

30th Sunday Ordinary Time Year "C"
October 26-27, 2019

Going home justified.

Readings: Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

About 160 years ago in the small village of Ars, northwest of Lyon France, St. John Vianney was called home by God. His ministry in a tiny village has had worldwide effects. One day Vianney noticed an elderly man sitting motionless before the Blessed Sacrament for much of the day, being too old and arthritic to do much else. The holy priest asked him, "What do you say to the good God?" The old man responded hesitantly, as though he could not understand or explain. "Say...I say nothing. He looks at me and I look at Him!"

Even a man as saintly as John Vianney must have been taken back a bit by the old man, for the years of prayer had been rewarded with a simple, yet profound insight about the nature of the spiritual life. The man had attained the prayer of contemplation, when all else is lost before the face of God, and the person is absorbed by God's love.

"The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens." These words are from the Book of Sirach, written 200 years before Christ. The author also tells us that the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds and does not rest until it reaches its goal. Ben Sira was a wise family man who taught, read widely, and enjoyed a sterling reputation. People trusted his advice, and he offered it freely. Much of the wisdom was communicated by his grandson, to whom was entrusted the translation of the book in its present form.

The clouds about which Sirach wrote were more than atmospheric clouds; it referred to the attendants at God's throne. The Book of Lamentations, several centuries older than Sirach, spoke of a veiled God to whom the people reached out towards heaven. "You wrapped yourself in a cloud which prayer could not pierce." Psalm 104 speaks of the God of creation who makes the clouds His chariot, traveling on the wings of the wind.

At the very least, God dwells far above the visible clouds. So, the idea of a hidden God was very well-known. God can often seem hidden and veiled. In St. Thomas Aquinas' most famous hymn, "*Adoro te devote*," we sing "Devotedly I adore you, hidden God," referencing the veiled presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

While many in Old Testament times attributed the hiddenness to an angry God, many people today feel the same way, but without attributing anger towards God. They simply desire to feel His presence more in their lives. But how? Certainly, many valuable printed resources can assist with prayer. But they are not a substitute. Prayer itself can be a battle. The Catechism even has a section entitled "The Battle of Prayer." "Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort."¹

Still, many become *discouraged* because they forget that prayer comes from the Holy Spirit and not only due to their own effort. If you think that you can earn spiritual consolation by your persistent efforts at prayer, you will be very disappointed. Our distractions and spiritual dryness do not mean that our prayers are useless.

St. John Henry Newman, once remarked, "Before the flame of religion in the heart is purified and strengthened by long practice and experience, it will flare about and flicker, and at times even seem to go out."² These are precisely the times when we mustn't give up. Please know that Jesus will never stop interceding on our behalf with the Father.

The tax collector understood how this works much better than did the self-righteous Pharisee in today's Gospel. He prayed in humility, never for a moment trusting in his own righteousness, as if it was something about which he could boast.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 2725

² John Henry Newman, "Profession Without Hypocrisy," *Plain and Parochial Sermons*, (1834) Sermon #11.

One day, as a young priest, I was attending a priest meeting at St. Olaf Church in downtown Minneapolis. Having arrived early, I thought I would take some time in prayer in Church. I had the whole church to myself! Soon thereafter, a man hobbles in, making lots of noise with his cane, shabbily dressed, and heading right for the front row.

I watched as he walked, wondering what he would do next...feebly reached into his overcoat.... "He is going to take a swig of alcohol right in Church," I thought, as I looked around to see if security was present.

Instead, he simply reached down to reveal a tattered old prayer book, held together by rubber bands, lest all the pages fall out. He opened it ever so carefully and began to pray.

As I sat there in disbelief, there was little doubt in my mind who left the Church justified that day and who would not.