

# POPE FRANCIS



## CATECHESSES ON PRAYER

CATECHESSES 1 - 13



## **1. *The mystery of prayer***

Today we begin a new series of catecheses on the theme of *prayer*. Prayer is the breath of faith; it is its most proper expression. Like a *cry* that issues from the heart of those who believe and entrust themselves to God. Let us think about the story of Bartimaeus, a character in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:46-52), and I confess that for me he is the most likeable of all. He was blind and sat begging for alms by the roadside on the periphery of his city, Jericho. He is not an anonymous character. He has a face and a name: Bartimaeus, that is, "son of Timaeus". One day he heard that Jesus would be passing through there. In fact, Jericho was a crossroads of people, continually criss-crossed by pilgrims and tradesmen. Thus, Bartimaeus positioned himself: he would have done anything possible to meet Jesus. So many people did the same. Let us recall Zacchaeus who climbed up the tree. Many wanted to see Jesus; he did too. In this way the man enters the Gospels as a voice that loudly cries out. He cannot see. He does not know whether Jesus is near or far away but he hears him. He understands this from the crowd which, at a certain point, grows and comes closer.... But he is completely alone and no one is concerned about him. And what does Bartimaeus do? He cries out. And he cries out and continues to cry out. He uses the only weapon he possesses: his voice. He begins to shout: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 47). And he continues to cry out in this manner. His repeated cries are a nuisance. They do not seem polite and many people scold him, telling him to be quiet: "But be polite; do not do this". However, Bartimaeus does not keep silent but rather cries out even more loudly: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 47): That beautiful stubbornness of those who seek a grace and knock and knock on the door of God's heart. He cries out; he knocks. That expression: "Son of David", is very important. It means "the Messiah" — he professes the Messiah. It is a profession of faith that emerges from the mouth of that man who was despised by all. And Jesus listens to his cry. Bartimaeus' prayer touches his heart, God's heart, and the doors of salvation open

up for him. Jesus calls for him. He jumps to his feet and those who had first told him to be quiet, now lead him to the Master. Jesus speaks to him. He asks him to express his desire — this is important — and then the cry becomes a request: “that I may see again, Lord!” (cf. v. 51).

Jesus says to him: “Go your way; *your faith has made you well*” (v. 52). He recognises in that poor, defenceless and despised man, all the power of his faith, which attracts the mercy and the power of God. Faith is having two hands raised up, a voice that cries out to implore the gift of salvation. The Catechism states that “humility is the foundation of prayer” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2559). Prayer is born of the earth, of the *humus* from which “humble”, “humility” derive. It comes from our precarious state, from our continuous thirst for God (cf. *ibid.*, 2560-2561). Faith, as we have seen with Bartimaeus, is a cry. Lack of faith is the suppression of that cry. That attitude that the people had, in making him keep quiet: they were not people of faith, whereas he was. To suppress that cry is a type of *omertà* (code of silence). Faith is a protest against a pitiful condition the cause of which we do not understand. Lack of faith is to limit ourselves to endure a situation to which we have become accustomed. Faith is the hope of being saved. Lack of faith is becoming accustomed to the evil that oppresses us and continuing in that way.

Dear brothers and sisters, we begin this series of catecheses with Bartimaeus’ cry because perhaps everything is already written in someone like him. Bartimaeus is a persevering man. He was surrounded by people who explained that imploring was useless, that it was clamouring without receiving a reply, that it was noise that was only bothersome, and thus please stop crying out. But he did not remain in silence. And in the end he obtained what he wanted.

Greater than any discussion to the contrary, there is a voice in mankind’s heart that invokes. We all have this voice within. A voice that comes forth spontaneously without anyone commanding it, a voice that asks itself about the meaning of our journey on earth, especially

when we find ourselves in darkness: "Jesus, have mercy on me! Jesus have mercy on me!". This is a beautiful prayer.

But are these words perhaps not chiselled in all of creation? Everything invokes and implores so that the mystery of mercy may be definitively fulfilled. Not only Christians pray; they share their cry of prayer with all men and women. But the horizon can be further widened: Paul states that all of creation "has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22). Artists are often the interpreters of this silent cry of creation that is found in every creature and emerges above all in the heart of men and women, because they are "beggars before God" (ccc, 2559). It is a beautiful definition of mankind: "beggars before God". Thank you.

*(6<sup>th</sup> May 2020)*

## ***2. The prayer of a Christian***

Today we take our second step in the journey of catecheses on prayer that we began last week.

Prayer belongs to everyone: to men and women of every religion, and probably also to those who profess none. Prayer arises in our innermost self, in that interior place that spiritual authors call "heart" (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2562-2563). Therefore, it is not something peripheral that prays within us, it is not some secondary and marginal ability that we have, but rather it is our most intimate mystery. It is this mystery that prays. Feelings pray, but one cannot say that prayer is only feeling. Intelligence prays, but praying is not simply an intellectual act. The body prays, but one can speak with God even having the most serious disability. Thus the entire man prays if he prays with his "heart".

Prayer is an impulse; it is an invocation that goes beyond ourselves: something that is born in the intimacy of our person and extends, because it senses the nostalgia of an encounter. That nostalgia which is more than a need, more than a necessity: it is a path. Prayer is the voice of an "I" that fumbles, that proceeds unsteadily in search of a "You". The encounter between the "I" and the "You" cannot occur via calculators: it is a human encounter and we often proceed unsteadily in order to find the "You" that my "I" is seeking.

Instead, the prayer of a Christian arises from a revelation: the "You" did not remain shrouded in mystery, but rather entered into a relationship with us. Christianity is the religion that continually celebrates God's "manifestation", that is, his epiphany. The first feasts of the liturgical year are the celebration of this God who does not remain hidden, but rather offers his friendship to mankind. God reveals his glory in the poverty of Bethlehem, in the contemplation of the Magi, in the baptism in the River Jordan, in the miracle of the wedding at Cana. The Gospel of John concludes the great hymn of the

Prologue with a concise affirmation,: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:18). It was Jesus who revealed God to us.

The prayer of a Christian enters into a relationship with the God of the most tender face, who does not wish to instill any fear in men and women. This is the first characteristic of Christian prayer. While men and women had always been accustomed to drawing near to God somewhat intimidated, somewhat fearful of this fascinating and tremendous mystery, while they had been accustomed to worshiping him with a servile attitude, similar to that of a vassal who does not wish to disrespect his lord, Christians instead address him by daring to call him intimately with the name, "Father". Indeed, Jesus uses the other word: "Dad".

Christianity has banned all "feudal" relationships from the bond with God. In the heritage of our faith there are no expressions such as "subjection", "slavery" or "servitude"; but rather, words like "covenant", "friendship", "promise", "communion", "closeness". In his long farewell discourse to his disciples, Jesus says this: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (*Jn* 15:15-16). But this is a blank cheque: "whatever you ask the Father in my name, I will give to you"!

God is a friend, an ally, a spouse. In prayer one can establish an intimate relationship with him, so much so that in the "Our Father" Jesus taught us to address to him a series of questions. We can ask God everything, everything; explain everything, recount everything. It does not matter if we feel flawed in our relationship with God: we are not good friends, we are not grateful children, we are not faithful spouses. He continues to love us. It is what Jesus shows definitively at

the Last Supper when he says: "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (*Lk 22:20*).

With that gesture in the Upper Room, Jesus foreshadows the mystery of the Cross. God is a faithful ally: if men and women cease to love him, he nevertheless continues to love, even if love leads him to Calvary. God is always close to our heart's door and he waits for us to open it to him. And sometimes he knocks on the heart, but he is not intrusive: he waits. God's patience with us is the patience of a father, of one who loves us dearly. I would say it is the combined patience of a father and a mother. Always close to our heart, and when he knocks he does so with tenderness and with much love.

Let us all try to pray this way, by entering the mystery of the Covenant. To place ourselves through prayer into the merciful arms of God, to feel enveloped by that mystery of happiness which is Trinitarian life, to feel like guests who were not worthy of so much honour. And to repeat to God in the wonder of prayer: how can you know only love? He does not know hatred. He is hated but he does not know hatred. He knows only love. This is the God to whom we pray. This is the incandescent core of all Christian prayer. The God of love, our Father who waits for us and accompanies us.

*(13<sup>th</sup> May 2020)*



### 3. The mystery of Creation

Let us continue the catechesis on prayer, by meditating on the mystery of Creation. Life, the simple fact that we exist, opens mankind's heart to prayer.

The first page of the Bible resembles a great hymn of thanksgiving. The narrative of Creation has a rhythm with refrains, where the goodness and beauty of every living thing is continually emphasized. With his word, God calls to life, and every thing comes into existence. With his word, he separates life from darkness, alternates day and night, interchanges the seasons, opens a palette of colours with the variety of plants and animals. In this overflowing forest that quickly vanquishes the chaos, the last one to appear is man. And this appearance inspires an extreme exultation that amplifies his satisfaction and joy: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (*Gen* 1:31). Very good, but also beautiful: the beauty of all creation can be seen!

The beauty and mystery of Creation create in the human heart the first impulse that evokes prayer (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2566). The eighth Psalm which we heard earlier states: "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" (vv. 3-4). The one praying contemplates the mystery of the life around him; he sees the starry sky that lies above him — and that astrophysics shows us today in all its immensity — and asks himself what loving plan must there be behind such ponderous work!.... And, in this boundless expanse, what is man? 'Almost nothing', another Psalm states (cf. 89:48): a being that is born, a being that dies, an extremely fragile creature. Yet, in all the universe, the human being is the only creature aware of the great profusion of beauty. A small being who is born, who dies; he is here today and gone tomorrow. He is the only one who is aware of this beauty. We are aware of this beauty!

Mankind's prayer is closely linked to the sentiment of wonder. The greatness of man is infinitesimal when compared to the dimensions of the universe. His greatest conquests seem quite small... However man is not nothing. In prayer a sentiment of mercy is powerfully confirmed. Nothing exists by chance: the secret of the universe lies in a benevolent gaze that someone meets in our eyes. The Psalm states that we are made little less than God; we are crowned with glory and honour (cf. 8:6). The relationship with God is man's greatness, his enthronement. By nature we are almost nothing, small, but by vocation, by calling, we are the children of the great King!

It is an experience that many of us have had. If life's events, with all their bitterness, sometimes risk choking the gift of prayer that is within us, it is enough to contemplate a starry sky, a sunset, a flower..., in order to rekindle a spark of thanksgiving. This experience is perhaps the basis of the first page of the Bible.

The people of Israel were not experiencing happy days when the great biblical narrative of Creation was written. An enemy power had occupied their land; many had been deported, and they now found themselves slaves in Mesopotamia. There was no more homeland, nor temple, nor social and religious life, nothing.

Yet, precisely in starting from the great narrative of Creation, someone began to find reasons for thanksgiving, to praise God for his or her existence. Prayer is the first strength of hope. You pray and hope grows, it moves forward. I would say that prayer opens the door to hope. There is hope but I open the door with my prayer. Because people of prayer safeguard basic truths; they are the ones who repeat, first and foremost to themselves and then to all the others, that this life, despite all its toils and trials, despite its difficult days, is full of a grace that is awe inspiring. And as such it must always be defended and protected.

Men and women who pray know that hope is stronger than discouragement. They believe that love is more powerful than death, and that surely one day it will triumph, even if in times and ways that we do not understand. Men and women of prayer bear gleaming reflections of light on their faces: because, the sun does not stop illuminating them, even in the darkest of days. Prayer illuminates you: it illuminates the souls, it illuminates the heart and it illuminates the face. Even in the darkest times, even in times of greatest suffering.

We are all bearers of joy. Have you considered this? That you are bearers of joy? Or do you prefer to bring bad news, things that sadden? We are capable of bearing joy. This life is the gift that God gave us: and it is too short to consume it in sadness, in bitterness. Let us praise God, happy to simply exist. Let us look at the universe, let us look at beauty and let us also look at our crosses and say: 'You exist, you made us like this, for you'. It is necessary to feel that unrest of the heart that leads to thanking and praising God. We are children of the great King, of the Creator, capable of reading his signature in all of Creation. We are not safeguarding that creation today, but that creation holds the signature of God who made it out of love. May the Lord make us understand this ever more deeply and lead us to say "thank you"; and that "thank you" is a beautiful prayer.

*(20<sup>th</sup> May 2020)*

## **4. *The prayer of the righteous***

We are dedicating today's catechesis to the *prayer of the righteous*.

God's plan for humanity is good, but in our daily affairs we experience the presence of evil. It is a daily experience. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis describe the progressive expansion of sin in human affairs. Adam and Eve (cf. *Gen 3:1-7*) doubt God's good intentions; they think they are dealing with an envious God who impedes their happiness. This is where their rebellion comes from: they no longer believe in a generous Creator who desires their happiness. Yielding to the temptation of evil, their hearts are overcome by a delirium of omnipotence: 'if we eat the fruit from the tree we will become like God' (cf. v. 5). And this is temptation: this is ambition that enters hearts. But their experience goes in the opposite direction: their eyes are opened and they discover they are naked (cf. v. 7), with nothing. Do not forget this: the tempter is a bad payer, he does not pay well.

Evil becomes even more disruptive with the second human generation, it is stronger: it is the story of Cain and Abel (cf. *Gen 4:1-16*). Cain is envious of his brother; there is the seed of envy; even though he is the first born, he sees Abel as a rival, one who undermines his primacy. Evil appears in his heart and Cain is unable to control it. Evil begins to enter his heart: his thoughts are always turned to looking badly upon the other, with suspicion. And this occurs with his thoughts too: "This one is evil, he will hurt me". And this thought enters his heart ....And thus the story of the first brotherhood ends in murder. I think of human fraternity today... war everywhere.

In Cain's descendants, arts and crafts develop, but violence develops too, expressed by the sinister canticle of Lamech, which sounds like a hymn of revenge: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me, if Cain is avenged seven times, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold" (4:23-24). Vengeance: "You did this, you will pay". But the judge does not say this, I do. And I make myself the judge of the

situation. And in this way evil spreads like wildfire, until it occupies the entire picture: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). The great frescos of the universal flood (ch. 6-7) and of the tower of Babel (ch. 11) reveal that there is need of a new beginning, like a new creation, which will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Yet, in these first pages of the Bible, another, less striking, much more humble and pious story is also written, which represents the release of hope. While almost everyone behaves in a wicked manner, making hatred and conquest the great engine of human affairs, there are people who are capable of praying to God with sincerity, capable of writing mankind's destiny in a different way. Abel offers God the firstling sacrifice. After his death, Adam and Eve had a third son, Seth, to whom Enosh (which means 'mortal') was born, and it is stated: "At that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord". (4:26). Then Enoch appears, a person who "walked with God" and was taken to heaven (cf. 5:22, 24). And lastly there is the story of Noah, a righteous man who "walked with God" (6:9), before whom God withheld his intention to blot out mankind (cf. 6:7-8).

While reading these narratives, one has the impression that prayer is a bulwark; it is man's refuge before the flood wave of evil that grows in the world. On closer inspection, we also pray to be saved from ourselves. It is important to pray: "Lord, please, save me from myself, from my ambitions, from my passions". The prayerful of the first pages of the Bible are peace workers: indeed, when prayer is authentic, it frees one from the instincts of violence and it is a gaze directed to God, that he may return to take care of the heart of mankind. We read in the Catechism: "This kind of prayer is lived by many righteous people in all religions" (ccc, 2569). Prayer cultivates flowerbeds of rebirth in places where man's hatred has only been able to expand the desert. And prayer is powerful because it attracts the power of God and the

power of God always gives life: always. He is the God of life and he causes rebirth.

This is why God's lordship passes through this chain of men and women, often misunderstood or marginalized in the world. But the world lives and grows thanks to the power of God whom these servants attract with their prayer. It is not at all a boisterous chain, and rarely makes headlines, yet it is so important to restoring trust to the world!

I remember the story of one man: an important government leader not from these days, but from the past. An atheist who had no religious feeling in his heart, but as a child he heard his grandmother pray, and this remained in his heart. And at a very difficult time in his life, that memory returned to his heart and said: "But my grandmother used to pray...". He thus began to pray with his grandmother's formulas, and there he found Jesus. Prayer is always a chain of life: many men and women who pray sow life.

Prayer sows life, small prayers: this is why it is so important to teach children to pray. I suffer when I encounter children who do not know how to make the sign of the Cross. They have to be taught to make the sign of the Cross properly, because it is the first prayer. Then perhaps they may forget, take another path, but the first prayers learned as a child remain in the heart, because they are a seed of life, the seed of dialogue with God.

The journey of God in the history of God is conveyed through them: it has passed through a "remainder" of humanity that has not conformed to the law of the fittest, but has asked God to perform his miracles, and above all to transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (cf. *Ez 36:26*). And this helps prayer: because prayer opens the door to God, turning our often stony hearts into a human heart. And this demands a lot of humanity, and with humanity one can pray well.

*(27<sup>th</sup> May 2020)*

## 5. *The prayer of Abraham*

There is a voice that suddenly resonates in Abraham's life. A voice that invites him to undertake a journey that he knows is absurd: a voice that spurs him to uproot himself from his homeland, from his family roots, in order to move toward a new, different future. And it is all based on a promise, in which he needs only to have trust. And to have trust in a promise is not easy. It takes courage. And Abraham had trust.

The Bible is silent on the steps of the first patriarch. The logic of things leaves us to presume that he had worshipped other divinities; perhaps he was a wise man, accustomed to observing the heavens and the stars. The Lord, in fact, promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars that speckle the sky.

And Abraham sets out. He listens to the voice of God and trusts in His word. This is important: he trusts the Word of God. And with this departure of his, a new way of understanding the relationship with God arose. It is for this reason that the patriarch Abraham is present in the great Jewish, Christian and Islamic spiritual traditions as the perfect man of God, capable of being submissive to Him, even when His will proves arduous, if not completely incomprehensible.

Abraham is thus the *man of the Word*. When God speaks, man becomes the receptor of that Word and his life the place in which it seeks to become flesh. This is a great novelty in man's religious journey: the life of a believer begins to be understood as a vocation, thus as a calling, as the place where a promise is fulfilled; and he moves in the world not so much under the weight of an enigma, but with the power of that promise, which one day will be fulfilled. And Abraham believed God's promise. He believed and he set out without knowing where he was going — thus says the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. 11:8). But he had trust.

In reading the Book of Genesis, we discover that Abraham experienced prayer in constant faithfulness to that Word, which periodically appeared along his path. In short, we could say that in Abraham's life *faith becomes history*. Faith becomes history. Indeed Abraham, with his life, with his example teaches us this path, this path in which faith becomes history. God is no longer seen only in cosmic phenomena, as a distant God, who can instill fear. The God of Abraham becomes "my God", the God of my personal history, who guides my steps, who does not abandon me; the God of my days, companion in my adventures; the God Providence. I ask myself and I ask you: do we have this experience with God? "My God", the God who accompanies me, the God of my personal history, the God who guides my steps, who does not abandon me, the God of my days? Do we have this experience? Let us think about this a bit.

Abraham's experience is also attested to in one of the most original texts of the history of spirituality: the *Memorial* of Blaise Pascal. It begins like this: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants. Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ". This memorial, written on a small parchment and found after his death, sewn inside the philosopher's clothing, expresses not an intellectual reflection that a wise man like him can conceive of God, but the living, experienced sense of His presence. Pascal even noted the precise instant in which he felt that reality, having finally encountered it: the evening of 23 November 1654. It is not the abstract God or the cosmic God, no. He is the God of a person, of a calling, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God who is certainty, who is feeling, who is joy.

"Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds: a man of silence, he constructs an altar to the Lord at each stage of his journey" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2570). Abraham does not build a temple, but scatters the path of stones that recall God's passage. A surprising God, as when He pays a visit in the form of three guests, whom Abraham and Sarah welcomed with care, and the three announce the birth of



their son Isaac (cf. *Gen* 18:1-15). Abraham was 100 years old and his wife was more or less 90. And they believed, they trusted God. And Sarah, his wife, conceived. At that age! This is the God of Abraham, our God who accompanies us.

Thus, Abraham becomes familiar with God, even able to argue with Him, but ever faithful. He speaks with God and argues. Up to the supreme test, when God asks him to sacrifice his very son Isaac, the son of his elder years, his sole heir. Here Abraham lives faith as a tragedy, as a groping walk in the night, under a sky that, this time, is starless. And many times this also happens to us, to walk in the dark but with faith. God himself will halt Abraham's hand, already prepared to strike, because He saw his willingness truly complete (cf. *Gen* 22:1-19).

Brothers and sisters, let us learn from Abraham; let us learn how to pray with faith: to listen to the Lord, to walk, to dialogue, up to arguing. Let us not be afraid to argue with God! I will even say something that may seem like heresy. Many times I have heard people say to me: "You know, this happened to me and I became very angry with God" — "You had the courage to be angry at God?" — "Yes, I got angry" — "But this is a form of prayer". Because only a son or daughter is capable of being angry at their dad and then encounter him again. Let us learn from Abraham to pray with faith, to dialogue and to argue, but always willing to accept the Word of God and to put it into practice. With God, let us learn to speak like a child with his dad: to listen to him, to reply, to argue. But transparent like a child with his dad. This is how Abraham teaches us to pray. Thank you.

*(3<sup>d</sup> June 2020)*

## **6. *The prayer of Jacob***

Let us continue with our catechesis on the subject of prayer. Through the occurrences of men and women from a far-off time, the Book of Genesis tells us stories in which we can reflect our lives. In the Patriarch cycle, we also find the story of a man who had turned shrewdness into his best talent: Jacob. The biblical account tells us about the difficult relationship Jacob had with his brother Esau. Ever since childhood, there was a rivalry between them, which was never overcome later on. Jacob is the second-born son — they were twins — but through deceit he manages to obtain the blessing and birthright of their father Isaac (cf. *Gen* 25:19-34). It is only the first in a long series of ploys of which this unscrupulous man is capable. Even the name “Jacob” means someone who is cunning in his movements.

Forced to flee far from his brother, he seems to succeed in every undertaking in his life. He is adept at business: he greatly enriches himself, becoming the owner of an enormous flock. With tenacity and patience he manages to marry Laban’s most beautiful daughter, with whom he is truly in love. Jacob — as we would say in modern terms — is a “self-made” man; with his ingenuity, his cunning, he manages to obtain everything he wants. But he lacks something. He lacks a living relationship with his own roots.

And one day he hears the call of home, of his ancient homeland, where his brother Esau, with whom he has always had a terrible relationship, still lives. Jacob sets out, undertaking a long journey with a caravan of many people and animals, until he reaches the final leg, the Jabbok stream. Here the Book of Genesis offers us a memorable page (cf. 32:23-33). It recounts that after having all his people and all the livestock — which was numerous — cross the stream, the patriarch remains alone on the foreign river bank. And he ponders: What awaits him the following day? What attitude will his brother Esau, whose birthright he had stolen, assume? Jacob's mind is a whirlwind of thoughts.... And, as it is growing dark, a stranger suddenly grabs him

and begins to wrestle with him. The Catechism explains: "From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance" (ccc, 2573).

Jacob wrestles the entire night, never letting go of his adversary. In the end he is defeated, his sciatic nerve is struck by his opponent, and thereafter he will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. That mysterious wrestler asks the patriarch for his name and tells him: "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (*Gen* 32:28). As if to say: you will never be the man who walks this way, but forthright. He changes his name, he changes his life, he changes his attitude. You will be called Israel. Then Jacob also asks the other: "Tell me, I pray, your name". The other does not reveal it to him, but blesses him instead. Then Jacob understands he has encountered God "face to face" (vv. 29-30).

Wrestling with God: a metaphor for prayer. At other times Jacob had revealed himself capable of dialoguing with God, of sensing him as a friendly and close presence. But that night, through a lengthy struggle that nearly makes him succumb, the patriarch emerges changed. A change of name, a change in his way of life and a change in personality: he emerges changed. For once he is no longer master of the situation — his cunning is of no use to him — he is no longer a strategic and calculating man. God returns him to his truth as a mortal man who trembles and fears, because in the struggle, Jacob was afraid. For once Jacob has nothing but his frailty and powerlessness, and also his sins, to present to God. And it is *this* Jacob who receives God's blessing, with which he limps into the promised land: vulnerable and wounded, but with a new heart. Once I heard an elderly man — a good man, a good Christian, but a sinner who had great trust in God — who said: "God will help me; he will not leave me alone. I will enter Heaven; limping, but I will enter". At first, Jacob was a self-assured man; he trusted in his own shrewdness. He was a man who was

impervious to grace, resistant to mercy; he did not know what mercy was. "Here I am, I am in command!". He did not think he needed mercy. But God saved what had been lost. He made him understand that he was limited, that he was a sinner who needed mercy, and He saved him.

We all have an appointment with God in the night, in the night of our life, in the many nights of our life: dark moments, moments of sin, moments of disorientation. There is an appointment there with God, always. He will surprise us at the moment we do not expect him, when we find ourselves truly alone. That same night, struggling against the unknown, we will realize that we are only poor men and women — "poor things", I dare say — but right then, in that moment in which we feel we are "poor things", we need not fear: because God will give us a new name, which contains the meaning of our entire life; he will change our heart and will offer us the blessing reserved to those who have allowed themselves to be changed by him. This is a beautiful invitation to allow ourselves to be changed by God. He knows how to do so, because he knows each one of us. Each of us can say, "Lord, you know me". "Lord, you know me. Change me".

*(10<sup>th</sup> June 2020)*

## **7. The prayer of Moses**

In our itinerary on the theme of prayer, we are realizing that God never liked to deal with those who prayed the 'easy' way'. And Moses was not a 'weak' conversationalist either, from the very first day of his vocation.

When God called him, Moses was, in human terms, 'a failure'. The Book of Exodus portrays him in the land of Midian as a fugitive. As a young man he had felt compassion for his people, and had aligned himself in defense of the oppressed. But he soon discovered that, despite his good intentions, it was not justice, but violence that flowed from his hands. Thus his dreams of glory were shattered: Moses was no longer a promising official, destined to rise rapidly in his career, but rather one who gambled away opportunities, and now grazed a flock that was not even his own. And it was precisely in the silence of the Midian desert that God summoned Moses to the revelation of the burning bush: "'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (*Ex 3:6*).

Moses resists God who speaks, who invites him to take care of the people of Israel once more, with his fears and his objections: he is not worthy of that mission, he does not know God's name, he will not be believed by the Israelites, he has a stammering tongue ... so many objections. The word that issues most frequently from Moses' lips, in every prayer he addresses to God, is the question: 'Why?' Why have you sent me? Why do you want to free this people? Why? In the Pentateuch, there is even a dramatic passage where God reproaches Moses for his lack of trust, a lack that will prevent him from entering the promised land (cf. *Num 20:12*).

With these fears, with this often wavering heart, how can Moses pray? Indeed, Moses appears human like us. And this happens to us too: when we have doubts, how can we pray? We do not feel like praying.

And it is because of this, his weakness, as well as his strength, that we are impressed. Entrusted by God to transmit the Law to his people, founder of divine worship, mediator of the loftiest mysteries, he will not for this reason cease to maintain close bonds of solidarity with his people, especially in the hour of temptation and sin. He is always attached to his people. Moses never forgets his people. And this is a great characteristic of pastors: not forgetting the people, not forgetting one's roots. It is what Paul says to his beloved young Bishop Timothy: "Remember your mother and your grandmother, your roots, your people". Moses is so friendly with God that he can speak with Him face to face (cf. *Ex* 33:11); and he will remain so friendly with the people that he feels mercy for their sins, for their temptations, for the sudden nostalgia that the exiles feel for the past, recalling when they were in Egypt.

Moses does not reject God, but nor does he reject his people. He is faithful to his flesh and blood, he is faithful to God's voice. Moses is not therefore an authoritarian and despotic leader; the Book of Numbers defines him rather as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth" (*Num* 12:3). Despite his privileged status, Moses never ceases to belong to the ranks of the poor in spirit who live by trusting in God as the viaticum of their journey. He is a man of his people.

Thus, the manner of prayer most proper to Moses is through *intercession* (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2574). His faith in God is completely at one with the sense of fatherhood he feels toward his people. Scripture habitually portrays him with his hands outstretched toward God, as if to form with his own person a bridge between heaven and earth. Even in the most difficult moments, even on the day when the people repudiate God and Moses himself as leader and make themselves a golden calf, Moses does not feel inclined to set his people aside. They are my people. They are your people. They are my people. He does not reject God nor his people. And he says to God: "this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves

gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (*Ex 32:31-32*). Moses does not barter his people. He is the bridge; he is the intercessor. Both of them, the people and God, and he is in the middle. He does not sell out his people to advance his career. He does not climb the ladder; he is an intercessor: for his people, for his flesh and blood, for his history, for his people and for the God who called him. He is the bridge. What a beautiful example for all pastors who must be ‘bridges’. This is why they are called *pontifex*, bridges. Pastors are the bridges between the people they belong to, and God, to whom they belong by vocation. This is what Moses is: “Lord, forgive their sin, and if you do not forgive, blot me from the book you have written. I do not want to advance at the expense of my people”.

And this is the prayer that true believers cultivate in their spiritual life. Even if they experience people’s shortcomings and their distance from God, these prayerful people do not condemn them, they do not reject them. The intercessory attitude is proper to the saints who, in imitation of Jesus, are ‘bridges’ between God and his people. Moses, in this sense, was the first great prophet of Jesus, our advocate and intercessor (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2577). And today, too, Jesus is the *pontifex*; he is the bridge between us and the Father. And Jesus intercedes for us; he shows the Father the wounds that are the price of our salvation, and he intercedes. And Moses is the figure of Jesus who today prays for us, intercedes for us.

Moses urges us to pray with the same ardour of Jesus, to intercede for the world, to remember that despite all its frailties, it still belongs to God. Everyone belongs to God. The worst sinners, the most wicked people, the most corrupt leaders, are children of God, and Jesus feels this and intercedes for everyone. And the world lives and flourishes to the blessing of the righteous, to the prayer for mercy, this prayer for mercy that the holy, the righteous, the intercessor, the priest, the bishop, the Pope, the layperson, any baptized person unceasingly raises up for humanity, in every place and time in history. Let us think

of Moses, the intercessor. And when we want to condemn someone and we become angry inside — getting angry can do good, but condemning does no good – let us intercede for him or her; this will help us a lot.

Today is the “Day of Conscience”, inspired by the witness of the Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who some 80 years ago decided to follow the voice of his conscience and saved the lives of thousands of Jews and other persecuted people. May freedom of conscience be respected always and everywhere; and may every Christian give the example of consistency with an upright conscience enlightened by the Word of God.

*(17<sup>th</sup> June 2020)*



## **8. *The prayer of David***

On our itinerary of catecheses on prayer, today we meet King David. Favoured by God even from his youth, he is chosen for a unique mission that plays a central role in the history of the People of God and of our own faith. In the Gospels, Jesus is called "son of David" a number of times; in fact, like him, He was born in Bethlehem. According to the promises, the Messiah would come from the descendants of David: a King completely after God's heart, in perfect obedience to the Father, whose action faithfully realizes His plan of salvation (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2579).

David's story begins on the hills surrounding Bethlehem, where he grazes the flock of his father, Jesse. He is still a boy, the last of many brothers. So much so that when the prophet Samuel, by God's order, goes in search of the new king, it seems almost as if his father has forgotten about his youngest son (cf. *1 Sam* 16:1-13). He worked in the open air: we can think of him as a friend of the wind, of the sounds of nature, of the rays of the sun. He has only one companion to comfort his soul: his harp; and during those long days spent in solitude, he loves to play and to sing to his God. He also played with the slingshot.

Therefore David is, first and foremost, *a shepherd*: a man who takes care of animals, who defends them from oncoming danger, who provides for their sustenance. When, by God's will, David will have to care for his people, the actions he will take will not be very different from these. This is why the image of the shepherd frequently occurs in the Bible. Even Jesus defines himself as "the good shepherd", whose behaviour is different than that of the mercenary; he offers his life on behalf of the sheep; he guides them; he knows each of them by name (cf. *Jn* 10:11-18).

David learned a lot from his previous job. So, when the prophet Nathan reproaches him for his very serious sin (cf. *2 Sam* 12:1-15), David understands right away that he has been a bad shepherd, that he has

despoiled another man of his only sheep which he loved, that he is no longer a humble servant, but a man crazy for power, a poacher who loots and preys on others.

A second characteristic trait present in David's vocation is his *poet's soul*. From this small observation, we can deduce that David was not a vulgar man, as is often the case with individuals who are forced to live for long periods isolated from society. He is, instead, a sensitive person who loves music and song. His harp would accompany him always: sometimes to raise a hymn of joy to God (cf. 2 Sam 6:16), other times to express a lament, or to confess his own sin (cf. *Ps* 51:3).

The world that presents itself before his eyes is not a silent scene: as things unraveled before his gaze he observed a greater mystery. That is exactly where prayer arises: from the conviction that life is not something that takes us by surprise, but an astonishing mystery that inspires poetry, music, gratitude, praise, even lament and supplication in us. When a person lacks that poetic dimension, let's say, when he lacks poetry, his or her soul limps. Thus, tradition casts David as the great artist behind the composition of the Psalms. Many of them, at the beginning, often bear an explicit reference to the king of Israel, and to some of the more or less noble events of his life.

David, therefore, has a dream: that of being a good shepherd. Sometimes he will live up to this task, other times less so; what is important, however, in the context of the history of salvation, is that he is a prophecy of another King, whom he merely announces and prefigures.

Let us look at David; let us think about David. Holy and sinful, persecuted and persecutor, victim and manslayer, which is a contradiction. David was all of this, together. And we too have recorded events in our lives that are often opposed to each other; in the drama of life, all people often sin by inconsistency. There is a single golden thread running through David's life, that gives unity to everything that

happens: his prayer. That is the voice that is never extinguished. David the saint prays; David the sinner prays; David the persecuted prays; David the persecutor prays. Even David the manslayer prays. This is the golden thread that runs through his life. A man of prayer. That is the voice that is never silenced: whether it assumes tones of jubilation or those of lament, it is always the same prayer; only the melody changes. In so doing, David teaches us to let everything enter into dialogue with God: joy as well as guilt, love as well as suffering, friendship as much as sickness. Everything can become a word spoken to the "You" who always listens to us.

David, who knew solitude, was in reality never alone! In the end, this is the power of prayer in all those who make room for it in their lives. Prayer gives you nobility, and David is noble because he prays. But he is a manslayer who prays; he repents and his nobility returns thanks to prayer. Prayer gives us nobility. It is capable of securing our relationship with God who is the true Companion on the journey of every man and woman, amid life's thousand adversities, good or bad: but always prayer. Thank you, Lord. I am afraid, Lord. Help me, Lord. Forgive me, Lord. David's trust is so great that, when he was persecuted and had to flee, he did not let anyone defend him: "If my God humiliates me thus, he knows what he is doing", because the nobility of prayer leaves us in God's hands. Those hands wounded by love: the only sure hands we have.

*(24<sup>th</sup> June 2020)*

## **9. *Elijah's prayer***

Today, we resume our catechesis on prayer, which we interrupted for the catechesis on the care of creation, and will now resume; and we meet one of the most compelling characters in all of Sacred Scripture: the prophet Elijah. He goes beyond the confines of his time, and we can also see his presence in some of the episodes in the Gospels. He appeared at Jesus' side, along with Moses, at the moment of the Transfiguration (cf. *Mt* 17:3). Jesus himself refers to him to give credit to the testimony of John the Baptist (cf. *Mt* 17:10-13).

In the Bible, Elijah appears suddenly, in a mysterious way, coming from a small village that is completely marginal (cf. 1 *Kings* 17:1); and in the end he leaves the scene, under the eyes of the disciple Elisha, on a chariot of fire that takes him to heaven (cf. 2 *Kings* 2:11-12). He is therefore a man without a precise origin, and above all without an end, carried off into heaven. For this reason his return was expected before the coming of the Messiah, as a precursor. Elijah's return was thus awaited.

Scripture presents Elijah as a man of crystalline faith: his very name, which may mean "Yahweh is God", encloses the secret of his mission. He will be like this for the rest of his life: a man of integrity, incapable of petty compromises. His symbol is fire, the image of God's purifying power. He will be the first to be put to the test, and he will remain faithful. He is the example of all people of faith who know temptation and suffering, but do not fail to live up to the ideal for which they were born.

Prayer is the lifeblood that constantly nourishes his existence. This is why he is one of those most dear to the monastic tradition, so much so that some have elected him as the spiritual father of a life consecrated to God. Elijah is the man of God, who stands as a defender of the primacy of the Most High. And yet, he too is forced to come to terms with his own frailties. It is difficult to say which experiences were

most useful to him: the defeat of the false prophets on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 *Kings* 18:20-40), or the bewilderment in which he finds that he is "no better than his ancestors" (cf. 1 *Kings* 19:4). In the soul of those who pray, the sense of their own weakness is more precious than moments of exaltation, when it seems that life is a series of victories and successes. This always happens in prayer: moments of prayer that we feel lift us up, even of enthusiasm, and moments of prayer of pain, aridity, trial. This is what prayer is: letting ourselves be carried by God, and also allowing ourselves to be struck by unpleasant situations and even temptations. This is a reality found in many other biblical vocations, even in the New Testament; think, for example, of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Their lives were like this too: moments of exaltation and moments of low spirits, of suffering.

Elijah is the man of contemplative life and, at the same time, of active life, preoccupied with the events of his time, capable of clashing with the king and queen after they had Nabot killed to take possession of his vineyard (cf. 1 *Kings* 21:1-24). How much we need believers, zealous Christians who take action when facing those with managerial responsibility, with the courage of Elijah, to say: "This must not be done! This is murder!". We need Elijah's spirit. He shows us that there should be no dichotomy in the life of those who pray: one stands before the Lord and goes towards the brothers and sisters to whom He sends us. Prayer is not about locking oneself up with the Lord to put "make-up" on one's soul: no, this is not prayer, this is false prayer. Prayer is a confrontation with God, and allowing oneself to be sent to serve one's brothers and sisters. The touchstone of prayer is concrete love towards our neighbour. And vice versa: believers act in the world after having first kept silent and prayed; otherwise, their action is impulsive, it is devoid of discernment, it is rushing without a destination. Believers behave this way, they do many injustices because they did not go to pray to the Lord first, to discern what they must do.

The pages of the Bible suggest that Elijah's faith also made progress: he too grew in prayer, he refined it little by little. God's face came into

focus for him as he walked. He reached his peak in that extraordinary experience, when God manifested himself to Elijah on the mount (cf. 1 *Kings* 19:9-13). He manifested himself not in the fierce storm, not in the earthquake or the devouring fire, but in "a still small voice" (v. 12). Or better, a translation that reflects that experience well: in a thread of resounding silence. This is how God manifests himself to Elijah. It is with this humble sign that God communicates with Elijah, who at that moment was a fugitive prophet who had lost peace. God comes forward to meet a tired man, a man who thought he had failed on all fronts, and with that gentle breeze, with that thread of resounding silence, He brings calm and peace back into his heart.

This is the story of Elijah, but it seems written for all of us. Some evenings we may feel useless and alone. It is then that prayer will come and knock on the door of our hearts. We can all gather a corner of Elijah's cloak, just as his disciple Elisha collected half his cloak. And even if we have done something wrong, or if we feel threatened and frightened, when we return before God with prayer, serenity and peace will return as if by miracle. This is what the example of Elijah teaches us.

*(7<sup>th</sup> October 2020)*

## **10. *The prayer of the Psalms. 1***

As we read the Bible, we continually come across prayers of various types. But we also find a book made up solely of prayers, a book that has become the native land, gymnasium and home of countless men and women of prayer. It is the *Book of Psalms*. There are 150 Psalms to pray.

The *Catechism* affirms that every Psalm “possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by men of all times and conditions” (ccc, 2588). As we read and reread the Psalms, we learn the language of prayer. God the Father, indeed, with his Spirit, inspired them in the heart of King David and others who prayed, in order to teach every man and woman how to praise him, how to thank him and supplicate him; how to invoke him in joy and in suffering, and how to recount the wonders of his works and of his Law. In short, the Psalms are the Word of God that we human beings use to speak with him.

In this book we do not encounter ethereal people, abstract people, those who confuse prayer with an aesthetic or alienating experience. The Psalms are not texts created on paper; they are invocations, often dramatic, that spring from lived existence. To pray them it is enough for us to be what we are. We must not forget that to pray well we must pray as we are, without embellishment. One must not embellish the soul to pray. “Lord, I am like this”, and go in front of the Lord as we are, with the good things and also with the bad things that no one knows about, but that we inwardly know. In the Psalms we hear the voices of men and women of prayer in flesh and blood, whose life, like that of us all, is fraught with problems, hardships and uncertainties. The Psalmist does not radically contest this suffering: he knows that it is part of living. In the Psalms, however, suffering is transformed into a *question*. From suffering to questioning.

And among the many questions, there is one that remains suspended, like an incessant cry that runs throughout the entire book from

beginning to end. A question that we repeat many times: "*Until when, Lord? Until when?*" Every suffering calls for liberation, every tear calls for consolation, every wound awaits healing, every slander a sentence of absolution. "Until when, Lord, will I have to suffer this? Listen to me, Lord!" How many times we have prayed like this, with "Until when?", enough now, Lord!

By constantly asking such questions, the Psalms teach us not to get used to pain, and remind us that life is not saved unless it is healed. The existence of each human being is but a breath, his or her story is fleeting, but the prayerful know that they are precious in the eyes of God, and so *it makes sense to cry out*. And this is important. When we pray, we do so because we know we are precious in God's eyes. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that, from within, inspires in us this awareness: of being precious in the eyes of God. And this is why we are moved to pray.

The prayer of the Psalms is the testimony of this cry: a multiple cry, because in life suffering takes a thousand forms, and takes the name of sickness, hatred, war, persecution, distrust... Until the supreme "scandal", that of death. Death appears in the Psalter as man's most unreasonable enemy: what crime deserves such cruel punishment, which involves annihilation and the end? The prayer of the Psalms asks God to intervene where all human efforts are in vain. That is why prayer, in and of itself, is the way of salvation and the beginning of salvation.

Everyone suffers in this world: whether they believe in God or reject Him. But in the Psalter, pain becomes a *relationship*, rapport: a cry for help waiting to intercept a listening ear. It cannot remain meaningless, without purpose. Even the pains we suffer cannot be merely specific cases of a universal law: they are always "my" tears,. Think about this: tears are not universal, they are "my" tears. Everyone has their own. "My" tears and "my" pain drive me to go ahead in prayer. They are "my" tears, that no one has ever shed before me. Yes, many have



wept, many. But "my" tears are mine, "My" pain is my own, "my" suffering is my own.

Before entering the Hall, I met the parents of that priest of the diocese of Como who was killed: he was killed precisely in his service of helping. The tears of those parents are "their" own tears, and each of them knows how much he or she has suffered in seeing this son who gave his life in service to the poor. When we want to console somebody, we cannot find the words. Why? Because we cannot arrive at his or her pain, because "their" suffering is "their" own, his tears are his own. The same is true of us: the tears, "my" suffering is mine, the tears are "mine" , the tears are mine, and with these tears, with this suffering I turn to the Lord.

All human suffering is sacred to God. So prays the prayer of Psalm 56: "Thou hast kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?" (v. 8). Before God we are not strangers, or numbers. We are faces and hearts, known one by one, by name.

In the Psalms, the believer finds an answer. He knows that even if all human doors were barred, God's door is open. Even if the whole world had issued a verdict of condemnation, there is salvation in God.

"The Lord listens": sometimes in prayer it is enough to know this. Problems are not always solved. Those who pray are not deluded: they know that many questions of life down here remain unresolved, with no way out; suffering will accompany us and, after one battle, others will await us. But if we are listened to, everything becomes more bearable.

I will tell you something: it is good for me, in difficult moments, to think of Jesus weeping; when He wept looking at Jerusalem, when He wept before Lazarus' tomb. God has wept for me, God weeps, He weeps over our suffering. Because God wanted to make Himself man - a spiritual writer used to say - in order to be able to weep. To think

that Jesus weeps with me in suffering is a consolation: it helps us to keep going. If we maintain our relationship with Him, life does not spare us suffering, but it opens up to a great horizon of goodness and sets out towards its fulfillment. Take courage, persevere in prayer. Jesus is always by our side.

*(14<sup>th</sup> October 2020)*

## **11. *The prayer of the Psalms. 2***

Today, we need to slightly change the way the Audience is conducted because of the coronavirus. You are separated, with the protection of masks as well, and I am here, a bit distant and I cannot do what I always do, come near you, because every time I approach you, you come together and we lose the distance, and there is the danger of contagion for you. I apologize for this, but it is for your safety. Instead of coming near you and shaking your hands and greeting you, we have to greet each other from a distance, but know that I am near you with my heart. I hope that you understand why I am doing this. Also, while the readers were reading the biblical passage, my attention was caught by that baby boy or girl who was crying. And I was watching that mum who was cuddling and nursing the baby and I thought: "this is what God does with us, like that mum". With what tenderness she was trying to comfort and nurse the baby.

They are beautiful images. And when this happens in Church, when a baby cries, one knows there is the tenderness of a mother there, like today there is the tenderness of a mother who is the symbol of God's tenderness with us. Never silence a crying baby in Church, never, because it is the voice that attracts God's tenderness. Thank you for your witness.

Today we complete the catechesis on the *prayer of the Psalms*. First of all, we see that a negative figure often appears in the Psalms, that of the "wicked" person, he or she who lives as if God were not there. This is the person without any transcendent referent, whose arrogance has no limits, who fears no judgment regarding what he or she thinks or does.

For this reason, the Psalter presents prayer as the fundamental reality of life. The reference to the absolute and to the transcendent — which the spiritual masters call the "holy fear of God" — is what makes us completely human, it is the boundary that saves us from ourselves,

preventing us from venturing into life in a predatory and voracious manner. Prayer is the salvation of the human being.

There certainly also exists a false prayer, prayer that is said only for the admiration of others. The person or persons who go to Mass only to show that they are Catholics or to show off the latest fashion they bought, or to make a good impression in society. They move toward false prayer. Jesus strongly admonished against such prayer (cf. *Mt* 6:5-6; *Lk* 9:14). But when the true spirit of prayer is sincerely received and enters the heart, it then lets us contemplate reality with God's very eyes.

When one prays, everything acquires "depth". This is interesting in prayer, perhaps something subtle begins but in prayer that thing acquires depth, it becomes weighty, as if God takes it in hand and transforms it. The worst service someone can give God and also mankind is to pray wearily, by rote. To pray like parrots. No, we pray with the heart. Prayer is the centre of life. If there is prayer, even a brother, a sister, even an enemy becomes important. An old saying from the first Christian monks reads: "Blessed the monk who regards every human being as God, after God" (Evagrius Ponticus, *Trattato sulla preghiera*, n. 123). Those who adore God, love his children. Those who respect God, respect human beings.

And so, prayer is not a sedative to alleviate life's anxieties; or, in any case, this type of prayer is certainly not Christian. Rather, prayer makes each of us responsible. We see this clearly in the "Our Father" that Jesus taught his disciples.

To learn how to pray this way, the Psalter is a tremendous school. We saw how the Psalms do not always use refined and genteel language, and that they often bear the scars of existence. And yet, all these prayers were first used in the Temple of Jerusalem and then in the synagogues; even the most intimate and personal ones. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way: "The Psalter's many

forms of prayer take shape both in the liturgy of the Temple and in the human heart" (n. 2588). And thus, personal prayer draws from and is nourished first by the prayer of the people of Israel, then by the prayer of the Church.

Even the Psalms in the first person singular, which confide the most intimate thoughts and problems of an individual, are a collective heritage, to the point of being prayed by everyone and for everyone. The prayer of Christians has this "breath", this spiritual "tension" that holds the temple and the world together. Prayer can begin in the half light of a church's nave, but then come to an end on the city streets. And vice versa, it can blossom during the day's activities and reach its fulfillment in the liturgy. The church doors are not barriers, but permeable "membranes", willing to receive everyone's cry.

The world is always present in the Psalter's prayer. The Psalms, for example, voice the divine promise of salvation for the weakest: "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan I will now arise," says the Lord; "I will place him in the safety for which he longs" (12:5). Or again, they warn about the danger of worldly riches because "man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish" (49:20). Or still, they open the horizon to God's gaze over history: "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nought; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (33:10-11).

In short, where there is God, the human person must be there too. Sacred Scripture is categorical: We love because he loved us first. He always goes before us. He always awaits us because he loves us first, he looks at us first, he understands us first. He always awaits us. If any one says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his own brother who he can see, cannot love God who he cannot see.

If you pray many rosaries each day but then gossip about others, and nourish grudges inside, if you hate others, this is pure artifice, it is not the truth. And this is the commandment we have from him: "that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 Jn 4:19-21). Scripture acknowledges the case of a person who, even while sincerely seeking God, never succeeds in encountering Him; but it also states that one can repudiate the tears of the poor only at the expense of encountering God. God cannot stand the "atheism" of those who repudiate the divine image that is imprinted in every human being. That everyday atheism: I believe in God but I keep my distance from others and I allow myself to hate others. This is practical atheism. Not recognizing the human person as the image of God is a sacrilege, an abomination, the worst offense that can be directed toward the temple and the altar.

Dear brothers and sisters, the prayers of the Psalms help us not to fall into the temptation of the "wicked", that is, of living, and perhaps also of praying, as if God does not exist, and as if the poor do not exist.

*(21<sup>st</sup> October 2020)*

## **12. *Jesus, man of prayer***

Today, in this audience, as we have done in the previous audiences, I will stay here. I would very much like to come down and greet each one of you, but we must keep our distance, because if I come down, then a crowd immediately forms to greet me, and this is contrary to the measures and the precautions we must take in order to face this “lady” that is called Covid and harms us so much. Therefore, please excuse me if I do not come down to greet you: I will greet you from here but I hold all of you in my heart. And you, please hold me in your heart, and pray for me. From a distance, we can pray for each other; thank you for your understanding.

In our itinerary of catechesis on prayer, after travelling through the Old Testament, we now arrive at Jesus. And Jesus prayed. The beginning of his public ministry takes place with his baptism in the River Jordan. The Evangelists are in agreement in attributing fundamental importance to this episode. They narrate how all the people came together *in prayer*, and specify that this gathering had a clearly *penitential* nature (cf. *Mk* 1:5; *Mt* 3:8). The people went to John to be baptized, for the forgiveness of sins: it is of a penitential character, of conversion.

Jesus’ first public act is therefore participation in a choral prayer of the people, a prayer of the people who went to be baptized, a penitential prayer, in which everyone recognizes him or herself as a sinner. This is why the Baptist wishes to oppose it, and says: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (*Mt* 3:14). The Baptist understands who Jesus is. But Jesus insists: His is an act of obedience to the will of the Father (v. 15), an act of solidarity with our human condition. He prays with the sinners of the People of God. Let us keep this clearly in mind: Jesus is the Righteous One; he is not a sinner. But he wished to come down to us, sinners, and he prays with us, and when we pray he is with us, praying; he is with us because he is in heaven, praying for us. Jesus always prays with his people, he always prays with us:

always. We never pray alone; we always pray with Jesus. He does not stay on the opposite side of the river — “I am righteous, you are sinners” — to mark his difference and distance from the disobedient people, but rather he immerses his feet in the same purifying waters. He acts as if he were a sinner. And this is the greatness of God, who sent his Son and annihilated himself, and appeared as a sinner.

Jesus is not a distant God, and he cannot be so. Incarnation revealed him in a complete and humanly unthinkable way. Thus, inaugurating his mission, Jesus places himself at the forefront of a people of penitents, as if charging himself with opening a breach through which all of us, after him, must have the courage to pass. However, the road, the journey, is difficult; but he goes ahead, opening the way. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that this is the newness of the fullness of time. It says: “his *filial prayer*, which the Father awaits from his children, is finally going to be lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for men” (no. 2599). Jesus prays with us. Let us keep this clear in our mind and in our heart: Jesus prays with us.

On that day, on the bank of the River Jordan, there is therefore all of humanity, with its unexpressed yearning for prayer. There is, above all, the population of sinners: those who thought they could not be loved by God, those who did not dare cross the threshold of the temple, those who did not pray because they did not consider themselves worthy. Jesus came for everyone, even for them, and he begins precisely by joining them. At the forefront.

The Gospel of Luke, in particular, highlights the climate of prayer in which the baptism of Jesus took place: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened” (3:21). By praying, Jesus opens the door to the heavens, and the Holy Spirit descends from that breach. And from on high a voice proclaims the wonderful truth: “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (v. 22). This simple phrase encloses an immense treasure; it enables us to intuit something of Jesus’ ministry



and of his heart, always turned to the Father. In the whirlwind of life and the world that will come to condemn him, even in the hardest and most sorrowful experiences he will have to endure, even when he experiences that he has no place to lay his head (cf. *Mt 8:20*), even when hatred and persecution are unleashed around him, Jesus is never without the refuge of a dwelling place: he dwells eternally in the Father.

This is the unique greatness of Jesus' prayer: the Holy Spirit takes possession of his person and the voice of the Father attests that he is the beloved, the Son in whom he fully reflects himself.

This prayer of Jesus, which on the banks of the River Jordan is totally personal — and will be thus for all his earthly life — in Pentecost becomes the grace of prayer for all those baptized in Christ. He himself obtained this gift for us, and he invites us to pray as he prayed.

Therefore, if during an evening of prayer we feel sluggish and empty, if it seems to us that life has been completely useless, we must at that moment beg that Jesus' prayer also become our own. "I cannot pray today, I don't know what to do: I don't feel like it, I am unworthy". In that moment, it is necessary to entrust ourselves to him so that he may pray for us, In this moment he is before the Father, praying for us; he is the intercessor; he shows the wounds to the Father, for us. Let us trust in this! If we are trustful, we will then hear a voice from heaven, louder than the voice rising from the depths of ourselves, and we will hear this voice whispering words of tenderness: "You are God's beloved, you are a son, you are the joy of the Father in heaven". Precisely for us, for each one of us, echoes the word of the Father: even if we were rejected by all, sinners of the worst kind. Jesus did not descend into the waters of the Jordan for himself, but for all of us. It was the entire People of God who went to the Jordan to pray, to ask for forgiveness, to receive that baptism of penance. And as that theologian said, they approached the Jordan with a "bare soul and bare feet". This is humility. It takes humility to pray. He opened the

heavens, as Moses had opened the waters of the Red Sea, so that we could all pass behind Him. Jesus gave us his own prayer, which is his loving dialogue with the Father. He gave it to us like a seed of the Trinity, which he wants to take root in our hearts. Let us welcome him! Let us welcome this gift, the gift of prayer. Always with him. And we will not err. Thank you.

*(28<sup>th</sup> October 2020)*

### **13. *Jesus, Teacher of prayer***

Unfortunately we have had to return to holding this audience in the library, to protect ourselves against contagion by Covid. This also teaches us that we must be very attentive to the prescriptions of the authorities, both the political authorities and health authorities, in order to protect ourselves against this pandemic. Let us offer to the Lord this distance between us, for the good of all, and let us think, let us think a lot about the sick, about those who are already marginalized when they enter the hospitals; let us think about the doctors, the nurses, the volunteers, the many people who work with the sick at this time: they risk their life but they do so out of love for their neighbour, as a vocation. Let us pray for them.

During his public life, Jesus constantly availed himself of the power of prayer. The Gospels show this to us when he retired to secluded places to pray. These are sober and discreet observations that allow us only to imagine those prayerful dialogues. They clearly demonstrate, however, that even at times of greater dedication to the poor and the sick, Jesus never neglected his intimate dialogue with the Father. The more he was immersed in the needs of the people, the more he felt the need to repose in the Trinitarian Communion, to return to the Father and the Spirit.

In Jesus' life there is therefore a secret, hidden from human eyes, which is the fulcrum of everything. Jesus' prayer is a mysterious reality, of which we grasp only something, but which allows us to interpret his entire mission from the right perspective. In those solitary hours — before dawn or at night — Jesus immerses himself in his intimacy with the Father, that is, in the Love that every soul thirsts for. This is what emerges from the very first days of his public ministry.

One Sabbath, for example, the town of Capernaum was transformed into a "field hospital": after sunset they brought all the sick to Jesus, and he healed them. Before dawn, however, Jesus disappeared: he

withdrew to a solitary place and prayed. Simon and the others looked for him and when they found him they said: "Everyone is searching for you!" How does Jesus reply? "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out" (cf. *Mk* 1:35-38). Jesus always goes a bit further, further in prayer with the Father, and beyond, to other villages, other horizons, to go and preach, other peoples.

Prayer is the *rudder that guides Jesus' course*. The stages of his mission were not dictated by success, nor by consensus, or the seductive phrase "everyone is searching for you". Jesus' path was charted by the least comfortable one, which obeyed the Father's inspiration, which Jesus heard and welcomed in his solitary prayer.

The Catechism states that "when Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray" (no. 2607). Therefore, from Jesus' example we can derive some *characteristics of Christian prayer*.

First and foremost, it possesses primacy: it is *the first desire of the day*, something that is practised at dawn, before the world awakens. It restores a soul to what otherwise would be without breath. A day lived without prayer risks being transformed into a bothersome or tedious experience: everything that happens to us could turn into a badly endured and blind fate for us. Jesus instead teaches an obedience to reality and, therefore, to listening. Prayer is primarily listening and encountering God. The problems of everyday life, then, do not become obstacles, but appeals from God himself to listen to and encounter those who are in front of us. The trials of life thus change into opportunities to grow in faith and charity. The daily journey, including hardships, acquires the perspective of a "vocation". Prayer has the power to transform into good what in life would otherwise be a sentence; prayer has the power to open the mind to a great horizon and to broaden the heart.

Secondly, prayer is an art to be practised *insistently*. Jesus himself says to us: knock, knock, knock. We are all capable of sporadic prayers, which arise from a momentary emotion; but Jesus educates us in another type of prayer: the one that knows a discipline, an exercise, and is assumed within a rule of life. Consistent prayer produces progressive transformation, makes us strong in times of tribulation, gives us the grace to be supported by the One who loves us and always protects us.

Another characteristic of Jesus' prayer is *solitude*. Those who pray do not escape from the world, but prefer deserted places. There, in silence, many voices can emerge that we hide in our innermost selves: the most repressed desires, the truths that we insist on suffocating, and so on. And, above all, in silence God speaks. Every person needs a space for him or herself, somewhere to cultivate their interior life, where actions find meaning again. Without an interior life we become superficial, agitated, and anxious — how anxiety harms us! This is why we must turn to prayer; without an interior life we flee from reality, and we also flee from ourselves, we are men and women always on the run.

Lastly, Jesus' prayer is the place where we perceive that *everything comes from God and returns to him*. Sometimes we human beings believe that we are the masters of everything, or on the contrary, we lose all self-esteem, we go from one side to the other. Prayer helps us to find the right dimension in our relationship with God, our Father, and with all creation. And Jesus' prayer, in the end, means delivering oneself into the hands of the Father, like Jesus in the olive grove, in that anguish: "Father, if it is possible ... but may your will be done". Delivering oneself into the hands of the Father. It is beautiful, when we are agitated, a bit worried, and the Holy Spirit transforms us from within and leads us to this surrendering into the hands of the Father: "Father, let your will be done".

Dear brothers and sisters, let us rediscover Jesus Christ as a teacher of prayer in the Gospel and place ourselves in his school. I assure you that we will find joy and peace.

*(4<sup>th</sup> November 2020)*



