

## ATONEMENT?!

How's your praying? If I were to ask all of you that question do you think there would be many who would respond "Great! Right where it should be?" Do you think it more likely that others are pretty much like yourself when it comes to prayer? Meaning? "I pray some. I know I should pray more. I realize that I need to pray better. My prayer isn't truly consistent."

When we gather here we gather to give the worship of our hearts to God and to pray, not just individually and personally but as a community. We join our own prayer to the prayers of those around us, those with whom we gather. You also pray in your homes. You pray with your children at night before they go to bed. You pray grace before meals. You also pray your own private prayers in a place of quiet or solitude somewhere in your homes. Have you ever listened to another person pray? Really listened? Have you ever overheard a person who was praying out loud but didn't think there was anyone else there? Have you ever read the prayer journal of another person?

Back in 1971, in my Second Year of Theological Studies some classmates and friends of mine decided to meet together to pray together on a weekly basis. We prayed in community as seminarians but our own personal prayer was our own personal prayer. Our communal praying was all organized and programmed. There was no place for personal or spontaneous prayer. Our Prayer Group was started to remedy that shortfall. I remember the first time we gathered in a room and we were all sitting around and someone led us in the process of praying together. Things were pretty quiet to begin with. Then one of the guys opened up and started to pray out loud what was going on in his own heart. I remember being blown away. Like his prayer was real. And he was putting it right out there for everyone else to hear. I was really impressed but also intimidated. Immediately I thought, "My prayer isn't as good as his prayer."

I also felt very self-conscious as if I was more interested in what the others present would think of my prayer than I was actually focusing on the Lord Jesus and talking to him from my heart—but out loud. I thought my prayer effort was the worst. But afterwards a guy came up to me and said that he really identified with my prayer and was glad I shared it with the group. That was the beginning of our Prayer Group which still meets—monthly now, fifty years later—to share our faith and to pray together. I am always moved and touched when I hear another person pray aloud but allows me to listen in on this most intimate of conversations.

We have such a moment in today's Gospel. Jesus is with his apostles at the Last Supper on the night before he is to die. He knows this but they do not grasp it yet. I believe they all felt a sense of foreboding though. So Jesus has taken them through his last meal and he has consecrated the bread and wine and them. But then he does something that they had all witnessed before. He prayed. Remember they would see him praying quietly and they just sensed how good it was and how right it was and they asked him to teach them to pray. And so the Our Father was born out of an experience of prayer and a desire to learn how to pray.

But here at the Last Supper Jesus opens his heart to his Father—and to them. By praying out loud. What does he pray? "Holy Father, keep them in your name. Holy Father, keep them from

the evil one. Holy Father consecrate them in the truth. Holy Father, may they be one as you Father are in me and I am in you. May they abide in our love.” Jesus is the most unique person who ever lived and his legacy is unlike the legacy of any person who has ever lived.

His uniqueness is that he combines God and man in a single person. Two natures. One person. One mind. One heart. One will. In his person Jesus of Nazareth reunites the God who was sinned against by rebellious humans and the ancestors of those same rebellious and sinful people. In Jesus, God and man are one—again. God and sinners—reconciled, as the Christmas Carol sings. And Jesus prays to the Father with whom he is one. He prays that same blessing of unity and oneness upon us as sinful human beings. Why? Because we are estranged, broken, wounded, isolated, in the grips of various compulsions and addictions. He has come to set us free, to liberate us from the grip of the enemy and to restore us to our rightful place as children of the loving God and Father. To invite us to join with them in the very kingdom of God—forever.

Jesus is reparation for the sins we have committed.

Jesus is the One who repairs the breach between God and man.

Jesus restores the close relationship sundered by sin.

Jesus heals the estrangement between us and God.

Jesus reunites us and God despite our sin.

Jesus makes us one again with God.

Jesus accomplishes atonement—paying the ransom, rescuing us, bringing us home again.

Atonement. And that is precisely what He prays for at the end. That they may be one Father in you, that they may be one in us. My friends, we cannot accomplish this oneness in and of our own efforts. It must originate in God. The initiative is God’s initiative. It must be done unto us. Isn’t that precisely what Mary responded to the angel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation. “Let it be done in me as you say?” My friends, our task is not to do this on our own. Our task is to pray for the grace to let Jesus and his Spirit into our lives and give permission and entrée so that the Lord may accomplish in us what we cannot accomplish in ourselves or for ourselves but which we so deeply desire. Oneness with God. Atonement with God. Let us pray for this grace as Mary did. Mother Mary let it be.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.