

WHEN YOU FEEL
UNABLE TO PRAY,
remember that the
Spirit Himself
intercedes for you
with groans that words
cannot express.



—JESUS LIVES

After a lovely week at the ocean, I spent the second week of vacation at my niece and her husband's vacation home in a town called Pocono Pines in the Pocono Mountains. On my last night there, we had decided to have a family Mass in remembrance of my brother-in-law Jack, who had died five years ago on July 14th, the day of the Mass. We also were praying for Kay Costello, who was close to death and is the mother of Tom, my niece's husband. My sisters two grandchildren sat on both sides of me on the coach and were the altar servers. They are wonderful kids, but I did have to referee at the offertory of the Mass as a debate broke out between them as to who should pour the water over my fingers for the hand washing. Some of the family members proclaimed the readings and all of us were feeling the presence of the deceased Jack, my sister's husband, and that Kathleen, who was close to death in Brooklyn.

My sister has a little Shih Tzu named Nora. She is still a bit of a puppy and very cute little young lady. But like many of us, she craves attention. So, as the Mass moved along, Nora became concerned that no one was paying much attention to her. She had a pet toy, that squeaked every time she touched it. This was driving me crazy. My sister who loves Mass took Nora out of the living room several times, but then the prayers of the celebrant were being drown out by loud persistent whining and barking. Nora

wanted to attend the Mass! Since Jack loved dogs, my sister, his widow, kept bringing Nora back to the liturgy. As I said *peace be with you, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*, I was feeling anything but peace or mercy. Our Responsorial Psalm was mostly *Behave Nora; Sit down Nora; Nora, no*; I find it hard to pray during the Mass.

Yet, as we stood and held hands and prayed the Lord's Prayer, and as we offered the sign of peace to one another, and then as we received the Body and Blood of Jesus, a sense of calm came over us and we truly felt the Body of Christ within us and in one another. Then, my niece played the hymn to *Our Lady of Knock*. Our Lady of Knock is a shrine in County Mayo, Ireland where the Blessed Mother, along with St. Joseph and St. John the Evangelist, appeared to fifteen people of different ages in 1879. This apparition has been approved by the Church. Knock is a very small village in Mayo, Ireland. It was a very special song to my brother-in-law Jack because he was born and raised in Mayo, and it was also special to Tom, who was praying for his mother Kathleen, whose family also came from the County Mayo. The hymn became a prayer that silenced us all, even Nora. There were tears in the eyes of several of the participants. At the end of the Mass, several of my family mentioned how much that Mass touched their hearts and let feel the love of God. The following morning, we received word that his Mom had died and he was so very grateful for the Mass which begin with the chaos of Nora.

I tell that story because of our second reading today from St. Paul. It is a very consoling reading to me as I struggle to pray and stay focused on God and not allowing my mind to become filled with distractions about second collections, the air-conditioning, what am I going to have for lunch, what time are the Mets on, did I take my medicine, and a thousand other thoughts. When people speak to me about prayer, they almost always say that it is hard for them to pray since they get distracted during Mass, or while saying the rosary, or fall asleep before they finish their evening prayer. Even some of the greatest saints wrote about the challenges of being attentive during prayer.

I love the verse from *Psalms 46: Be still and know that I am God*. In the world in which we live, there are so many distractions, even though say we just want some peace and quiet, I wonder if we really do. What I look for in vacation is to just slow down and pause. But as soon as I start to do that I feel that I should be doing something: let's go for a drive, let's go shopping, how about lunch, is it time for miniature golf? I often complain when I see young people texting on their cell phones during meals, but I find myself often looking at my cell phone throughout the day. It is no easy task to be still and know that God is God. We struggle to pay attention to our spouses, to our children, our family and friends. We use the *uh uh strategy* to make like we are listening.

Let me read to you again what St. Paul says about prayer: *The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the holy ones according to God's*

will. How consoling are these words for those of us who struggle to pray. The Spirit comes to our aid us in struggles to pray. When we can't pray, when we are distracted, the Holy Spirit makes intercessions for us.

If we wait to be perfect pray-ers, we will never pray. A recommendation I make to you and to myself is the pray about what distracts you. If you cannot stop thinking about some person that offended you, something that is bothering you, something that you need to soon do, turn it into a prayer. Talk to God about the very thought that is distracting you. A key piece of advice I have heard repeatedly is to pray from where you are, not where you want to be. If you are angry, bitter, hurt, sad, joyful, worried, pray to God about those feelings. God is the one person with whom we can always be totally honest. *The Psalms*, prayer book of the Bible, is full of prayers that come from the darkest places of the human heart.

I have often heard that when you are in pain, very sick in the hospital or even close to death, or in deep emotional pain, it can be very difficult to pray. This text from St. Paul reminds us that at these very moments, the Holy Spirit can pray in and through us despite our struggles. *The Spirit makes intercessions when we are weak*. Be patient with yourself in prayer. At Mass, we do not pray alone but with the rest of our community, we pray to the Father in the name of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Now, I will stop talking so you don't become overly distracted and wonder if this priest will ever stop talking.