

August 18, 2002

Sunday After the Dormition of Our Lady

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Of all the sundry intercessions of the saints, we doubt that any are so dear to the Almighty as the prayers of parents for their children. Sired by faith, conceived in the profound instincts of the heart, the petitions of fathers and mothers for their sons and daughters appear in a special way to gladden that parental impulse radical to God's own being. There seem to be several reasons for this.

First, when we pray for our offspring, we appeal, in a sense, to those sentiments that lie deepest in the Deity. And should it happen, as often it does, that our parental prayers are of the anxious sort, weighed down by fret and freighted with worry, our heavenly Father recognizes in them a reflection of the solicitude He feels for all His children, who frequently wander and are always at risk. When, then, with worried Job we rise early in the morning and offer the daily oblation according to the number of our progeny, in order to "sanctify them," concerned as we are lest any of them sin in their heart (Job 1:5), this offering is surely received on high by God's most gracious and paternal favor.

A second reason why these pleadings for our offspring are so pleasing to God is that they tend to be particularly humble and self-effacing. When we implore the divine mercy for our children, the mind offers no asylum to haughty thoughts or an arrogant temper. If a child suffers, if a child is in danger, if a child is threatened or lost in any of the myriad ways that children can be threatened or lost, we rather promptly learn humility. Indeed, we become utterly shameless in our begging. Like the Shunammite we fling ourselves to the earth and cling to the feet of the prophet (2 Kings 4:27). With the nobleman of Capernaum we cry to the Lord, "Sir, come down before my child dies!" (John 4:49) Maybe more than any other form of petition, then, the intercessions we offer for our offspring take on the quality of abject pleading, accompanied by profound sentiments of self-abasement.

A third reason for the special quality of prayer for our children comes from the demand that such prayer makes on the resources of our belief. A man who beholds his son convulsing, helpless on the ground is brought up short by the weakness of his own faith. "O faithless generation," he is told, "How long

shall I bear with you?" Even then, nonetheless, he finds somewhere down in his soul the wherewithal to cry back, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:14-24). And how does a believing father act when his daughter lies at death's door? How is faith expressed? We may take our example from Jairus who brought that very problem to Jesus: "And when he saw Him, he fell at His feet and begged him earnestly, saying, 'My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live'" (5:22-23).

A fourth reason why such prayer is so dear to God is that, like the love that inspires it, this prayer takes on the quality of self-sacrifice. Even when we do not explicitly say so, the Lord senses that we would willingly suffer in place of our young ones - would hand ourselves over, as it were, on their behalf. Our sentiments in such times are those of David, who would have died in place of Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33). The impulse of such prayer touches the mystery of the Cross, where the Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep.

All the qualities of this prayer may be discerned in the intercession that the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman made for her afflicted daughter. It was, first of all, a prayer of faith. Jesus remarked, indeed, on the greatness of her faith (Matthew 15:28). It was also a prayer of the most profound humility, in which she came to Jesus "and fell at His feet" (Mark 7:25). And the sacrificial nature of her prayer is readily perceived in the response this Gentile woman gave to Jesus' assertion that "it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Far from taking personal offense at this deliberate rebuff, the woman gracefully turned the last shred of her pride into a burnt offering for her suffering daughter: "Yes, Lord, but even the puppies under the table eat from the children's crumbs." Hers was the prayer of faith and humility, because it was the prayer of parental love. It was also the prayer of self-sacrifice for the sake of love, to the Father who knows and honors such love.

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