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Christ's Parable About the Need to Pray Always

Gospel Commentary for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap

ROME, OCT. 19, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Sunday's Gospel begins thus: "Jesus told them a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart." The parable is the one about the troublesome widow. In answer to the question "How often must we pray?" Jesus answers, "Always!"

Prayer, like love, does not put up with calculation. Does a mother ask how often she should love her child, or a friend how often he should love a friend? There can be different levels of deliberateness in regard to love, but there are no more or less regular intervals in loving. It is the same way with prayer.

This ideal of constant prayer is realized in different forms in the East and West. Eastern Christianity practiced it with the "Jesus Prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!"

The West formulated the principle of constant prayer in a more flexible way so that it could also be proposed to those who do not lead a monastic life. St. Augustine teaches that the essence of prayer is desire. If the desire for God is constant, so also is prayer, but if there is no interior desire, then you can howl as much as you want -- to God you are mute.

Now, this secret desire for God, a work of memory, of need for the infinite, of nostalgia for God, can remain alive, even when one has other things to do: "Praying for a long time is not the same thing as kneeling or folding your hands for a long time. It consists rather in awakening a constant and devout impulse of the heart toward him whom we invoke."

Jesus himself gave us the example of unceasing prayer. Of him, it is said that he prayed during the day, in the evening, early in the morning, and sometimes he passed the whole night in prayer. Prayer was the connecting thread of his whole life.

But Christ's example tells us something else important. We are deceiving ourselves if we think that we can pray always, make prayer a kind of respiration of the soul in the midst of daily activity, if we do not set aside fixed times for prayer, when we are free from every other preoccupation.

The same Jesus who we see praying always, is also the one who, like every other Jew of his period, stopped and turned toward the temple in Jerusalem three times a day, at dawn, in the afternoon during the temple sacrifices, and at sundown, and recited ritual prayers, among which was the "Shema Yisrael!" -- "Hear, O Israel!" On the Sabbath he also participated, with his disciples, in the worship at the synagogue; different scenes in the Gospels take place precisely in this context.

The Church -- we can say, from its first moment of life -- has also set aside a special day dedicated to worship and prayer: Sunday. We all know what, unfortunately, has happened to Sunday in our society: Sports, from

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being something for diversion and relaxation, have often become something that poisons Sunday ... We must do whatever we can so that this day can return to being, as God intended it in commanding festive repose, a day of serene joy that strengthens our communion with God and with each other, in the family and in society.

We modern Christians should take our inspiration from the words that, in 305, St. Saturnius and his fellow martyrs addressed to the Roman judge who had them arrested for participating in the Sunday rite: "The Christian cannot live without the Sunday Eucharist. Do you not know that the Christian exists for the Eucharist and the Eucharist for the Christian?"

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Father Raniero Cantalamessa is the Pontifical Household preacher. The readings for this Sunday are Exodus 17:8-13a; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8.

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