

11. January 2022

The supplicatory prayer and the vow

1 Sam 1:9-20

When they had finished eating in the room, Hannah got up and stood before Yahweh. Eli the priest was sitting on his seat by the doorpost of the temple of Yahweh. In the bitterness of her soul she prayed to Yahweh with many tears, and she made this vow, 'Yahweh Sabaoth! Should you condescend to notice the humiliation of your servant and keep her in mind instead of disregarding your servant, and give her a boy, I will give him to Yahweh for the whole of his life and no razor shall ever touch his head.' While she went on praying to Yahweh, Eli was watching her mouth, for Hannah was speaking under her breath; her lips were moving but her voice could not be heard, and Eli thought that she was drunk. Eli said, 'How much longer are you going to stay drunk? Get rid of your wine.' 'No, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman in great trouble; I have not been drinking wine or strong drink -- I am pouring out my soul before Yahweh. Do not take your servant for a worthless woman; all this time I have been speaking from the depth of my grief and my resentment. 'Eli then replied, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him. 'To which she said, 'May your servant find favour in your sight.' With that, the woman went away; she began eating and was dejected no longer. They got up early in the morning and, after worshipping Yahweh, set out and went home to Ramah. Elkanah lay with his wife Hannah, and Yahweh remembered her. Hannah conceived and, in due course, gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel, 'since', she said, 'I asked Yahweh for him.'

Among the various forms of prayer, there is also supplicatory prayer. Today's reading presents us with an example of this prayer in the supplication of Hannah, who turns to the Lord in her great distress and unburdens her heart to him. In Jewish culture, it was considered a dishonour to be childless. This is why Hannah suffered, and we also know this situation from the story of Elizabeth, before she conceived John the Baptist. So great was Hannah's distress that she spent hours in silent dialogue with God. It seems that this way of praying was not common at that time, as we can see from the reaction of the priest Eli, who did not understand what this woman was

doing.

In her pleading prayer, Hannah made a vow to God - she knew that only He could help her in her need! So, not only did she set before the Lord her urgent intention, but she also made a promise: if God granted her a son, she would consecrate him to the Lord in a special way.

In our Catholic Church, we are very familiar with this form of prayer, and we know that it has great value, for in such a supplication we place all our trust in God. In a psalm we hear these beautiful words: *"I pour out my worry in his presence, in his presence I unfold my troubles."* (Ps 142:2).

St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, also struggled in this way for the conversion of her son, and had the grace that before her death the deep desire of her heart was fulfilled. Bishop St. Ambrose, who saw St. Monica suffering and struggling for her son, addressed these wonderful words to her: "A son of so many tears cannot be lost".

And something similar assures the priest Eli to Anna, when he understands the character of her prayer, *"Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him"*.

In Jerusalem I could also sometimes see people, mostly women, praying with this pleading intensity. Their whole person, with all their gestures, seems to be so focused on God, that one could not imagine that He would disregard such a prayer, or that He would not at least give them comfort for their sorrowful and troubled soul. If even the unjust judge, in the parable Jesus presents to us, ends up yielding to the widow's insistent plea, how much more will the Father be touched by a pleading prayer of His children!

Listen to what the unjust judge says: *"Now, will not God see justice done to his elect if they keep calling to him day and night even though he still delays to help them? I promise you, he will see justice done to them, and done speedily."* (Lk 18:6-7)

Hannah's promise to consecrate her son to God should not be interpreted as a bargain with the Lord. Perhaps we are sometimes tempted to think so when we hear stories of this kind.

On God's part, there is the intention to get the person out of his or her great need, which can even become a kind of prison for him or her. If the person makes a promise or a vow to give more weight to his plea, he is expressing in advance his trust and gratitude to God, believing that He will bring him out of his affliction. It is not that we must make offers to God to persuade Him to help us; it is not that we must present sacrifices for Him to have mercy on us. Rather, we should understand such a

vow as a collaboration with the Holy Spirit, who moves us to do this or that, or inspires us to promise God something. Then the vow will bear much fruit!

Think, for example, of the three women I have mentioned in this meditation, and you will see how their offerings bore great fruit. Hannah's son Samuel was a prophet; Elizabeth's son was John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Coming of Christ; St. Monica's "son of many tears" was St. Augustine, a great bishop and doctor of the Church.

Perhaps not everyone can utter a supplicatory prayer with this intensity, for everyone expresses himself differently before God and in God. But if we find ourselves in a difficult personal situation, or if we are moved by the need of another person, of the Church or of humanity in general, and a plea to God arises within us, let us give ourselves to this prayer with our whole being, for it will rise directly to the Heart of the Lord and move him to listen to it. And if in this prayer we promise Him something, we must keep our promise, for God, in His love, takes us very seriously.