

OCTOBER 17 2025 FATHER MICHAEL COUTTS

Every now and then, somebody will come to me and say, “Father, please pray for me.” I will quote very often the words of the late Fulton Sheen. He said there are two things every person has to do for himself or herself. One is they should blow their own nose, and the other is to pray for their own needs.

“Ah, but Father, you’ve got an inside line to God.” I say, “If that were so, I would ask for peace in Gaza, in Sudan, in Myanmar, among the maras of El Salvador, and in many different places.” But God has no favourites, as Paul tells us in the second letter to the Romans.

Having said all this, I’ll contradict myself and say that we need—and it’s a very healthy thing—to ask one another to pray. Because Jesus says, “If you are two or three gathered together and ask anything in my name, it will be answered.”

Now, the reason for Paul saying all this is because, in Chapter 3—just before our reading today—he spoke about the Jewish people, the Israelites during their Exodus experience. They were a chosen people; God made a covenant with them. And so they had the Torah, the keeping of the Sabbath, the circumcision—all these things that made them very special. But because of that, they thought they had an inside line to God; they thought they had a right to Heaven.

Unfortunately, that is not true. Heaven, eternal life, is a pure gift. You cannot buy it. You cannot barter for it. You cannot order it online on Amazon or Temu. You can’t do any of these things. It’s a gift given to you by God, and given to me by God.

So, what happens about my daily prayer, going for Mass, saying the Rosary, the Divine Mercy? All these things are of wonderful importance. They only open you to the fact that God has given this as a gift. And Paul uses Abraham as a good example. He says, “Look at Abraham—he was before the Israelites.

He wasn't a chosen person. He wasn't a royal race. He wasn't a people kept apart. He simply listened to the Lord and, in faith, left Ur of the Chaldees way up in the far Middle East and came down to the land which would later become Israel."

Now, Abraham was a good man. And if he gained Heaven because of his good works, then it was not a gift—it was something that was due to him for his wages. And sometimes you and I think about that in the same way. I pray, I do all these things, I act in charity, I help in the food bank—I have a right to Heaven. In one sense, you have a right. But the right is one that has been gained for us by the life, death, passion, and resurrection of Jesus—not because of all the good works that you and I do.

They are healthy, they are important, they help me to understand the fact that I'm just, as Jesus would say, an unworthy servant to receive this gift from God. And that is what all our prayers are meant to do—to open our eyes and see the generosity of God. A God who is totally self-contained and just decides, "I'm going to be beneficent to the people around."

You know, actually, this idea of earning Heaven has been a part of our Christian tradition. In the sixth century, you had a British monk called Pelagius, and he said, "There's no such thing as original sin. I'm a good person myself; I can do good works. I can attain Heaven without the need of anybody else. The Incarnation and Jesus Christ—all these things were important, but they were not necessary." And the Church condemned him, because by doing so, Pelagius was acting against the very core of our beliefs.

And the very core of our beliefs is that God has given this as a free gift to each one of us. And He has given it only in, and through, and with Jesus Christ. So all the good works that we do are things that help us to understand this gift.

This is what was picked up by Jesus in the Gospel today. He spoke about the yeast of the Pharisees—their hypocrisy. Now, the word *hypocrisy* is a Greek word which means playing a character, playing a persona on a stage. The Pharisees were a good bunch of people, actually. They were very careful about observing the Torah, observing the Sabbath, being circumcised—but most especially, paying attention to the minutest details of tradition.

The problem was that they paid all their attention to this, and never paid attention to the people who were supposed to do that—the people who were supposed to obey the Torah, the people for whom the traditions were made. They didn't care. They were absolutely cold-blooded in that sense. There was no compassion. There was no reaching out to these people.

And that is why Jesus would say, “All the good things that you do are good, but realize that the gift that is given to you is freely given by God.” And it is given by a God who cares for everything—for sparrows, even the hair on your head. I guess He wouldn't have much problem with me; I don't have very much hair on my head to count.

But it simply means, deep down within us, that there's a God who cares for us—cares about the fact that sometimes I'm awake at night worrying about things. And He says to me—Jesus says—“Be not afraid. I've got you in the palm of my hands. I've always held you there.”

And it requires from us what was required from Abraham—namely, a humility to realize that I'm a weak and finite person, and a realization that God is giving me this gift. And He's giving that to you as well.

God bless you all.