



Bishop Guy's Chronicle

Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation

Prayer nurtures and increases faith because praying is loving. In a previous chronicle, we have already had the opportunity to demonstrate how the prayer of intimacy with God enriches and increases our faith. Today, I present to you the rather unusual account of a providential encounter with an 18-year-old man named Simon.

This testimony will confirm to us the importance of “watching and praying that we may not enter into temptation,” as our divine Master teaches through the pen of the evangelist St. Matthew, “for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mt 26:41)

In 1992, on a beautiful sunny morning, I finished the celebration of Mass with the faithful in a small parish that I was in charge of. In the distance, I saw a young stranger walking towards me. He came close to me, staring at me with a mocking look on his face and saying, somewhat pretentiously, “So, you are a priest?” I replied with a smile on my face, “How on earth could you have guessed such a thing?” Deep down, I wanted to make him laugh, because I was wearing a Roman collar and anyone could have guessed that I was a priest.

He confided to me that his name was Simon, and hastened to tell me that he was an atheist. He didn't believe in God or the devil. And he said, “All who believe in God are weak! They need a crutch to lean on something, on anything! I only believe in what is visible. I do not believe in the invisible.”

I immediately replied, “If I understood correctly, you only believe in what your eyes are capable of seeing. Nothing else exists for you. So tell me, Simon. Have you ever seen intelligence walking down the street? According to your assertion, everything imperceptible to the senses simply doesn't exist. Do you realize that this means you have no intelligence because no one can see it?”

“And what's more because you refuse to believe in the invisible, you're admitting that love doesn't exist either! According to you, this is probably a man-made invention or an illusion. Therefore, I ask you the same question again: have you ever seen love walking in the midst of a crowd? No one has ever seen pure love. We only see the effects of love manifesting itself in our eyes. Which means you are incapable of loving or letting yourself be loved. Prove me wrong, Simon!”

Poor Simon. He bowed his head and began to smile despite himself. He felt trapped in a corner and he didn't know how to get out of this embarrassing situation. Then his human pride resurfaced. He was now trying to convince me that God was only a human invention and that religious institutions had well orchestrated their schemes to control the minds and hearts of men for their greater benefit.

But I did not respond to all his speculation and twisted assertions. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Simon, you look so much like me when I was your age! When I was eighteen, I thought I knew it all. I had decided not to believe in God anymore because I felt that he was a self-righteous and possessive God who did not appreciate people who were resistant to his will. When I was eighteen, I even told my mother that she had been tricked and that God did not really exist. He was the product of the creation of certain men who wanted to control, abuse, and take advantage of their subjects and property for personal benefit or interest.

My poor mother couldn't think of anything else to say to convince me otherwise. I was too stubborn and convinced I was right. So she tried one last time to move me, saying, 'I'm going to pray for you, Guy.' And I laughed and said to her, 'Good idea, Mom, pray for me. It won't do me any harm!' If only I had known at that moment that the fervent prayers of a distressed mother could one day be heard and answered by this God in whom I no longer believed; and if I had believed that because of her prayers I would one day obtain the grace to convert and even become a priest, I would have immediately said to my mother, 'No, Mom! Please don't pray for me! I don't want to convert and change my lifestyle! I don't want to become a priest someday!'"

Then suddenly an inspired word sprang up in me, "Simon, I could argue and argue with you for months on end to prove to you that the invisible God exists, but I know that I won't succeed. You are too stubborn and proud, as I was at your age. So here's what I propose: have your own experience of God. Ask him to prove to you that he exists. And if you're sincere, he'll manifest himself to you."

Surprised and curious at the same time, Simon replied sarcastically, "And how do I make him answer me, your invisible God?" I asked him if he would give me only fifteen minutes of his life to try something he had never done before. He answered yes. So I said, "Do you have a Bible at home?" Can you imagine his reaction? He responded immediately and told me unequivocally that he would never touch that book. And I countered by reminding him that he had just agreed to give me fifteen minutes of his life.

He went on to tell me that his girlfriend had one, but that he would never touch the book. To further illustrate the complexity of Simon's situation, I will share these facts with you: Simon's girlfriend had been pregnant with him for a few months. She

was only seventeen years old and her mother had agreed to temporarily house the two of them under her roof until the birth of the child because the two young lovebirds certainly did not have the means to provide for all their needs.

I continued to challenge him despite everything, inviting him to take this Bible when he would be all by himself, and to kneel for fifteen minutes. I said to him, "First ask God to forgive your stubbornness in not believing in Him. Then ask him to manifest himself to you and prove to you that he truly exists. Then open the Bible at random, and put your finger on the passage that comes to you. I confirm that He will give you the proof that He exists and that He loves you in a much deeper way than you can ever imagine because our spirit confined to the space-time in which we are temporarily put is too limited for the moment. This book is no ordinary book," I said. "It is a living book! It is God himself who has inspired some people to become his spokespersons, to reveal his love for us; at the same time, he invites us to respond to his Fatherly love. Later on, the scribes brought back the words of these prophets and wrote down everything God wanted them to say to us, we who are both human and spiritual creatures, intelligent and capable of loving like no other creature."

But Simon was working harder on his counterattack. He said to me, "I am like the apostle Thomas. If I don't put my finger in his wounds, if I don't put my hand in his side, no, I won't believe." I asked him again to give me only fifteen minutes of his life to experience it. But he refused and walked away, repeating to me a second time the words of St. Thomas. There was nothing left for me to do but to pray for him, as my dear mother had done for me when I was eighteen years old.

A week later, after the celebration of Sunday Mass, a woman approached me, deeply moved and trembling. Tearfully she said to me, "I am [Michelle]'s mother, Simon's girlfriend. I have come to tell you that something has happened to Simon." I immediately asked if he had been in an accident or if something dramatic happened to him. "No," she said. "But something extraordinary! Simon was alone in the house on Wednesday of this week. I had left with my daughter to run errands at the mall, which is 45 minutes from here. Simon used the opportunity to pick up my daughter's Bible. Then he got down on his knees and started talking to God for the first time in his life. His conversation was only supposed to last fifteen minutes. He began by asking him to forgive him for his stubbornness in not believing in Him, and then asked him to manifest himself to him, if he truly existed! He warned God that he would give him not one, but two chances to prove to him that he truly exists and that He loves him. He opened the Bible at random and his finger pointed to a phrase that was difficult to understand, "Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Mt 20:16)

"Then Simon called out to God again but told him that he had only a second and last chance to prove to him that he existed. And he closed the Bible, opened it again, and

put his index finger on a second word. His finger had fallen on the word 'finger.' And this is what the word said, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." (John 20:27) Simon was so overwhelmed and astounded by this word that he carried the Bible with him throughout the week. He told everyone, "This is incredible. God truly exists! These were the exact words I had said to the priest when he suggested that I have this personal experience and told me that the Word of God was a living book. Now I believe that God exists! Now Father," said the mother, "Simon would like to meet you and talk to you."

And I met Simon the following week. I gave him a long catechesis and explained to him how prayer is important to grow in faith and to maintain our loving relationship with God. I used the example of the fire in the fireplace: if you don't put any more wood in the fire, the fire will go out and die. And Simon agreed to start praying and getting to know God daily. Knowing that he was a new convert, I also warned him of the fact that the devil could come back in force if he stopped praying. The latter would then succeed in convincing him that his experience was only the fruit of randomness and that God had nothing to do with this mere coincidence. Finally, I told Simon that we must watch and pray that we may not enter into temptation.

Simon decided to come to church every Sunday. After a few months, however, I didn't see him in church anymore! Two weeks later, he came back. The next week Simon was still away; and then I didn't see him again for a whole month. So I decided to visit the young woman who was now seven or eight months pregnant. To my surprise, she told me that her friend had just left her two weeks earlier! She explained that he had done exactly the opposite of what I had recommended in our meetings. He had stopped praying for a few days, for reasons that were all very human. Then, as the days went by, he prayed less and less. And one day, he finally said that he didn't have time to pray anymore because he had more important things to do.

The mother and daughter couldn't believe their ears! After such a beautiful spiritual experience, Simon returned to his world of doubts and suspicions. He even said in front of his loved ones that he no longer had faith, and that his experience with the Word of God was really just a coincidence, and that God did not really exist. Simon then decided to leave his girlfriend, telling her that he was too young to take on such responsibilities. You can imagine all the tears and dismay of his girlfriend and his mother. Months went by, but there was still no news of him! Simon became a ghost.

Still, I had the joy of baptizing the young mother's beautiful little girl. The celebration was recorded and precious preserved. Years later, Simon still hasn't given any news to anyone, to the great dismay of the young mother and now of his own daughter who did not have the joy of knowing and loving her father. I heard

later that the little one often felt consoled and joyful when she listened to the recording of her baptism. I have always kept a bond of friendship with the family and the child. I even had the opportunity to speak with her on the phone a few years ago, and our exchange was most cordial. Certainly, her broken heart was scarred by her father's absence, but thanks to her vibrant faith, she learned to find comfort in the Fatherly heart of our loving God.

Dear reader, I conclude with these words: I know that there are many "Simons" in our world and in our families. God, however, looks at each one of them and calls them at some point, following the example of my young man. Without the daily prayer of intimacy with God, without the support of a community that practices and lives its faith intensely, the "Simons" of our world will not be able to stand for long. They increasingly need our prayers and the example of our Christian life to inspire them to return to God.

I feel like playing a trick on my friend Simon. A good trick that might one day bring him back to the Christian faith and perhaps give him the opportunity to reconnect with his wife and daughter: I ask you to pray with me for our brother Simon. Let us pray together for all the "Simons" who live in the heart of our families or in our surroundings. Let us make our own the words of my dear mother who said to me at the dawn of my eighteenth birthday, "I will pray for you, Guy!"

Thank you for carrying with me in your prayers all those people who call themselves atheists or who have distanced themselves from God under all sorts of pretexts. Let us believe that the God of the impossible will one day reach them and bring them back to His Fatherly heart. Even if they oppose us, even if they mock us, let us pray for their conversion and let us pray especially that they will persevere in prayer once they are converted. Otherwise, Satan will give himself to heart's content to convince them of the uselessness of prayer and sacramental life. The prayer of intimacy with God is a true armour against the assaults of the devil. That is why each of us who are believers must also be always vigilant and persevering, "so as not to enter into temptation!"