, a door will open, but he doesn’t always tell us where the door is, or if it is even the door we are pounding on. The door that opens is up to him, along with when and where. In fact, just this past Thursday, the Gospel for the day had Jesus telling his disciples that he likes speaking in parables instead of straight answers. We don’t like that. When we have a question, we want an immediate response. “Hey Siri! Give me an answer!” How many people’s phones just buzzed in your pockets? Creepy, isn’t it?

Jesus doesn’t operate that way. He is not creepy. But, why does he make us work? I think the reason for this is because God created us in his image and likeness, to know and to love him. Love to be love must be free. This means the big decisions must be ours. This isn’t to say that God doesn’t at times hit us over the head with a 2 X 4. That has also happened to me on more than one occasion. Most of the time though, at least in my experience, the Lord likes to smile back at me, tight lipped, waiting for me to work out the puzzle. However, if you give prayer enough time, I have found that Jesus cannot resist offering a clue. He can’t resist. He really loves us, you see, and he loves us more than we love ourselves. I believe that is the work of the Holy Spirit inside of us during a holy hour. An inspiration pops up in the soul and a breadcrumb is placed on the path. Usually, it is not the complete answer, usually far from it, but at least it is a step in the right direction. That is why he encourages us in the Gospel reading this Sunday to

persevere. He is telling us we need to work harder at asking, seeking, and knocking, because what good is an answer if we haven't spent enough time to truly understand the question? In my experience quick answers can also be inadequate or even dangerous, especially if we ask the wrong people. "Alexa, what should I do with my life?" Don't trust her!

As an aside, I don't mind telling you that I really worry about where the world is going with AI and how dependent we are becoming on computers. For example, how many of us ask it for directions to places we have been to a hundred times? Why do we do that? It's weird! We are starting to let them write for us, even make decisions for us, robbing us of the faculty to think for ourselves. Bottom line, there is a big, big difference between absorbing information and obtaining wisdom. I for one think that this is going to be a struggle for humanity going forward. We are going to be smarter than we ever have been, and at the same time, dumber than ever. Just wait.

This is why Jesus avoids giving us quick answers or GPS coordinates when we are asking, seeking and knocking. He wants us to use the gifts of reasoning and discernment given to us so that we can really delve deeper into the question and whatever it is that is going on in our lives right now. How do we begin? The Lord's Prayer is a very good place to start, especially that annoying little bit about, "Thy will be done", not my will. Sometimes "no" is an answer too, sometimes we could be asking the wrong questions, and sometimes we could be knocking on the wrong door altogether. And so, that is why spending quality time in prayer each day, and persevering with it, is so spiritually important. I recommend calendaring a holy hour in the morning, or as much time as you can, because asking, seeking, and knocking takes effort, but the treasure we can get can sometimes be amazing. Trust me. There is far more value in sitting at the feet of the Lord seeking wisdom than all the information in the world.