

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
19 July 2020

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19
Psalm 86
Romans 8:26-27
(see Matthew 11:25) Matthew 13:24-43

The Spirit Helps Us Pray & Sacred Story

It was fourteen years ago this month that I first started to pray. Well, I guess I don't mean that *literally* or *absolutely*. I mean, I was baptized 44 years ago (on July 18th—yesterday, actually). So, for basically my whole life I've been a Catholic. I've been going to church, praying at Mass, before meals, before going to bed, etc.

Like many of us, there are prayers I've been praying longer than I can remember. One is the *Lord's Prayer*. I have a memory of being in Kindergarten CCD and cutting out the words of the *Our Father* and pasting them to construction paper. Another is the classic children's bedtime prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep..."¹ Do any of you remember that one?

I've been praying for at least forty years. So, what do I mean when I say: "It was fourteen years ago this month I first started to pray."? Well, here's a quick version of my "vocation story" to help explain what I mean...

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As I just said, I grew up Catholic, but it never occurred to me to think about being a priest. I loved math and I was good at it. So, I was planning on being an engineer someday. (In fact, one of our parishioners here today, Mr. Cash, was a teacher at my junior high school. He probably doesn't remember this, but I remember him encouraging me a few times, "You should be an engineer. You'll get a good job." Then he followed up by kidding with me, "And when you get a good job you can hire me!")

In college, I met a priest on a mission trip who said to me, “You should think about being a priest! When we get back to campus, come to my office and talk to me about it.” But, I didn’t understand why he said that to me, because I was studying to be a civil engineer. And, honestly, I didn’t even know how one became a priest. So, when we got back to campus, I never went to meet with him at his office.

Just a couple years later, I became an engineer, and for several years I worked in Seattle designing buildings. I enjoyed my work a lot! It was an honor to work with such great people and to be a part of constructing buildings that have had a positive impact on our community and are still standing today. It was very holy work and a vocation—a calling from God—in itself.

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But, in those years working as an engineer, I still wasn’t sure what I was supposed to “do” with my life, if you know what I mean. *Was I going to keep on working as an engineer forever? Would I one day find someone to marry? Would I have kids?* Not uncommon for someone to have questions like that.

Also, during that time, I was getting more and more involved at my church. I joined the young adult choir. I was on the parish facilities committee. I started serving at Mass. I even made my “second” Confession (about twenty years *after* my First Confession as a child).

Another thing is, I started making *friends* at church—something I had never really done before. Up to then, I had just gone to church on Sundays and that was it. My work, my school, my sports, my social life, my friends—all other parts of my life was separate from my church life.

As I was getting more involved at church, people started asking me more and more, “Have you ever thought about being a priest?” But, like I said before, I really didn’t know how one became a priest. So, how was I going to think about *being* a priest?

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The point of my homily today isn’t about trying to get anyone to think about being a priest, a deacon, or a religious brother or sister. Though, if you *are* thinking about, please get in touch with me. I’d be happy to help you discern or connect you with resources to help you in your discernment!

The point of my homily, rather, is this: fourteen years ago this month I decided that I needed help discerning an important question: *Have you ever thought about being a priest?* That was a *big* question. And I realized that I couldn’t do it by myself. So, I made an appointment with a priest to talk about it.

Early in our meeting, Father asked me a simple question: “What do you do for prayer?” And, I said, “Well...I go to church every Sunday and Daily Mass a lot.” And he said, “Great! What else do you do?” And I said, “Well, it never occurred to me to do more than that.”

Then Father explained that, he’d be happy to help guide me in my discernment, but in order to answer the question about what I should *do* with my life—I would have to start praying to God to find the answer.

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So, we started small. Father asked me to simply pray every day for five minutes when I first woke up. And so I did it. I would wake up and kneel in my room in front of a holy image and pray, “God, what do You want me to do with my life? Do you want me to get married or be a priest?” And then I would just meditate for a few minutes on that question, listening for an

answer. Well, honestly, instead of listening, at first I was praying, “Please say You want me to get married... Please say You want me to get married...”

About two weeks later, I was praying in the morning, just like I had been: *God, what do You want me to do with my life?* And then something surprising happened. I heard this thought come from inside me: *Wouldn't it be awesome to be a priest?!* Then I thought, “Whoa! What just happened? Where did that come from?”

Where did that come from? The Holy Spirit! What was happening? The Holy Spirit was helping me pray!² As Saint Paul described in today's Second Reading from his Letter to the Romans, the Holy Spirit was starting to put words to the “inexpressible groanings” deep in my heart.³ It was the first little turn of my heart toward being open to God's calling in my life.

Now, it took eleven more years of prayer, discernment, and struggle before I was ordained a priest (our PAA, Rich Shively, who was previously my Seminarian Vocations Director, is familiar with some of that journey). But, fourteen years ago is one of the moments when I can say that it first started to happen—when I first started to *really* pray with the Holy Spirit's help.

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Now, that doesn't mean that my life was completely void of prayer and lacking the help of the Holy Spirit for the first thirty years of my life. Not at all! Certainly, the Holy Spirit was helping me recognize my gifts and helping me use them in beautiful ways, like being an engineer, helping out at church, being a son, brother, and friend. But, all those years, I wasn't taking full advantage of what God offers to all of us with the gift of His Holy Spirit.

So, this is what I want to talk about with you today. I want to ask you that same question my first spiritual director asked me fourteen years ago: *What do you do for prayer?*

What do you do and where do you go when you're trying to answer the big questions of life? These are the types of questions that we might be asking at any age. The youngest members of our community might be wondering about what profession to prepare for or what skills to develop. Eventually, we start to think about where to go to school or where to live when we move out of home. Then, maybe we start thinking about getting married (or, becoming a priest or religious). Eventually, what directions to go in a career, perhaps questions about raising children. Health concerns, retirement. There are many kinds of important questions that we face throughout our lives.

And, when we're looking for answers to these important questions, we have to also ask ourselves another important question, "What am I doing for prayer?" I'm reminded of a saying that applies here and in many situations: "Have you prayed about it as much as you've talked about it?" Have you heard that one before?

We can be good at talking about important things with *other people*, and thinking about them with our *heads*. But, do we *also* talk about them with *God*? Do we contemplate them—not just in our heads but, rather, in our *hearts*?⁴

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In the Gospel a couple of weeks ago, Jesus encouraged us to be what, do you remember? To be "little ones", to be *childlike* if we want to learn God's ways.⁵ As I preached about that Sunday, the original Greek word in the Gospel for *little ones* or *childlike* is *nepios*, ones who do not *speak*.⁶ Ones who spend time *listening* to God speaking to us. *Listening* for the Spirit teaching us how to pray. *Listening* for the Spirit groaning within us, answering the deepest questions we have about our lives.

That can only happen when we set aside consistent time for listening to God and allowing the Holy Spirit to help us pray. Allowing the Holy Spirit to groan within us. My hope for each of us is to have an answer ready to that question my spiritual director asked me: *What do you do for prayer?*

Even if our answer is, “I pray every morning for five minutes.” The Holy Spirit can work with that! The Holy Spirit can do *a lot* with five minutes every day! But, as I said a couple weeks ago: If you’re working on developing your prayer life (I’d say we all are), then *regularity* is more important than *quantity*. *Quantity* is important, but *regularity*—developing and strengthening the habit—is *critical*.

Start off with just five minutes a day. Then, let it grow to ten minutes, twenty minutes, or even more. Having that regular time for prayer is how we get better and better at allowing the Holy Spirit to help us and to groan within us.

And, I’ll repeat the suggestion and the offer I made a couple weeks ago. If any of you are looking for help with your prayer life, please talk to family and friends—ask them how they pray. Or, please contact me. I’d be happy to help you with it—that’s what I’m here for!

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Finally, I want to tell you about an upcoming opportunity that will be offered here at Mary, Queen of Peace beginning in September. This opportunity relates to some of the things I spoke about in my mini-vocation story. Namely, the importance of friendships and community to help one grow in discipleship and regularity of prayer. As well as the amazing things that the Holy Spirit can do in us, when we commit to just a few minutes of day in prayer.

There’s a ministry called Sacred Story Institute that many of you might already be familiar with.⁷ Fr. Bill Watson, a Jesuit priest from Seattle, started this institute about ten years

ago. About six years ago, you might remember that he came here to Mary, Queen of Peace and preached about Sacred Story.

This was before my time here at MQP, but I'm told that his preaching was very well received and that we sold out of his books after the Masses. Mary, Queen of Peace was one of the first parishes to offer Sacred Story and, years later, we still have a dedicated group of parishioners who meet twice a month and support one another in the spiritual exercises.

What is Sacred Story? Well, it's based on what are called Ignatian Spiritual Principals—developed by the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola. One of the foundational principals of this spirituality is the practice of setting aside fifteen minutes each day to pray and examine one's conscience. With only fifteen minutes a day, the Holy Spirit can help you encounter Jesus Christ! (*That didn't sound too much like an infomercial, did it?!*)

This has been proven to be true over the centuries: In just fifteen minutes a day, the Holy Spirit can help us “encounter [Jesus] Christ, the Divine Physician, who heals us in body, mind and spirit, transforming our lives into a Sacred Story!”⁸

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Fr. Watson has invited Mary, Queen of Peace to once again be a part of a new initiative of the Sacred Story Institute, which is called Sacred Story Community.⁹ Sacred Story Community is made up of small groups of 10-15 people each, and the primary commitments are:

- Purchasing and working through the Sacred Story books and materials appropriate for one's particular group¹⁰
- Practicing fifteen minutes of prayer each day
- Meeting with one's group for one hour each week (these will most likely be online meetings for the time being)

We will have a group for men and a group for women, and depending on who expresses interest, we could potentially have additional men's and women's groups for young adults, as

well as groups in both English and Spanish. Because this is still considered a testing out of the new program, there is a limit to the number of groups we can have this fall.

When someone completes the Sacred Story Community candidate phase, he or she is initiated as a Sacred Story Community member. Full members are then equipped to not only continue meeting with their Community and supporting one another in prayer and discipleship. But, also, they are further equipped to evangelize and help bring others to greater faith, and support new candidates in prayer and discipleship.

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Joining Sacred Story is a big commitment for the long-term, but it might be just the right time for you to make it such a commitment. Perhaps you are already part of a strong faith-sharing group. Or, perhaps you're not being called to make this commitment right now.

But, if the idea of developing regularity in your discipleship, being supported by spiritual friendships, and allowing the Holy Spirit to help you pray resonates with you, please get in touch with us.

The deadline to express interest is before August 15th, and the program will begin the week of September 15th. Again, please get in touch with us soon if you're interested, as we have a limited number of spaces in the program.

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Whether or not you're feeling called to apply for Sacred Story Community at this time, we're all being called to answer that question: *What do you do for prayer?*

We're all being called to set aside at least a few minutes each and every day. To allow the Holy Spirit to help us pray, and to put words to the deepest longings in our hearts.

¹ Printed in *The New England Primer* (1750):
Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my Soul to keep[;]
 If I should die before I 'wake,
 I pray the Lord my Soul to take.

² Romans 8:26: “In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought...”

Alternative translation (RSV): “Likewise the Spirit *helps* us...”

Greek word (Strong's 4878) = συναντιλαμβάνομαι (*synantilambanomai*)

Strong's Definition: “to take hold of opposite together, i.e. co-operate (assist):—help.”

The word is used one other time in the New Testament, in Luke 10:40:

“Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister [Mary] has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.’”

³ Romans 8:26

⁴ See Romans 8:27: “And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will.”

Also see Luke 2:19: “And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”

⁵ Gospel from Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A, as well as Gospel Proclamation for today's Mass: Matthew 11:25

⁶ Greek word (Strong's 3516) = νήπιος (*nēpios*)

Strong's definition: from an obsolete particle νή- *nē-* (implying negation) and not speaking, i.e. an infant (minor).

⁷ Sacred Story Institute: sacredstory.net

⁸ Sacred Story Institute, “About Us” at sacredstory.net/about

⁹ Sacred Story Community: sacredstory.net/ssc

¹⁰ sacredstory.net/books