

Prayer without Ceasing (3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24—Blameless for the Coming of Christ

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰ do not despise prophesying, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good, ²² abstain from every form of evil. ²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, RSV adapted)

1. Joy: continual joy (5:16)
2. Prayer: “constantly” or, literally, “without ceasing” (Greek *adialeiptōs*) (5:17)
3. Thanksgiving: ceaseless thanksgiving (5:18)
4. Holiness: God will “sanctify” or “make holy” (Greek *hagiazō*) (5:23)
5. Anthropology: Paul prays for *total* sanctification; not that a person has three ‘parts’
 - a. Spirit: or “breath” (Greek *pneuma*)
 - b. Soul: or “mind” (Greek *psychē*)
 - c. Body (Greek *sōma*)
6. Compare with the *Shema*:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *might*. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

The Living Tradition

Catechism: *Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit*: St. Paul for instance prays that God may sanctify his people “wholly,” with “spirit and soul and body” kept sound and blameless at the Lord’s coming. *The Church teaches that this distinction does not introduce a duality into the soul*. “Spirit” signifies that from creation man is ordered to a supernatural end and that his soul can gratuitously be raised beyond all it deserves to communion with God. (CCC 367, citing Constantinople IV)

Francis de Sales: Always remember, Philothea, to retire at various times into the solitude of your own heart even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others. This mental solitude cannot be violated by the many people who surround you since they are not standing around your heart but only your body... Indeed, our tasks are seldom so important as to keep us from withdrawing our hearts from them from time to time in order to retire into this divine solitude... Therefore withdraw your spirit from time to time into your heart and there, apart from the world of men, you can converse heart to heart with God... (Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 2.12)

The Jesus Prayer: This simple invocation of faith developed in the tradition of prayer

under many forms in East and West. The most usual formulation, transmitted by the spiritual writers of the Sinai, Syria, and Mt. Athos, is the invocation, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners.” The invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always. (CCC 2667-68)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (3rd Sunday of Advent, Year B)

1. Is it really possible to “pray constantly” (1 Thess 5:17)? What are some practical ways to put Paul’s teaching here into practice? (Cf. CCC 2666-2669, 2754-45)
