

## The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Wisdom 12:13-16   |
| <i>Response</i>           | For thou, O Lord, art good and forgiving  |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16   |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | Romans 8:26-27  |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | At that time Jesus declared, “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Matthew 13:24-43  |

The sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our study of Paul’s classic letter to the Romans, his magisterial exposition of the Good News of salvation in Christ. And on the sixteenth Sunday, we get a little further into Romans 8. The reading for today is very short. It’s only a couple of verses from Romans 8, but it’s very rich. And it’s about the role of the Holy Spirit in the prayer and in the interior life of a Christian. So let’s see what Paul has to say about what theologians refer to as his pneumatology.

So we talk a lot about christology, which would be the theology of Christ—Paul’s understanding of the person and work of Christ. We spend a little less time, or not as frequently do we talk about Paul’s pneumatology, his theology of the Holy Spirit. So this is a very important text for Paul’s understanding of the Holy Spirit and the role of the Spirit in the life of a Christian. So in Romans 8:26-27, the second reading for today is as follows. Paul writes:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of

the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.<sup>1</sup>

That's the end of the reading for today. Okay, so what's going on in this particular text? Well, if you recall in the last passage we looked at from Romans, which is Romans chapter 8:18-25, Paul was talking about the hope of the new creation—the coming of the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of creation to its state of original holiness and rectitude, where there will be no more crying or pain or death anymore, but all things would be made new in Christ...this idea of a new creation.

And it's in that context that Paul is talking about the fact that we were saved in hope. In other words, we can't exactly see the new creation yet. If you look around you, it looks like everything is pretty much still fallen—in other words, that everything is continuing as it has been since the beginning of time. As Paul says:

...in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.

So there's this unseen element to the future hope of the resurrection of the dead and the new creation. It requires both faith—the belief in things that are unseen—as well as hope, which is the desire to possess something you don't yet have, you don't yet possess. And it's in that context that Paul says:

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought...

Alright, so first point we want to make here is...what does Paul mean by the Spirit? As I mentioned earlier, scholars will refer to Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit as pneumatology. So it comes from the Greek word *pneuma*, which means spirit. So when Paul talks about the Spirit, he's using the Greek word *to pneuma*, and so many things we could say about the word spirit. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the Hebrew word is *ruach*, and the Greek word is *pneuma*. Both the Hebrew word and the Greek word have multiple meanings. They can mean spirit—in other words, a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

kind of invisible, animating principle that gives unity and life to whatever it indwells. It can also mean a wind or a breath. So when a person's breath stops—when they stop breathing—the life leaves their body. So that's a kind of common connection between spirit and breath. So the word spirit can mean breath, wind, or spirit, as we think of it most commonly—as a kind of invisible, animating, unifying principle.

So when Paul talks about the spirit, though, of God, he will frequently do so in ways that make clear that he isn't just talking about the breath of God or the power of God, but a divine person that is equal to the other persons that he describes as divine—namely, Christ the Son and then God, who he will often imply to be God the Father. In other words, Paul is a trinitarian in the way he speaks about God the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Spirit. You can see this really clearly in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

So one of the things that you'll notice as I walk through Paul's letters is...if you want to understand what he says in one letter, it's helpful to look at parallels in others of his letters. So in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul ends his letter to the Corinthians with this:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Now that should sound familiar to you, because it's one of the standard opening greetings of a priest at the Mass, in the beginning of the liturgy. It's a trinitarian greeting, because it identifies these three persons: the Lord Jesus Christ the Son, God the Father, and then the Holy Spirit. And yet, there's a unity here as well, because it's the...

...grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

So he's greeting the Corinthians there with “in the name” of these three persons of the one God. And he doesn't include other persons in that list. It's not “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of Paul be with

you”...right? It’s these three divine persons. And so when Paul talks about the Spirit, he will often use the personal language to describe the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. So here he’s using a shorthand for the Holy Spirit when he says:

...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself...

See the personal language there?

...intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

Okay, so second point about this. What does he mean, “sighs too deep for words”? Well, the Greek word here, *stenagmos*...it can mean like a sigh, but it can also be a groan. It’s an expression of a human emotion, whether it be suffering or lamentation or desire, that goes beyond words. It’s deeper than words. It transcends our ability to articulate it precisely. And so one of the things Paul is revealing to us in this is the idea that prayer—this is important—for Paul, is not just saying words to God. So when we talk about prayer, we often either mean or have as our first experience of prayer, learning certain words, certain memorized prayers—what the saints and the Doctors call vocal prayer. The classic example being, of course, the Our Father. It’s a vocal prayer that Jesus gives to the disciples. It has certain words, and you memorize those words, and you repeat those words. So you can pray using words. That’s called vocal prayer.

But what Paul’s saying here is, when it comes to the hope of the resurrection and the new creation — this desire, this longing that we have to participate in the salvation that’s in Christ, we don’t really know how to pray for that, because we don’t even know what we’re talking about. It transcends our understanding. So in that situation, the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) actually prays on our behalf, intercedes for us...helps us to pray and utters within us, groanings and sighs that are too deep for words. So you’ll see this—I don’t have time to go into this in a lot of detail. But you’ll see this in the writings of the saints. They’ll talk about contemplative prayer or the gift of contemplation, which is a supernatural prayer. It’s not merely vocal prayer. It tends to go beyond vocal prayer. It tends to be silent. And the primary

master, the primary agent of contemplation is the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit praying in us, for us, with us, and on our behalf to God the Father. So it's a very powerful image that Paul gives here, that when we don't know what to say and we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us with a kind of prayer that goes beyond words...that's too deep for words.

And you might think, well, how can the Spirit do that? Well, the next point he makes is very crucial. It says:

...he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit...

Again, notice the Spirit has a mind, so there's the personal imagery for the Spirit. The Spirit's not just a power; the Spirit is a person.

...because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

So when it says "he who searches the hearts of men" here, that's probably a reference to God the Father. Because you'll see in the Old Testament, it'll say God and God alone knows the hearts of men. Only He can read the hearts of men. But what he's saying here is the Father searches the hearts of men, and so he knows also what is the mind of the Spirit and...

...the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Now what does that mean, "he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit"? Here we have a very crucial point about Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit and it's this: that the Holy Spirit is not just a divine person who dwells in Heaven and then does things on Earth. Rather, a person who is baptized and who has faith—who is in Christ—the Holy Spirit actually dwells within you. It's the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. That is a crucial element of Paul's understanding of what it means to be a Christian. So for Paul, what it means to be a Christian—although he doesn't even use the language of Christian. We'll get back to that in a second. For Paul, what it means to be a saint, actually, is his term—his term of choice—is not only that you have faith in Jesus, but that His Spirit dwells within you.

You can actually see this again in another parallel in Romans 8:11. If you just back up a few verses in the very same letter, Paul writes:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you.

So see twice there, Paul emphasizes to the Romans that the Spirit of God dwells within them. In other words, they have become temples of the Holy Spirit. Every single individual Christian is a living temple of the Holy Spirit. And so precisely it's because of this indwelling of the Spirit that the Spirit knows what's in our hearts and is able to intercede for us in ways that go beyond what we ourselves can even understand or imagine...and with sighs that are too deep for words, a kind of transcendent, supernatural prayer. Very powerful image there.

Another thing that's interesting about this language here, is the language of intercession. I don't know about you, but there are lots of different kinds of prayers, and I'm familiar with most of them. Most of us have heard about the prayer of intercession. We'll frequently have the situation where someone will come and tell you "I'm going through this" or "I'm suffering this" or someone is sick. And you will say, "I will pray for you." So that's intercessory prayer, praying on behalf of someone else. But I think, at least in my experience, most of us don't think about the Holy Spirit as our interior intercessor—in other words, that the Spirit intercedes with God the Father on our behalf when asking, so to speak, and praying for us, according to God's will. That's what Paul means when he says:

the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

I'm sure I've mentioned this before, but just to stress it again...although in contemporary Catholicism, we tend to reserve the word "saint" for a believer in Christ who has already died and is now in glory and that the Church has canonized that person and made clear to us that that person exhibited heroic virtue. And therefore, their soul is with God. They have the beatific vision. That's not how the New Testament uses the word "saint." In the New Testament, Paul in particular

uses the word saint—*hagios*, holy one—to refer to Christians on Earth...not Christians in Heaven. Not that he would reject the idea that they were saints, but his primary mode of reference for that word is to describe what you or I would call a Christian, Paul would call a saint. Or what you or I would call a believer, Paul would call a saint.

And the reason—this is important—we are saints, *hagios*, holy ones, is because we possess the *pneuma hagios*, the Holy Spirit. It's the indwelling of the Spirit that makes you a saint. Because the indwelling of the Spirit sets you apart as belonging to Christ and to God the Father. With the indwelling of the Spirit of Baptism, a Christian becomes a member of Christ's mystical body, but also a son of God the Father. So it's a kind of participation in the life of the Trinity that sets you apart from the world and sets you apart for God. And so what Paul is saying here is that when we pray, when a Christian prays, we might think that it's just me choosing to do X, Y, or Z. But it's actually the Spirit praying in us and interceding for us with God the Father, according to the will of God.

Now, what's interesting about that—well, there are several things interesting about it. But one of them is that is the parallelism between the role of Christ and the Spirit. So sometimes Christians will be a little more familiar with the idea that Christ intercedes for us, that He intercedes for us with the Father. For example, in Romans 8:34, same chapter, Paul says:

Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?

So it's the same word for intercession there. So in Paul's mind, think of it this way. The Father is in Heaven. The Son—who is not just risen but ascended into Heaven—sits at His right hand. So Christ in glory intercedes for the saints on Earth, with the Father. So He is our advocate. He is our intercessor. But He's not our only intercessor. The Holy Spirit is another intercessor, but He dwells within us. He's within the saints on Earth. So you have these two intercessors, the Son and the Spirit, interceding with the Father on behalf of the Church...on behalf of the Saints. So lots of time, if you know someone holy—maybe you know a holy priest or maybe a holy nun. If you have any sense in your head, you're going to ask that

person to be an intercessor for you—to pray for you. And that’s great. But according to Paul, we have two really, really fine intercessors, and they are the second and third persons of the Trinity. Christ is our intercessor, and the Spirit intercedes for us as well.

So I just bring that up because I think it’s something that we often kind of overlook in our understanding of the spiritual life, understanding of Christian prayer, and also just our understanding of the role of the different persons in the Trinity. What does the Holy Spirit do all day? Okay, well, one of the things he does is intercedes for the saints on Earth, according to the will of God. And that’s what Paul’s describing here in Romans 8:26-27.

Okay, and I think I mentioned already that the Greek term for saints there is Paul’s...that’s just Paul’s favorite word for believers in Christ. Interestingly, he never uses the word *christianos*—Christian. It occurs in the Acts of the Apostles, and it occurs in one of the letters of Peter, but Paul never uses the word Christian. His term for believers is *hagios*—the holy ones, the saints. Because something radical happens to a person, according to Paul, when you believe in Christ and you’re baptized. You become a holy one. But aren’t both of those names revealing? Because one of them emphasizes our being in Christ, *christianos*—we’re like another Christ—and the other one emphasizes the indwelling of the Spirit, *hagios*, the Holy Spirit. So we’re holy ones and we’re also little Christs. Both of those are appropriate descriptions for what it means to be a Christian, according to Pauline theology.

Okay, so what then are some practical points we can draw out about this verse from the living tradition? I’m going to bring up two sources here. The first is from St. Augustine. St. Augustine wrote a short—this is unusual for him—a short commentary on Romans. It was one of his earlier works. And in his section on Romans 8, Augustine says this about the verse we have for today:

“We do not know how to pray as we ought” for two reasons. First, it is not yet clear what future we are hoping for or where we are heading, and second, many things in this life may seem positive but are in fact negative, and vice versa. Tribulation, for example, when it comes to a servant of God



in order to test or correct him may seem futile to those who have less understanding... But God often helps us through tribulation, and prosperity, which may be negative if it traps the soul with delight and the love of this life, is sought after in vain.”<sup>2</sup>

So that’s Augustine, *On Romans*, number 54. In other words, for Augustine, what he’s saying is there are two reasons we need the Holy Spirit to intercede on our behalf and to teach us how to pray. There are two reasons we don’t know how to pray as we ought.

First, we don’t really know where we’re heading. We don’t know the future. A lot of times we are ignorant of what is to come, so it’s hard for us to ask rightly about our ultimate destiny, because it’s still obscure to us, as we’ll see elsewhere. Paul is going to say:

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,”

So there’s a transcendent element to our ultimate destiny that just illuminates how ignorant we really are of where we’re heading and what our ultimate destiny really is. So we tend to shoot lower, in other words. Our hopes are often much lower than what God’s hopes for us actually are. So the Spirit will ask for more than we ask for ourselves. And you know this if you have kids, right? A lot of times what they want is actually much less than what you want to give them. They will often set their sights on lower, earthly things. And you’ll often have to withhold those things from them in order to teach them to aim higher. That’s just how children are; they don’t know any better. And that’s how we are when we pray...we don’t know any better.

And then the second thing is, Augustine says, is that things that we think are good are actually negative. So for example, Augustine uses the example of suffering. He says, “How many of us actually pray, ‘Lord, send me some tribulation?’” Well,

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *On Romans* 54; trans. Gerald Bray

most people don't, and so when tribulation comes, we often treat it as something negative. But Augustine says that in this case, sometimes tribulation can actually grow us, help us to grow, and it can be a positive thing. Whereas prosperity, which we will often pray for—give us prosperity or health—can be a danger, because it can turn our soul away from God. And the only one who really knows what's good for us and what's bad for us is God Himself.

So the other reason that the Spirit will intercede for us is because we'll often ask for things that we don't actually need or that aren't good for us. And again, if you have children, you know exactly what I'm talking about here. Kids will take the candy everyday over...you know, they'll want candy over a good solid meal everyday. They want it because it's sweet. But it's not necessarily good for them. It can be bad for them, especially if it's too much. So the same thing is true in our prayer to God the Father. So the Spirit acts as our intercessor and helps us to pray when we don't know how to pray as we ought.

And then the second quote from the tradition is from a much more recent source. It's from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And I just thought this was fascinating, that in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1995, it says:

...the Holy Spirit is the master of the interior life.<sup>3</sup>

Now that's interesting. The interior life is the description of the growth of the soul. So the life of our bodies go through certain stages of growth. The soul also has stages of growth as it grows to become more and more like Christ. And people will often look for spiritual masters to guide them along the path of the spiritual life, whether that be St. Francis de Sales or St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Teresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross...or whoever it might be. I almost said St. Thomas à Kempis, but he's not a saint. We don't even exactly know who he was but the author of *Imitation of Christ*. So people look for masters of the interior life to guide them. And the *Catechism* says of course that's fine, but that the master of the interior life—the ultimate master of the interior life—is the Holy Spirit, because He actually

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1995

dwells within us and guides us and helps us to grow on the life of holiness. Who better to teach us about holiness than the Holy Spirit of God?

So that understanding of the Holy Spirit is very Pauline, the idea that the Spirit is a divine person who dwells within us and who leads us and intercedes for us according to the will of God so that we might share in the hope of the resurrection that Paul describes and the new creation that Paul is talking about in Romans 8.