

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time Year "C" *Piercing the Clouds.*  
Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14  
October 22-23, 2016

"The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds." Ever since a sixth grade science project, I have been fascinated by clouds: cumulus, stratus, cirrus, cumulo-nimbus to name but a few. I was certain that I wanted to be a meteorologist. The thought of flying into the clouds and suddenly grasping them was always in the back of my mind. When I did fly, and we passed through them, those that had looked thick and fluffy appeared much less so. What happened to the shape of the cloud?

"The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal." This passage from the Book of Sirach was written 200 years before Christ. The author also tells us that the one who serves God willingly will be heard. Sirach, a wise family man, did not have the benefit of flying through the clouds at 10,000 feet. He could only gaze from below. It is difficult to pierce the clouds, because a sharp delineated figure suddenly becomes amorphous.

In meteorology, clouds present significant challenges. Even with the advent of satellite imagery, still many satellites were unable to pierce the clouds. The latest technology today utilizes **radio signals** that can indeed **penetrate clouds**, portraying multiple layers of the atmosphere. But even 2200 years after Sirach, the clouds both fascinate and confound us human beings.

But the clouds about which Sirach wrote were much more than atmospheric clouds; the clouds referred to the attendants at God's throne. The Book of Lamentations, several centuries before 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," lamented the writer.

The idea of a hidden God was very well known, and it is an aspect of our relationship that challenges us to this day. God can often seem hidden, veiled. Psalm 104 speaks beautifully of the God of creation who makes the clouds His chariot, traveling on the wings of the wind.

While many in Old Testament times attributed this “hiddenness” to an angry God, many people today feel the same way without but without any anger towards God. They just want to feel His presence more in their lives. How can we do that?

Certainly we could read books, for many valuable 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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 may be very disappointed. So what good does it do to pray? We become distracted, we experience spiritual dryness and seeming disappointment.

Does any of this mean that our prayers do not count, that they do not pierce the clouds? No. Christian prayer is cooperation with God’s providence, his plan of love for mankind.<sup>2</sup> He prays in us and with us; God is present in our very act of praying, and we mustn’t forget this. More than all else, we receive the Holy Spirit, dwelling in us by grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. # 2725

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., paragraph # 2738

Blessed John Henry Newman, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century cleric and prolific writer of more than 40 books 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.”<sup>3</sup>

These are precisely the times when we mustn’t give up. 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. Humility is the key.

Consider this simple reflection found in a medieval spiritual book:

*Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility. It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.*<sup>4</sup>

If we continue to seek humility, God will both grant us the grace of perseverance and assure us that our prayers will indeed pierce the clouds, and the gates of heaven.

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<sup>3</sup> Bl. John Henry Newman, “Profession without Hypocrisy,” found in *Plain and Parochial Sermons*, Sermon #11, page 94.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in the *Manipulus Florum* (1306 A.D.) *Humilitas homines sanctis angelis similes facit, et superbia ex angelis demones facit.*” Anonymous (Augustine?)