

October 5, 2008
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the subjects important for a Christian to learn, prayer is among the most difficult to teach.

There are several reasons for this difficulty, I suppose, but perhaps the most serious is the problem of how to "model" prayer. Prayer is the one subject about which a Christian teacher cannot plainly and unequivocally say to the pupils, "Watch, and do like me."

Even when the disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray," He responded by giving them a simple formula to recite (Luke 11:2-4). He did not tell them, "Well, later on this evening, when I go out into the desert to spend the night in prayer, why don't you tag along and see how it's done."

Because prayer is so deeply personal, the most prayerful people in the Bible seem downright reluctant to discuss it. The Apostle Paul, for instance, who exhorts us four times to pray always (Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17), gives us precious little idea how to go about it.

Moreover, Paul rarely speaks directly of his own prayer. He permits the veil to be lifted slightly on occasion, but normally only when he has some other point to make (for example, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Perhaps we best discern something of Paul's life of prayer from the many times that he cites the Book of Psalms.

Paul's reluctance to speak of his intimate prayer is consistent with the teaching of Jesus, who maintained such prayer should be concealed behind a closed door (Matthew 6:6). Thus, if we find Paul, or James, or John a bit circumspect of this topic, surely it is because they too were familiar with the temptation to make a display of their prayer. Jesus had solemnly warned of this danger (6:5).

Consequently, when Holy Scripture holds up "models" for our imitation in prayer, these are fictional characters, such as the persistent widow and the publican in the temple (Luke 18:1-14).

I render these reflections only in order to indicate how sensitive and ambiguous a thing it is to "model" prayer for others. Not for a minute do I question the need for personal models in the life of prayer. Like all other aspects of the life in Christ, it is imperative to learn from example. Normally, we must have models.

In the case of prayer, nonetheless, those serve best as our models who do not think of themselves as models. We are obliged to ferret them out, as it were, and force them---unwittingly---to disclose their secrets.

Such a one was Samuel's mother, Hannah, whom many generations of Christians have taken as their model in the ways of prayer. According to Caesarius of Arles, for

example, "our prayer must be such as we read of holy Hannah, the mother of Samuel," and Gregory the Dialoguist inquired, "If that woman so wept who desired a son, how much should the soul weep who desires God?"

Both Chrysostom and Bede compared Hannah's prayer at Shiloh to that of the publican in the temple. Rupert of Deutz, writing of Hannah's perseverance in prayer, likened her to Mary of Bethany sitting at the feet of Christ. Haymo of Halberstadt spoke of her freedom from distraction in prayer. Going further, Paschasius Radbertus compared the prayer of Hannah to that of Jesus in the garden of agony.

Hannah's patient endurance of the ridicule of Pennina caused several writers---including Chrysostom, Rhabanus Maurus, and Peter of Celles---to liken her to Job.

Hannah's prayer, said Origen, was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Gregory the Dialoguist and others compared her to the Apostles on the morning of Pentecost---in both cases their ecstasy in the Holy Spirit was mistaken for drunkenness!

Hannah prayed silently, wrote Clement of Alexandria, but God could read the thoughts of her heart. Didymus the Blind spoke of her "continuous meditation."

Numerous writers drew attention to the similarities of Hannah's canticle to that of the Mother of the Lord.

In the five sermons that he devoted to her, St. John Chrysostom repeatedly held up Hannah as the model of true philosophy---indeed, "the mother of philosophy"---and spoke of the patience and perseverance of her prayer. This woman, he proclaimed, is "our teacher in the ways of God."

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php