

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

Letting the Lord Work in Us

Br. Casey Cole

Hello again, and welcome back to our Advent retreat. My name is Brother Casey Cole, and this week we'll be looking at the readings of the second week of Advent. We begin, as we always do, in prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Good and gracious God, we know that You are the reason for all good things. Nothing good can come to be without Your willing it. We pray that You may live in us, and transform our spirits, transform our bodies, so that we may be better examples of Your followers. We pray that whatever You are growing in us may be brought to completion in us, so that one day we may be among Your saints, living in glory in heaven with You. In Your name we pray. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was a rising junior in high school going into eleventh grade, I had a summer homework assignment. To this day, I still think it's one of the greatest injustices in the history of the world. Summer is not a time for homework. But alas, I had to read a book, and I had to write a paper, just a two-page paper, and I was absolutely beside myself. I was not a great reader, not a great writer. I started reading the first chapter and just thought "I can't do this. I have no idea what going on. What have I gotten myself into? This is going to be a disaster." And so, annoyed that I had to do homework on one sense, and on the other sense just thinking I couldn't do it, I went to my dad and I begged him. "Please, please let me drop this class. I can't do it. I'm not that smart. I'm just going to fail. Please, let me go into the other class."

As you can imagine, my dad said no. Ugh, so heartless, right? Making his kids work hard. And so, he said "You'll be fine. Just work hard, and everything will be alright." Fine. And so I read the book, I struggled through it, I wrote the two-page paper. It turned out alright, I got a B in the class, and I learned basically everything I know about writing that year. So don't you just hate it when dads are wrong?

The reason I tell this story is because it seems so strange to me now. Having to read a book and write a two-page paper seems like a dream. As a seminarian, I'm training to the priesthood, training to be ordained soon and, as priests, we kind of need to know a little bit about everything. People expect us to be all things to all people, so that means we need to study a lot, and we need to read a lot. Scripture, and liturgy, and history, sacraments, moral theology, all the different things that we

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

may encounter. And a couple of years ago, I was looking at my studies and realizing that I was reading 100 pages, and writing 4 two-page papers every single week. Not just over the semester, but every single week. And I looked at what I was doing, and I was presumably passing and doing alright, and I looked back at myself 10 years earlier and I just thought “What a jerk. What a wimp. I can’t believe I complained about that. That would have been so much easier.”

And I was amazed, because I looked at who I was now and who I was before, and I just thought “Wow. When did I grow? When did I learn so much? How did I do this over the years without even me realizing it?” But, in a way, isn’t that the way all growth works? Does anyone ever really feel themselves growing taller? And yet, here we are. I am much taller than I was at 5 years old. Does anyone ever feel their hair growing? And yet, here we are, having to get a haircut every couple weeks. Does anyone ever feel themselves growing in the Spirit? Growing closer to God? Maturing, having moments of conversion. Do we ever actually feel this while it’s happening? The Spirit working in us? Or do we look sometimes and say “Wow, my relationship with God is so much stronger than it used to be.”

This is what Saint Paul talks about in our second reading this week. That the Spirit works in us, and even if we don’t know that the Spirit is there, even if we don’t know that it’s at work, the Spirit will continue to work until that work is brought to completion. God is working in us, growing us, making us stronger, and bringing us closer to that triune God we hope to be in communion with. And sometimes we don’t even realize it.

As Christians, we have the wonderful tradition of the communion of saints. We can look at these extraordinary men and women as examples of the way that we should live. And, at the same time, they can also be roadblocks sometimes. Because we can look at Saints like Saint Francis of Assisi and say “Oh my gosh, I will never, ever be that holy.” It just seems like a daunting task, like climbing Mount Everest. How could I even begin to try to be like that? Sometimes it can seem like a little bit of a roadblock.

We can look at Mother Teresa, the wonderful modern saint of our day. How extraordinary: She lived for the poor, she gave herself for Jesus Christ. And we could say “Oh my gosh, I could never live that way. How could I ever amount to that?” And we can look at people like this, and we can say “Well, if that’s what sainthood looks like, I don’t know if I’m up to the challenge. How could I ever be that great? How could I ever be that humble? That virtuous? I don’t even know if I should start trying.” But here’s the thing: God is the one who wills the goodness in us. And sometimes it takes time, sometimes it takes trust and patience.

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

When we look at Saint Francis of Assisi, we can look at the incredible revolutionary man that he was, the one who changed the church, who founded many orders, who lived an extraordinary life. And we can look at what he did at the end of his life and be overwhelmed, but we could also go back to look at him when he was 15 or 16, and he as a bit of party boy, and all he really wanted in life was to be a knight, and to have personal glory. And we can see “Wow, even someone like Saint Francis of Assisi wasn’t always perfect. He sinned too. He fell behind. He was kind of like me.” But what he did was take one step at a time, and over the course of a lifetime he let the Spirit work in him until that work was brought to completion.

We can look at someone like Mother Teresa. We can see her at the end of her life, how she gave herself, lived in one of the poorest places in the world, and say “No, we can’t do that.” But she wasn’t always like that. She wasn’t always the founder of an order doing extraordinary things. At one point, she was just a little girl struggling to learn English, reading the stories of the saints, wondering if she could be like that. She was just like us, having to do homework, probably had a summer assignment she didn’t want to do. I don’t know. She wasn’t who she ended up being, but let the Spirit work in and through her each and every day. A small step, until that work of the Spirit was brought to completion, and she was entered into the communion of the saints.

Sometimes it takes patience, sometimes it takes trust. No one, no person in history has ever been baptized and then immediately done extraordinary things. Your life does not end with baptism. You are not a perfect person just because you enter Christ. No one has been confirmed, oil on their head, and immediately sinned no more. That’s just not the way it works. Baptism, confirmation, receiving the Eucharist, these are all the beginning of the story, not the end. They’re the beginning of our first conversion, not our last. Sometimes, we need to realize that it’s 2 steps forward, and one step back. Sometimes, that is what progress that we see the Spirit working in us.

In fact, sometimes in our lives, we’ll take one step forward and 2 steps back, finding ourselves farther away from God than when we started. The question is not whether we should keep going, it’s whether we trust God enough to allow that journey to continue. It’s not our strength that will get us there, it is the Spirit working in and through us, bringing ourselves to completion that matters. What we have to do is not rely on our own strength, not look at the saints and say “I can’t do that,” but to say “Look what God did in him. Look what God did in her. Maybe God can do that in me.”

Pray More Advent Retreat 2018 - Transcript

And so I ask you, as we grow closer to our preparation and the celebration of Christmas: What might God be working in you? What extraordinary things might be budding and growing that you don't even see? That you've come so far and look how much farther you have to go. If you truly believe that it is God working in you and not you on your own strength, well then you are capable of much more than you think possible.

Look out at the world, look at our church, look at our family and see what God might be transforming in you to make all of those a better place. That God might be living in you in such a way that the world may know Jesus Christ much better having met you than having not met you. What a wonder it is to think that God could be working in us if we simply say yes. If we simply say "Lord, I will go. I'll let You work in me, and I won't fight." How amazing this world would be if everyone just let that happen. And it may not happen overnight, it may not happen over a couple of years, but it may take an entire lifetime of growth, and conversion, and setbacks, and trust.

And so I leave you this week with a prayer, a prayer that I did not write myself, but I feel is powerfully important for all of us to hear. It's the prayer of Thomas Merton: *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust You always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave me to face my perils alone. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*