

Third Sunday of Advent (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 61:1-2A, 10-11
<i>Response</i>	my soul shall exult in my God
<i>Psalm</i>	Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted
<i>Gospel</i>	John 1:6-8, 19-28

The third Sunday of Advent for year B brings us back to the letters of St. Paul. And in the second reading, we read once again from Paul's famous writing to the Church at Thessalonica, which is one of his most eschatological letters. So you'll notice in the Advent season, we talk a lot about eschatology, we're talking a lot about the future...about the things that are to come, the coming of Christ, the advent at the end of time. And the same thing is true for the reading for today.

So in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, after describing his basic teaching about the second coming of Jesus...Paul in the last chapter gives some moral exhortations for how to prepare for the coming of Christ at the end of time. So here we see the Church do what She does often, which is use the second reading in the lectionary as an opportunity for giving moral exhortation and not just doctrinal teaching.

So let's see what St. Paul says here, 1 Thessalonians 5:6-24, and then we'll see how we can apply it to the Advent season:

Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

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. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.¹

Ok, so what's going on here with this? Well, again, Paul here is trying to help the Thessalonians be prepared for the final advent, for the second coming of Jesus. So he gives a short, rapidfire series of moral exhortations that if you pause and look at them each carefully, they're really challenging. And they're also really crucial for Paul's vision of what the Christian life looks like. So I would highlight the first three characteristics that he gives here—really fascinating—which is 1) continual joy, 2) constant prayer, and then 3) ceaseless thanksgiving.

So Paul says that Christians should be characterized by continual joy, ceaseless prayer, and continual thanksgiving. Now...is that your experience? It's not how people think of you? Are you joyful all the time? Do you pray constantly? And do you give thanks no matter what happens, no matter what circumstance you find yourselves in? If you don't, these are three virtues that Paul is challenging you and me (and also the Thessalonians) to live up to.

And in particular, I want to highlight here the one...the RSV has translated to pray constantly, but the Greek word is actually *adialeiptōs*. It means pray without stopping, pray without ceasing. Now in my experience, a lot of Christians have difficulty praying at all, praying regularly...much less praying without ceasing. So we'll come back to that in a minute. At the end of the video, we'll kind of look at how that verse, that one verse "pray without ceasing"...if you look at the spiritual writers throughout the centuries—monastic writers like John Cassian, the desert fathers, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, especially John Cassian. He's in the late 4th, early 5th century.

They really wrestled with this. Is it possible to pray without ceasing? And if so, how do you do it? Is it really possible to always rejoice? What about when tragedy strikes or pandemics hit or persecution breaks out or sickness invades my life or

¹ 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.

hurts someone I love? How can I rejoice always? How can I give thanks in every circumstance?

Well, Paul doesn't give these as suggestions. They're imperatives at the end of his letter to Thessalonica. And notice he says, he's not just inviting you to do this. He says to the Thessalonians:

...this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So it's God's will that you rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in every circumstance. So these are big challenges. Don't let the brevity of Paul's form—the form of the words—lead you to rush too quickly through the magnitude of what he's calling Christians to in this passage here.

So he also says:

Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.

And the upshot of why he's giving these exhortations is holiness. He's calling the Thessalonians to holiness so that they will be blameless at the coming—Greek word *parousia*—of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he's giving them these exhortations to prepare them for the final advent of Jesus. You want to get ready for the final advent? Here's what you do: 1) rejoice always. You want to get ready for the final advent of Jesus? Second thing you do: pray without ceasing. You want to get ready for the final advent of Christ? Third thing you do: give thanks in every circumstance.

And in that context, Paul says something interesting here. He says:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you...

...mean, make you holy.

...and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is another famous verse from 1 Thessalonians, because it's one of the most explicit but also puzzling statements of anthropology that Paul gives us. Pauline anthropology is actually a topic that scholars study. So anthropology is the study of the human person, study of the human being, *anthropos* is the ancient Greek word for man.

And Paul gives here these three terms to describe the human person:

- The spirit, *pneuma*—Greek word meaning “breath”
- The soul, *psychē*—a Greek word that often gets used to describe the mind or the animating, unifying principle of the body; the invisible animating unifying principle...we get psychology from that
- And then the body—*sōma* is the Greek word, which just means “the body.” It's the material aspect of the human person.

And so lots of scholars have kind of wrestled with...what do these exact terms mean in Paul? And some in the history of the Church, there were some interpreters who took these as hard and fast categories which implied that the human being consisted of three parts—the spirit which is different from the soul, which is different from the body. It's kind of tripartite. And that actually was rejected by orthodox fathers. It actually led some heretics to say that there were two souls in a person. There's the spirit soul and then there's the nonspiritual soul in a person.

So this led to some puzzles in anthropology. People historically who have read it that way—that the human being is tripartite—are over-interpreting the text and missing the fact that Paul is simply using a kind of standard Semitic way to describe different aspects of the human person. This tripartite description of the human person goes actually back to the Shema. So if you look in Deuteronomy: 4-5, everybody knows—not everybody, but a lot of people are familiar with this verse. Jews would have recited it everyday:

“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)

Now the word “heart” in Jewish Scripture can be used to refer to the seat of the emotions, but it’s also the seat of the intellect in Jewish Scripture. The heart can think as well as feel. The soul in Hebrew Scripture actually can be translated as “the life.” It’s the animating principle of the body that unifies but also reveals and expresses the life force within an animal. So you’ll see things like the soul, the life, the *nephesh*, is in the blood.

And then “might” here seems to refer to our bodily strength. In other words, in Deuteronomy 6 as well as in Paul’s language here, these are biblical terms that you don’t want to separate them into rigidly or hermetically sealed categories, divided from one another. They’re aspects of the one human person that are meant to tell us—in Deuteronomy 6—that we are to love God with all that we are. The whole person is given to God—your heart, your soul, and your strength (your might).

And Paul is doing the same thing: “I want you to be ready in spirit, soul, and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” I’ll come back to that in just a minute, but it is a fascinating insight into the all-encompassing nature of the call to holiness. We’re not supposed to live divided lives. I’m one thing on Sunday and one thing the rest of the week. We’re not even supposed to live with divided hearts. Like Jesus said, you can’t love God and mammon. You either hate one and love the other, be devoted to one, love the other.

So there’s an integral role to holiness so that we prepare for God not just spiritually, not just intellectually, not just physically, but with the entire human person. So:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly...

See? Integrally, all of you.

...may your spirit [breath] and soul [mind] and body be kept sound and blameless at the [*parousia*] of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, you might think, “Dr. Pitre, that’s not possible. How is it possible for me to be completely holy, to be totally consecrated to God?” And the answer is: it’s not difficult, it’s just humanly impossible. It’s possible, however, through God’s grace. So as Jesus says, with men, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. And so Paul says here:

He who calls you...

It’s the universal call to holiness...

..is faithful, and he will do it.

So we can’t be holy through our own powers, but God’s grace is sufficient to make us holy. And it’s not just sufficient, but He’s faithful to His promises. He wouldn’t call us to something that isn’t possible. And He’s calling us to a total, integral gift of self to God—body, soul, and spirit, so the whole human being—in view of the *parousia* of Jesus Christ...in view of the coming, the second advent, of Jesus Christ.

So it’s fascinating, if you think about this—and I owe that insight, by the way, to Nathan Eubank. I’ve mentioned him elsewhere. But this commentary on First and Second Thessalonians, he does a better job than I am of just walking you through that verse and what it means in terms of Pauline anthropology, but also its allusions to the Shema. So in other words, Paul is describing holiness as loving God with all that you are in the same way that the Jewish Torah describes the call to holiness as really being about consecration to God through love—loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength—as a way of preparing for the second advent.

So again, I think this is something that...we don’t often think of the eschatological rationale for holiness when contemporary Christians talk about the call to holiness. Some people might think of it as: “Well, I want to grow in virtue so that I can be the best version of myself.” And obviously, growth in virtue in order to be a better

person is a noble and praiseworthy end. But the call to holiness is actually about more than that. It really is—Paul is saying here—about preparation for the final judgment. There’s an end beyond myself in mind here, which is the final *parousia* of Christ at the end of time, which is what the Church is thinking about, praying about, reflecting on, and preaching about during the Advent season.

So that’s the end of my basic comments on the universal call to holiness, but I think it’s really important to see that the universal call to holiness, it isn’t just something like—sometimes people will think, “Oh, that’s something that Vatican II made up and taught.” No, the universal call to holiness is in Paul—for that matter, and Jesus:

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

Or for that matter, it’s in Leviticus:

...You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy. (Leviticus 19:2b)

Or for that matter, it’s in Genesis, when God says to Abraham:

...walk before me, and be blameless.

...in Genesis 17. So the universal call to holiness goes all the way back to the Old Testament. It’s not a newfangled idea. And Paul sees it here, and he gives those consoling words:

He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:24)

So there’s ultimately a trust in the grace of God to do what is impossible.

Okay, so that’s my little basic overview of this text. I want to, however, make sure we look at the text in light of sacred tradition, the living tradition of the Church, in two areas. First, the anthropological element that I mentioned, and then also, I want to talk for a moment about prayer without ceasing, because that verse (1

Thessalonians 5:17) is really a *locus classicus*. It's a classic place where the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church spend a lot of time wrestling with how that's even possible, to pray constantly.

So first, let's look at the anthropology issue. How does the *Catechism* interpret that passage about the spirit, the soul, and the body? Well, in its section on the human person, on the human being (which I highly recommend you read), paragraph 367 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this:

Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit...

Notice it doesn't use the language of "separated," but distinguished.

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.

Right, pause there. This is a Church doctrine. They are not two separate parts, the spirit as opposed to the soul. It's a distinction, but it's not a separation. So the *Catechism* continues:

"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.²

Catechism, paragraph 367, citing the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople IV...rejecting the idea of a duality within the soul. So in other words, if you look at the body and the soul, human nature is that composite of body and soul and unification of the human nature. But spirit here, the *Catechism* is saying, is a way of talking about the fact that from creation man is ordered to a supernatural end. And you really see this very clearly when through Baptism, the Holy Spirit (which is supernatural) comes to dwell in the human soul through the grace of

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 367, citing Constantinople IV

Baptism...and that the soul, which is part of human nature, can be raised gratuitously (it's through grace) above itself to participate in a supernatural end, which is the beatific vision of God.

So it's a lot to pray with. Just ponder as you reflect on Paul's theology of the human being, of the human person, and the language of spirit, soul, and body. That's the Church's teaching from the *Catechism*. And if you want more, you can go read the *Catechism's* section on the body and the soul and spirit and how they all relate and what that means in terms of Christian anthropology. But this just gives you a little window into that. I just want to make sure we don't misinterpret that verse.

Okay, the second aspect of 1 Thessalonians 5 is the prayer *adialeiptōs*—without ceasing. How in the world is that possible? Especially if you're a lay person living in the world. Maybe you're a parent; you have a bunch of children. Or maybe you just have one child. That's enough to ruin a person's prayer life, especially if it's a baby keeping you up all night.

So what is the...what does Paul mean when he says “pray without ceasing” and how can different Christians in different states of life live that out? Well, in his classic work, *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales in the 17th century (early 17th century) publishes this classic work. And he deals with this, and he talks about applying this principle—and the other saints do as well—pray without ceasing, to an interior prayer that can take place even in the midst of other daily duties.

So what Paul doesn't mean is that every Christian has to stop engaging in all activity and recite vocal prayers all day long. That's not what he means when he says “prayer without ceasing.” People have duties of their state in life that involve labor and work and service to others—service to neighbor, spouses, children, colleagues, coworkers, employers...all the things that make up human life.

It doesn't mean ceasing activity in order to stop and do vocal prayer. But St. Francis says that this kind of exhortation, pray without ceasing, can be carried out by an interior prayer, sometimes called aspirations of the heart that take place

throughout the day. So listen to what Francis wrote...and he wrote this to a lay woman too. He's not speaking this to a consecrated religious, although obviously consecrated religious and priests can do this and should. But this is what he says:

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...

He continues:

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...³

That's from Francis de Sales in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, book 2, section 12. So I'd encourage you to read the whole thing if you want to get a sense of what he's doing—what he's referring to there. But basically, what Francis is describing is one way to pray without ceasing is that throughout the day as you're engaged in your labors, from time to time to pause interiorly in terms of the interior conversation going on within your mind and your heart...and to turn the eyes of the heart and the mind toward God.

St. Therese of Liseux actually, in one of her writings, she defines prayer, and she says, "For me, prayer is a glance toward heaven." It's like an interior lifting up of the heart to God, and you can do that all day long. You can do that at any time. You can pause—we do this all the time. We pause to talk to other people while we're engaged in activities, and then we get back to work. What Francis is saying is that we can pray without ceasing throughout the day by pausing to talk to God for a moment, or even just pausing for a moment to look at God, so to speak, interiorly

³ Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 2.12

with the glance of the heart before returning back to work. It's a way of remembering God throughout the day.

And this kind of interior prayer, you can do it while you're working. You can do it while you're washing dishes. You can certainly do it during meetings. Withdraw for a moment, and then lift the heart to God. I say that as a professor. Committee meetings give all kinds of times for this kind of interior prayer without ceasing. Although, you don't want to neglect your duties as well.

So what Francis is talking about here are momentary aspirations of the heart, momentary acts of prayer...just like you would think of a loved one. You might think of your wife or children throughout the day while you're engaged in work. You pause to ponder and think of—in an act of love—the people you care for. Well, we should love God above all things, so the way to prayer without ceasing is doing that.

Now historically, one of the most famous method of this kind of pausing and praying interiorally is what's known as the Jesus Prayer. Especially in Eastern Christianity, the Jesus Prayer, a very simple...it's a vocal prayer drawn from the Gospels. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" is one common form...or "have mercy on me, a sinner" or "have mercy on us sinners." You find a little variety there. It's drawn from the words of the blind man and the Pharisee:

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:38)

...and then the Pharisee and the tax collector:

"God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13)

It's kind of a combination of those different sayings from the Gospels. But in Eastern Christianity, especially Eastern monasticism, the idea was developing the habit of saying those words, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me," over and over again throughout the day—whether audibly or just interiorly saying them. So actually, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a paragraph on this, and I'll end with this. It actually alludes to the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5,

and it says the simplest way to do this is the Jesus Prayer. So in *Catechism* 2667-2668, we read these words:

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.” By it the heart is opened to human wretchedness and the Savior’s mercy. The invocation of the holy name of Jesus is the simplest way of praying always.⁴

So I just offer that to you as a gem of wisdom from the living tradition about how to make 1 Thessalonians a reality in your own life. So this Advent season, if you don’t already practice this, one thing you might try to do is practice St. Paul’s teaching of praying without ceasing by punctuating the day with the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2667-68