

POPE FRANCIS



CATECHESES ON PRAYER

CATECHESES 14 - 26

14. *The persevering prayer*

We continue the catecheses on prayer. Someone said to me: "You talk too much about prayer. It is not necessary". Yes, it is necessary. Because if we do not pray, we will not have the strength to go forward in life. Prayer is like the oxygen of life. Prayer draws down upon us the presence of the Holy Spirit who always leads us forward. For this reason, I speak a lot about prayer.

Jesus gave us the example of continual prayer, practiced with *perseverance*. Constant dialogue with his Father, in silence and in recollection, was the fulcrum of his entire mission. The Gospels also report his exhortations to the disciples, that they pray insistently, without growing tired. The *Catechism* recalls three parables contained in the Gospel of Luke that underline this characteristic of Jesus' prayer (cf. CCC, 2613).

First of all, prayer must be *tenacious*: like the character in the parable who, having to welcome a guest who arrived unexpectedly in the middle of the night, goes to knock on the door of a friend and asks him for some bread. The friend responds, "No!", because he is already in bed — but he insists and insists until he forces his friend to get up and give him some bread (cf. *Lk* 11:5-8). A tenacious request. But God is more patient than we are, and those who knock with faith and perseverance on the door of his heart will not be disappointed. God always responds. Always. Our Father knows well what we need; insistence is necessary not to inform him or to convince him, but rather it is necessary to nurture the desire and expectation in us.

The second parable is that of the widow who goes to the judge so that he may help her obtain justice. This judge is corrupt; he is a man without scruples, but in the end, exasperated by the insistence of the widow, he decides to please her (cf. *Lk* 18:1-8)... He thought: "But, it is better to resolve this problem and get her off my back rather

than she continuously come before me to complain". This parable makes us understand that faith is not a momentary leap, but a courageous disposition to call on God, even to "argue" with him, without resigning oneself to evil and injustice.

The third parable presents a pharisee and a publican who go to the Temple to pray. The first turns to God boasting of his merits; the other feels unworthy even to enter the sanctuary. God however does not listen to the prayer of the first, that is, of the proud ones, while he does grant the prayer of the humble (cf. *Lk* 18:9-14). There is no true prayer without a spirit of humility. It is precisely humility that leads us to ask in prayer.

The teaching of the Gospel is clear: we need to pray always, even when everything seems in vain, when God appears to be deaf and mute and it seems we are wasting time. Even if heaven is overshadowed, the Christian does not stop praying. A Christian's prayer keeps stride with his or her faith. And many days of our life, faith seems to be an illusion, a barren struggle. There are moments of darkness in our life, and in those moments, faith seems to be an illusion. But the practice of prayer means accepting this struggle too. "Father, I pray and do not feel anything... I feel like my heart is dry, that my heart is arid". But we have to continue, with this struggle in the tough moments, the moments in which we feel nothing. Many saints experienced the night of faith and God's silence — when we knock and God does not respond — and these saints were persevering.

During these nights of faith, those who pray are never alone. Indeed, Jesus is not only a witness and teacher of prayer; he is more. He welcomes us *in his prayer* so that we might pray in him and through him. And this is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why the Gospel invites us to pray to the Father in Jesus' name. Saint John provides these words of the Lord: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (14:13). And

the *Catechism* explains that “the certitude that our petitions will be heard is founded on the prayer of Jesus” (n. 2614). It gives the wings that the prayer of mankind has always desired to possess.

How can we fail to recall here the words of Psalm 91, laden with trust, springing from a heart that hopes for everything from God: “he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday” (vv. 4-6). It is in Christ that this stupendous prayer is fulfilled, it is in him that it finds its complete truth. Without Jesus, our prayer risks being reduced to human effort, destined most of the time to failure. But he has taken on himself every cry, every groan, every jubilation, every supplication ... every human prayer. And let us not forget the Holy Spirit who prays in us; it is he who leads us to pray, he leads us to Jesus. He is the gift that the Father and the Son gave us to foster an encounter with God. And the Holy Spirit, when we pray, is the Holy Spirit who prays in our hearts.

Christ is everything for us, even in our prayer life. Saint Augustine used to say this with an enlightening expression that we also find in the *Catechism*: Jesus “prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore let us acknowledge our voice in him and his in us” (n. 2616). This is why the Christian who prays fears nothing, he or she trusts in the Holy Spirit who was given to us as a gift and who prays in us, eliciting prayer. May the Holy Spirit himself, Teacher of prayer, teach us the path of prayer.

(11th November 2020)

15. *The Virgin Mary, prayerful woman*

In our course of catecheses on prayer, today we meet *the Virgin Mary as the prayerful woman*. Our Lady prayed. When the world still knew nothing of her, when she was a simple girl engaged to a man of the house of David, Mary prayed. We can imagine the young girl of Nazareth wrapped in silence, in continuous dialogue with God who would soon entrust her with a mission. She is already full of grace and immaculate from the moment she was conceived; but she knows nothing yet of her surprising and extraordinary vocation and the stormy sea she will have to cross. One thing is certain: Mary belongs to a great host of the humble of heart whom the official historians never include in their books, but with whom God prepared the coming of his son.

Mary did not autonomously conduct her life: she waited for God to take the reins of her path and guide her where he wanted. She was docile, and with her availability she prepared the grand events in which God takes part in the world. The *Catechism* recalls her constant and caring presence in the benevolent design of the Father throughout the course of Jesus' life (cf. CCC, 2617-2618).

Mary was praying when the Archangel Gabriel came to bring his message to her in Nazareth. Her small yet immense "Here I am", which made all of creation jump for joy in that moment, had been preceded throughout salvation history by many other "Here I am's", by many trusting obediences, by many who were open to God's will. There is no better way to pray than to place oneself like Mary in an attitude of openness, with a heart open to God: "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". That is, a heart open to God's will. And God always responds. How many believers live their prayer like this! Those who are more humble of heart pray like this: with essential humility, let's put it that way; with simple humility: "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". And they pray like this and do not get upset when problems fill their days, but rather

they face reality, knowing that in humble love, in love offered in each situation, we become instruments of God's grace. "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". A simple prayer, but one in which we place ourselves in the Lord's hands so that he may guide us. We can all pray like this, almost without words.

Prayer knows how to calm restlessness. But we are restless, we always want things before asking for them, and we want them right away. This restlessness harms us. And prayer knows how to calm restlessness, knows how to transform it into availability. When we are restless, I pray and prayer opens my heart and makes me open to God's will. In those few moments of the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary knew how to reject fear, even while sensing that her "yes" would bring her tremendously difficult trials. If in prayer we understand that each day given by God is a call, our hearts will then widen and we will accept everything. We will learn how to say: "What you want, Lord. Promise me only that you will be present every step of my way". This is what's important: to ask the Lord to be present in every step of our way: that he not leave us alone, that he not abandon us in temptation, that he not abandon us in the bad moments. The end of the Our Father is like this: the grace that Jesus himself taught us to ask of the Lord.

Mary accompanied Jesus' entire life in prayer, right up to his death and resurrection; and in the end, she continued and she accompanied the first steps of the nascent Church (cf. *Acts* 1:14). Mary prayed with the disciples who had witnessed the scandal of the cross. She prayed with Peter who had succumbed to fear and cried in remorse. Mary was there, with the disciples, in the midst of the men and women whom her son had called to form his Community. Mary did not act like a priest among them, no! She is Jesus' Mother who prayed with them, in the community, as a member of the community. She prayed with them and prayed for them. And, once again, her prayer preceded the future that was about to be fulfilled: by the work of the Holy Spirit she became the Mother of God, and by the work of the Holy Spirit

she became the Mother of the Church. Praying with the nascent Church, she became the Mother of the Church, accompanying the disciples in the first steps of the Church in prayer, awaiting the Holy Spirit. In silence, always silently. Mary's prayer was silent. The Gospels recount only one of Mary's prayers at Cana, when she asked her son for those poor people who were about to make a terrible impression during the banquet. So, let us imagine: having a wedding banquet and ending it up with milk because there is no wine! What a bad impression! And she prayed and asked her son to resolve that problem. In and of itself, Mary's presence was prayer, and her presence among the disciples in the Upper Room, awaiting the Holy Spirit, was prayer. Thus Mary gave birth to the Church, she is the Mother of the Church. The *Catechism* explains: "In the faith of his humble handmaid, the Gift of God", that is, the Holy Spirit, "found the acceptance he had awaited from the beginning of time" (CCC, 2617).

In the Virgin Mary, natural feminine intuition is exalted by her most singular union with God in prayer. This is why, reading the Gospel, we note that she seems to disappear at times, only to reappear in crucial moments: Mary was open to God's voice that guided her heart, that guided her steps where her presence was needed. Her silent presence as mother and as disciple. Mary was present because she was Mother, but she was also present because she was the first disciple, the one who best learned Jesus' ways. Mary never said: "Come, I will take care of things". Instead she said: "Do whatever he will tell you", always pointing her finger at Jesus. This behaviour was typical of the disciples, and she was the first disciple: she prayed as Mother and she prayed as a disciple.

"Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). This is how the evangelist Luke depicts the Mother of the Lord in the infancy Gospel. Everything that happened around her ended up being reflected on in the depths of her heart: the days filled with joy, as well as the darkest moments when she too struggled to understand

by which roads Redemption must pass. Everything ended up in her heart so that it might pass through the sieve of prayer and be transfigured by it: whether it be the gifts of the Magi, or the flight into Egypt, until that terrible passion Friday. The Mother kept everything and brought it to her dialogue with God. Someone has compared Mary's heart to a pearl of incomparable splendour, formed and smoothed by patient acceptance of God's will through the mysteries of Jesus meditated in prayer. How beautiful it would be if we too could be a bit like our Mother! With a heart open to God's Word, with a silent heart, with an obedient heart, with a heart that knows how to receive God's Word and allows it to grow with the seed of good for the Church.

(18th November 2020)

16. *The prayer of the nascent Church*

The Church's first steps in the world were interspersed with prayer. The apostolic writings and the great narration of the *Acts of the Apostles* give us the image of a Church on the move, an active Church which, however, finds the basis and impulse for missionary action while gathered in prayer. The image of the early Community of Jerusalem is the point of reference for every other Christian experience. Luke writes in the Book of Acts: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The community persevered in prayer.

We find here four essential characteristics of ecclesial life: listening to the apostles' teaching, first; second, the safeguarding of mutual communion; third, the breaking of the bread; and fourth, prayer. They remind us that the Church's existence has meaning if it remains firmly united to Christ, that is, in community, in his Word, in the Eucharist and in prayer. It is the way we unite ourselves to Christ. Preaching and catechesis bear witness to the words and actions of the Teacher; the constant quest for fraternal communion shields us from selfishness and particularisms; the breaking of the bread fulfils the sacrament of Jesus' presence among us. He will never be absent; it is really him in the Eucharist. He lives and walks with us. And lastly, prayer, which is the space of dialogue with the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Everything in the Church that grows outside of these "coordinates" lacks a foundation. To discern a situation, we need to ask ourselves: in this situation, how are these four coordinates present — preaching, the constant search for fraternal communion — charity — the breaking of the bread — that is, Eucharistic life — and prayer. Any situation needs to be evaluated in the light of these four coordinates. Whatever is not part of these coordinates lacks ecclesiality, it is not ecclesial. It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works.

The Church is not a market; the Church is not a group of businesspeople who go forward with a new business. The Church is the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to gather us together. The Church is precisely the work of the Spirit in the Christian community, in the life of the community, in the Eucharist, in prayer... always. And everything that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation, it is like a house built upon sand (cf. *Mt* 7:24-27). It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. It is Jesus' word that fills our efforts with meaning. It is in humility that we build the future of the world.

At times, I feel tremendous sadness when I see a community that has good will, but takes the wrong path because it thinks that the Church is built up in meetings, as if it were a political party: the majority, the minority, what does this one think, that one, the other.... "This is like a Synod, the synodal path that we must take". I ask myself: where is the Holy Spirit there? Where is prayer? Where is communitarian love? Where is the Eucharist?". Without these four coordinates, the Church becomes a human society, a political party — majority, minority — changes are made as if it were a company, according to majority or minority... But the Holy Spirit is not there. And the presence of the Holy Spirit is precisely guaranteed by these four coordinates. To evaluate whether a situation is ecclesial or not ecclesial, let us ask ourselves whether these four coordinates are present: life in community, prayer, the Eucharist... [preaching] how is life developing along these four coordinates. If this is lacking, the Holy Spirit is lacking, and if the Holy Spirit is lacking, we will be a beautiful humanitarian charitable organization, good, good ... even an ecclesial party, let's put it that way. But it is not the Church. And this is why the Church cannot grow by these things: she does not grow through proselytism, as any other company, she grows by attraction. And who provokes attraction? The Holy Spirit. Let us never forget Benedict xvi's words: "The Church does not grow through proselytizing, she grows by attraction". If the Holy Spirit — who is the one who attracts [people] to Jesus — is lacking, the Church is not

there. There might be a beautiful friendship club, good, with good intentions, but not the Church, not synodality.

In reading the Acts of the Apostles we then discover what a powerful driving force of evangelization the *prayer gatherings* can be, where those who participate actually experience Jesus' presence and are touched by the Spirit. The members of the first community — although this always applies, even to us today — sensed that the narrative of the encounter with Jesus did not stop at the moment of the Ascension, but continued in their life. In recounting what the Lord said and did — listening to the Word — in praying to enter into communion with him, everything became alive. Prayer infuses light and warmth: the gift of the Spirit endowed them with fervour.

In this regard, the *Catechism* contains a very substantial expression. It says this: "The Holy Spirit ... keeps the memory of Christ alive in his Church at prayer, also leads her toward the fullness of truth, to the whole truth, and inspires new formulations expressing the unfathomable mystery of Christ at work in his Church's life, sacraments, and mission" (n. 2625). This is the Spirit's work in the Church: *making us remember Jesus*. Jesus himself said so: he will teach you and remind you. The mission is to *remember* Jesus, but not as a mnemonic exercise. Christians, walking on the paths of mission, remember Jesus while they make him present once more; and from him, from his Spirit, they receive the "push" to go, to proclaim, to serve. In prayer, Christians immerse themselves in the mystery of God who loves each person, that God who desires the Gospel to be preached to everyone. God is God for everyone, and in Jesus every wall of separation has definitively crumbled: as Saint Paul says, He is our peace, that is, he "who has made us both one" (*Eph 2:14*). Jesus created unity.

In this way the life of the early Church had the rhythm of a continuous succession of celebrations, convocations, times of both communitarian and personal prayer. And it is the Spirit who granted

strength to the preachers who set out on the journey, and who, for love of Jesus, sailed the seas, faced dangers, subjected themselves to humiliation.

God gives love, God asks for love. This is the mystical root of the believer's entire life. In prayer, the first Christians, but we too who have come many centuries later, all live the same experience. The Spirit inspires everything. And every Christian who is not afraid to devote time to prayer can make his or her own the words of the Apostle Paul: "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (*Gal* 2:20). Prayer makes you aware of this. Only in the silence of adoration do we experience the whole truth of these words. We must recapture this sense of adoration. To adore, to adore God, to adore Jesus, to adore the Spirit. The Father, the Son and the Spirit: to adore. In silence. The prayer of adoration is the prayer that makes us recognize God as the beginning and the end of all of History. And this prayer is the living flame of the Spirit that gives strength to witness and to mission. Thank you.

(25th November 2020)

17. *The blessing*

Today we will reflect on an essential dimension of prayer: *blessing*. We are continuing the reflections on prayer. In the creation accounts (cf. *Gen* 1-2), God continually blesses life, always. He blesses the animals (1:22); he blesses the man and the woman (1:28); finally, he blesses the Sabbath, the day of rest and the enjoyment of all of creation (2:3). It is God who blesses. In the first pages of the Bible, there is a continual repetition of blessings. God blesses, but men give blessings as well, and soon they discover that the blessing possesses a special power that accompanies those who receive it throughout their entire life, and disposes man's heart to allow God to change it (cf. Second Vatican Council Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 61).

At the world's beginning, there is thus God who "speaks goodness" [*dice-bene*], he blesses [*bene-dice*], he speaks goodness [*dice-bene*]. He sees that every work of his hands is good and beautiful, and when he creates man, and creation is complete, he recognizes that it is "very good" (*Gen* 1:31). Shortly thereafter, the beauty that God had imprinted within his work will change, and the human being will become a degenerate creature, capable of spreading evil and death in the world; but nothing will ever take away God's original imprint, an imprint of goodness that God placed in the world, in human nature, in all of us: the capacity to bless and the fact of being blessed. God did not make a mistake with creation nor with the creation of man. The *hope of the world* lies entirely in *God's blessing*: he continues to *love us, to wish us well*; he is the first, as the poet Péguy said, to continue to hope for our good (*The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, first ed. 1911).

God's great blessing is Jesus Christ; his Son is God's greatest gift. He is a blessing for all of humanity. He is the blessing that saved us all. He is the eternal Word with which the Father blessed us "while we

were yet sinners" (*Rom 5:8*), Saint Paul says, the Word made flesh and offered for us on the cross.

Saint Paul proclaims God's plan of love with emotion. And he says it like this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (*Eph 1:3-6*). There is no sin that can completely erase the image of Christ present in each one of us. No sin can erase that image that God has given us — the image of Christ. Sin can disfigure it, but not remove it from God's mercy. A sinner can remain in error for a long time, but God is patient till the end, hoping that [the sinner's] heart will eventually open and change. God is like a good father and like a good mother — he is also a good mother: they never stop loving their child, no matter what he or she may do wrong, always. What comes to my mind is the many times that I have seen people queue to enter a prison.

Many mothers queue up to see their imprisoned child: they do not stop loving their child and they know that the people passing by on the bus are thinking: "Ah, that is a prisoner's mother". Yet they are not embarrassed about this; or better yet, they are embarrassed but they go ahead, because their child is more important than their embarrassment. Thus we are more important to God than all of the sins that we can commit, because he is a father, he is a mother, he is pure love, he has blessed us forever. And he will never stop blessing us.

It is an impressive experience to read these biblical texts of blessing in a prison, or in a rehabilitation group. To let these people feel that they are still blessed, notwithstanding their grave errors, that the heavenly Father continues to desire their good and to hope that they

will open themselves to the good, in the end. Even if their closest relatives have abandoned them since by now they judge them to be irredeemable, they are always children to God. God cannot erase in us the image of sons and daughters; each one of us is his son, his daughter. At times we see miracles happen: men and women who are reborn because they find this blessing that has anointed them as children. For God's grace changes lives: he takes us as we are, but he never leaves us as we are.

Let us think about what Jesus did with Zacchaeus (cf. *Lk* 19:1-10), for example. Everyone saw evil in him; instead, Jesus spots a glimmer of good, and from that — from his curiosity to see Jesus — He allows the mercy that saves to pass through. Thus, first Zacchaeus' heart was changed, and then his life. Jesus sees the indelible blessing of the Father in the people who are rejected and repudiated. Zacchaeus was a public sinner; he had done so many awful things, but Jesus saw that indelible sign of the Father's blessing and because of that, he had compassion. That phrase that is repeated often in the Gospel, "He was moved with compassion", and that compassion leads Him to help him and to change his heart. What's more, Jesus came to identify himself with every person in need (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). In the passage about the final protocol on which all of us will be judged, Matthew 25, Jesus says: "I was hungry, I was naked, I was in prison, I was in hospital, I was there..."

To God who blesses, we too respond by *blessing* — God has taught us how to bless and we must bless — through the prayer of praise, of adoration, of *thanksgiving*. The Catechism writes: "The prayer of blessing is man's response to God's gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing" (n. 2626). Prayer is joy and thanksgiving. God did not wait for us to convert before beginning to love us, but he loved us long before, when we were still in sin.

We cannot just bless this God who blesses us; we must bless everyone in him, all people, bless God and bless our brothers and sisters, bless the world: this is the root of Christian meekness, the ability to feel blessed and the ability to bless. If we were all to do this, wars would surely not exist. This world needs blessings, and we can give blessings and receive blessings. The Father loves us, and the only thing that remains for us is the joy of blessing him, and the joy of thanking him, and of learning from him not to curse, but to bless. Here, just one word for the people who have the habit of cursing, people who always have a bad word, a curse, on their lips and in their hearts. Each of us can think: do I have this habit of cursing like this? And ask the Lord for the grace to change this habit because we have a blessed heart and curses cannot come out of a blessed heart. May the Lord teach us never to curse, but to bless.

(2nd December 2020)

18. *The prayer of petition*

Let us continue our reflections on prayer. Christian prayer is fully human — we pray as humans, as what we are — it includes praise and supplication. Indeed, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he did so with the “Our Father”, so that we might place ourselves in a relationship of filial trust with God, and ask him all *our questions*. We implore God for the highest gifts: the sanctification of his name among men, the advent of his lordship, the fulfillment of his will for good in relation to the world. The *Catechism* recalls that: “There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the Kingdom, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming” (n. 2632). But in the “Our Father” we also pray for the simplest gifts, for more everyday gifts, such as “daily bread” — which also means health, home, work, everyday things; and it also means for the Eucharist, necessary for life in Christ; just as we pray for the forgiveness of sins — which is a daily matter; we are always in need of forgiveness — and then for peace in our relationships; and finally, that he help us during temptation and deliver us from evil.

To ask, to supplicate. This is very human. Let us listen to the *Catechism* again: “By prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have turned away from our Father. Our petition is already a turning back to him” (no. 2629).

If one feels bad because he has done bad things — he is a sinner — when he prays the “Our Father” he is already approaching the Lord. At times we may believe we do not need anything, that we are enough for ourselves, and that we live in complete self-sufficiency. This happens at times! But sooner or later this illusion vanishes. The human being is an invocation, that at times becomes a cry, often withheld. The soul resembles a dry, parched land, as the Psalm says (cf. Psalm 63:2). We all experience, at some time or another in our

existence, a time of melancholy, or of loneliness. The Bible is not ashamed of showing our human condition, marked by disease, injustice, the betrayals of friends, or the threat of enemies. At times it seems that everything is collapsing, that the life lived so far has been in vain. And in these situations, seemingly dead ends, there is only one way out: the cry, the prayer "Lord, help me!". Prayer can open up a sliver of light in the densest darkness. "Lord, help me!". This opens up the road, it opens up the path.

We human beings share this invocation of help with the rest of creation. We are not the only ones "praying" in this boundless universe: every fragment of creation bears the desire for God. And Saint Paul himself expressed it in this way. He says: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (Rom 8:22-24). The multiform cry of creatures resounds in us: of trees, of rocks, of animals. Everything yearns for fulfillment. Tertullian wrote: "Every creature prays; cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees; and when they issue from the layers and lairs, they look up heavenward with no idle mouth, making their breath vibrate after their own manner. Nay, the birds too, rising out of the nest, upraise themselves heavenward, and instead of hands, expand the cross of their wings, and somewhat to seem like prayer" (*De oratione*, XXIX). This is a poetic expression commenting on what Saint Paul says: "*the whole creation has been groaning*". But we are the only ones who pray consciously, who know that we are addressing the Father, and entering into dialogue with the Father.

Therefore, we should not be shocked if we feel the need to pray, we should not be ashamed. And, especially when we are in need, to ask. Jesus, in speaking of a dishonest man, who had to settle the accounts with his landlord, says this: "To ask, I am ashamed". And many of us have this feeling: we are ashamed to ask, to ask for help, to ask something of someone who can help us, to reach our purpose, and

also ashamed to ask God. One should not be ashamed to pray and to say: "Lord, I need this", "Lord, I am in difficulty", "Help me!": It is the cry of the heart to God who is the Father. And we have to learn to do so also in happy moments, to thank God for everything that is given to us, and not to take anything for granted or as if it were owed to us: everything is grace. The Lord always gives to us, always, and everything is grace, everything. The grace of God. However, we must not suffocate the supplication that rises up in us spontaneously. Prayer of petition goes in step with acceptance of our limitations and our nature as creatures. One may even not reach the point of belief in God, but it is difficult not to believe in prayer: it simply exists, it presents itself to us as a cry; and we all know this inner voice that may remain silent for a long time, but one day awakens and cries out.

Brothers and sisters, we know that God will respond. There is no one at prayer in the Book of Psalms who raises a lament that remains unheard. God always answers: [it may be] today, tomorrow, but he always answers, in one way or another. He always answers. The Bible repeats it countless times: God listens to the cry of those who invoke him. Even our reluctant questions, those that remain in the depths of our heart, that we are ashamed to even express: the Father listens to them and wishes to give us the Holy Spirit, who inspires every prayer and transforms everything. It is always a question of patience, of withstanding the wait. Now we are in the season of Advent, a time that is typically of expectation of Christmas. We are in waiting. This is clear to see. But all our life is also *in waiting*. And prayer is always in expectation, because we know that the Lord will answer. Even death trembles when a Christian prays, because it knows that everyone who prays has an ally who is stronger than it: the Risen Lord. Death has already been defeated in Christ, and the day will come when everything will be final, and it will no longer scorn our life and our happiness.

Let us learn to remain in expectation of the Lord. The Lord comes to visit us, not only during these great feasts — Christmas, Easter — but rather the Lord visits us every day, in the intimacy of our heart if we are in waiting. And very often we do not realize that the Lord is nearby, that he knocks on our door, and we let him pass by. Saint Augustine used to say: I am afraid of God when he passes; I am afraid he will pass and I will not realize. And the Lord passes, the Lord comes, the Lord knocks. But if your ears are filled with other noise, you will not hear the call of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, to be waiting: this is the prayer.

(9th December 2020)

19. *The prayer of intercession*

Those who pray never turn their backs on the world. If prayer does not gather the joys and sorrows, the hopes and the anxieties of humanity, it becomes a “decorative” activity, a superficial, theatrical, solitary way of behaving. We all need interiority: to retreat within a space and a time dedicated to our relationship with God. But this does not mean that we evade reality. In prayer, God “takes us, blesses us, then breaks us and gives us”, to satisfy everyone’s hunger. Every Christian is called to become in God’s hands bread, broken and shared. That is, it is concrete prayer, that is not an escape.

So, men and women of prayer seek solitude and silence, not so as not be disturbed, but so as to listen better to God’s voice. Sometimes they withdraw from the world altogether, in the secret of their own room, as Jesus recommended (see *Mt* 6:6). But wherever they are, they always keep the doors of their hearts wide open: an open door for those who pray without knowing how to pray; for those who do not pray at all but who carry within themselves a suffocating cry, a hidden invocation; for those who have erred and have lost the way... Whoever can knock on the door of someone who prays finds a compassionate heart which does not exclude anyone. Prayer comes from our hearts and our voices and gives heart and voice to so many people do not know how to pray or who do not want to pray or for whom it is impossible to pray: we are the heart and the voice of these people, rising to Jesus, rising to the Father as intercessors. In the solitude of those who pray, whether the solitude lasts a long time or only a half hour, to pray, those who pray separate themselves from everything and from everyone to find everything and everyone in God. These people pray for the whole world, bearing its sorrows and sins on their shoulders. They pray for each and every person: they are like God’s “antennas” in this world. The one who prays sees the face of Christ in every poor person who knocks at the door, in every person who has lost the meaning of things. In the *Catechism* we read: “intercession - asking on behalf of another (...) has been

characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy". This is beautiful. When we pray we are in tune with God's mercy; having mercy regarding our sins, being merciful with ourselves, but also merciful with all those who have asked to be prayed for, those for whom we want to pray in tune with God's heart. This is true prayer: in tune with God's mercy, with His merciful heart. "In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints" (n. 2635). What does it mean to participate in Christ's intercession? When I intercede for someone or pray for someone: because Christ is before the Father He is the intercessor, He prays for us, He prays showing the Father the wounds of His hands because Jesus is physically present before the Father with His body. And Jesus is our intercessor and to pray is to be a bit like Jesus: to intercede in Jesus to the Father, for others. This is very beautiful.

The human heart tends toward prayer. It is simply human. Those who do not love their brother or sister do not pray seriously. Someone might say: one cannot pray when steeped in hatred; one cannot pray when steeped in indifference. Prayer is offered only in the spirit of love. Those who do not love pretend to pray, they believe they are praying, but they are not praying because they lack the proper spirit, which is love. In the Church, those who are familiar with the sadness and joy of others dig deeper than those who investigate the worlds "chief systems". Because of this, human experience is present in every prayer, because no matter what mistakes people may have committed, they should never be rejected or set aside.

When believers, moved by the Holy Spirit, pray for sinners, no selection is made, no judgement or condemnation is uttered: they pray for everyone. And they pray for themselves. At that moment they know they are not that different from those for whom they pray. They realize they are sinners among sinners and they pray for everyone. The lesson of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican is always alive and always relevant (see *Lk* 18:9-14): we are not better than anyone, we are all brothers and sisters who bear fragility,

suffering and being sinners in common. Therefore, a prayer that we can say to God is this: "Lord, no one is just in your sight" (see *Ps* 143:2), this is what one of the Psalms says: "Lord, no one who lives is just in your sight, none of us: we are all sinners – we are all in debt, each with an outstanding balance to pay; no one is without sin in Your eyes. Lord, have mercy on us!" And with this spirit, prayer is fruitful because we go humbly before God and pray for everyone. Instead, the Pharisee was praying proudly: "I thank you, Lord, because I am not like others, sinners: I am just, always always do...". This is not prayer: this is looking at yourself in a mirror, it is not looking at one's own reality, no. It is like looking at yourself made-up in a mirror because of your pride.

The world keeps going thanks to this chain of people who pray, who intercede, and who are unknown for the most part...but not unknown to God! There are many anonymous Christians who, in times of persecution, have repeated the words of our Lord: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (*Lk* 23:34).

The Good Shepherd remains faithful even before the awareness of the sin of His own people: the Good Shepherd continues to be a Father even when His children distance themselves and abandon Him. He perseveres in His service as shepherd even with those who have bloodied His hands; He does not close His heart to those who have even made Him suffer.

The Church, in all of her members, has the mission to practice the prayer of intercession: to intercede for others. This is especially so for those who exercise roles of responsibility: parents, teachers, ordained ministers, superiors of communities... Like Abraham and Moses, they must at times "defend" the people entrusted to them before God. In reality, we are talking about protecting them with God's eyes and heart, with His same invincible compassion and tenderness. Pray with tenderness for others.

Brothers and sisters, we are all leaves on the same tree: each one that falls reminds us of the great piety that must be nourished in prayer, for one another. So let us pray for each other. It will do us good and do good for everyone. Thank you.

(16th December 2020)

20. *The prayer of thanksgiving*

Today, I would like to focus on the prayer of thanksgiving. And I take my cue from an episode recounted by the Evangelist Luke. While Jesus was on the way, ten lepers approached Him, begging: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (17:13). We know that those who had leprosy suffered not only physically, but also from social marginalization and religious marginalization. They were marginalized. Jesus did not back off from meeting them. Sometimes, he went beyond the limitations imposed by the law and touched the sick — which was not permitted — he embraced and healed them. In this case, there was no contact. From a distance, Jesus invited them to present themselves to the priests (v. 14), who were designated by law to certify any healings that had occurred. Jesus said nothing else. He listened to their prayer, he heard their cry for mercy, and he sent them immediately to the priests.

Those 10 lepers trusted, they did not remain there until they were cured, no: they trusted and they went immediately, and while they were on their way, all 10 of them were cured. The priests would have therefore been able to verify their healing and readmit them to normal life. But here is the most important point: only one in the group, before going to the priests, returned to thank Jesus and to praise God for the grace received. Only one, the other nine continued on their way. And Jesus points out that that man was a Samaritan, a sort of "heretic" for the Jews of that time. Jesus comments: "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (17:18). This narrative is touching.

This narrative, so to speak, divides the world in two: those who do not give thanks and those who do; those who take everything as if it is owed them, and those who welcome everything as a gift, as grace. The *Catechism* says: "every event and need can become an offering of thanksgiving" (n. 2638). The prayer of thanksgiving always begins from here: from the recognition that grace precedes us. We were

thought of before we learned how to think; we were loved before we learned how to love; we were desired before our hearts conceived a desire. If we view life like this, then "thank you" becomes the driving force of our day. And how often we even forget to say "thank you".

For us Christians, thanksgiving was the name given to the most essential Sacrament there is: the *Eucharist*. In fact, the Greek word means precisely this: *thanksgiving*. Eucharist: thanksgiving. Christians, as all believers, bless God for the gift of life. To live is above all to have received life. All of us are born because someone wanted us to have life. And this is only the first of a long series of debts that we incur by living. Debts of gratitude. During our lives, more than one person has gazed on us with pure eyes, gratuitously. Often, these people are educators, catechists, persons who carried out their roles above and beyond what was required of them. And they stirred gratitude within us. Even friendship is a gift for which we should always be grateful.

This "thank you" that we must say continually, this thanks that Christians share with everyone, grows *in the encounter with Jesus*. The Gospels attest that when Jesus passed by, he often stirred joy and praise to God in those who met Him. The Gospel accounts of Christmas are filled with prayerful people whose hearts are greatly moved by the coming of the Saviour. And we too were called to participate in this immense jubilation. The episode of the ten lepers who are healed also suggests this. Naturally, they were all happy about having recovered their health, thus being allowed to end that unending forced quarantine that excluded them from the community. But among them, there was one who experienced an additional joy: in addition to being healed, he rejoices at *the encounter with Jesus*. He is not only freed from evil, but he now possesses the certainty of being loved. This is the crux: when you thank someone, you express the certainty that you are loved. And this is a huge step: to have the certainty that you are loved. It is the discovery of love as the force that governs the world. Dante would say: the Love that "moves the

sun and other stars" (*Paradise*, XXIII, 145). We are no longer vagabonds wandering aimlessly here and there, no: we have a home, we dwell in Christ, and from that "dwelling" we contemplate the rest of the world which appears infinitely more beautiful to us. We are children of love, we are brothers and sisters of love. We are men and women of grace.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us seek to remain always in the joy of the encounter with Jesus. Let us cultivate joyfulness. The devil, instead, after having deluded us — with whatever temptation — always leaves us sad and alone. If we are in Christ, there is no sin and no threat that can ever prevent us from continuing our journey with joy, along with many fellow travel companions.

Above all, let us not forget to thank: if we are bearers of gratitude, the world itself will become better, even if only a little bit, but that is enough to transmit a bit of hope. The world needs hope. And with gratitude, with this attitude of thanksgiving, we transmit a bit of hope. Everything is united and everything is connected, and each one can do their part wherever they are. The path to happiness is the one that Saint Paul described at the end of one of his letters: "Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit" (*1Thess* 5:17-19). Do not quench the Spirit, what a beautiful project of life! Not quenching the Spirit that we have within leads us to gratitude.

(30th December 2020)

21. *The prayer of praise*

Let us continue our catechesis on prayer, and today we will give space to the dimension of praise.

We will take our cue from a critical passage in the life of Jesus. After the first miracles and the involvement of the disciples in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, the mission of the Messiah undergoes a crisis. John the Baptist has doubts and makes Him receive this message — John is in jail: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (*Mt 11:3*). He feels this anguish of not knowing whether he is mistaken in his proclamation. There are always dark moments, moments of spiritual nighttime, and John is going through this moment. There is hostility in the villages along the lake, where Jesus had performed so many prodigious signs (cf. *Mt 11:20-24*). Now, precisely in this disappointing moment, Matthew relates a truly surprising fact: Jesus does not raise a lament to the Father but, rather, a hymn of jubilation: “I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (*Mt 11:25*). Thus, in the midst of a crisis, amid the darkness of the soul of so many people, such as John the Baptist, Jesus blesses the Father, Jesus praises the Father. But why?

First and foremost, he praises Him *for who He is*: “Father, Lord of heaven and earth”. Jesus rejoices in his spirit because he knows and feels that his Father is the God of the Universe, and vice versa, the Lord of all that exists is the Father, “My Father”. Praise springs from this experience of feeling that he is “Son of the Most High”. Jesus *feels* he is Son of the Most High.

And then Jesus praises the Father for *favouring the little ones*. It is what he himself experiences, preaching in the villages: the “learned” and the “wise” remain suspicious and closed; they make calculations; while the “little ones” open themselves and welcome his message.

This can only be the will of the Father, and Jesus rejoices in this. We too must rejoice and praise God because humble and simple people welcome the Gospel. When I see these simple people, these humble people who go on pilgrimages, who go to pray, who sing, who praise, people who perhaps lack many things but whose humility leads them to praise God. In the future of the world and in the hopes of the Church there are always the "little ones": those who do not consider themselves better than others, who are aware of their own limitations and their sins, who do not want to lord it over others, who, in God the Father, recognize that we are all brothers and sisters.

Therefore, in that moment of apparent failure, where everything is dark, Jesus prays, praising the Father. And his prayer also leads us, readers of the Gospel, to judge our personal defeats in a different way, to judge differently the situations in which we do not see clearly the presence and action of God, when it seems that evil prevails and there is no way to stop it. Jesus, who highly recommended the prayer of asking, at the very moment when he would have had reason to ask the Father for explanations, instead begins to praise him. It seems to be a contradiction, but therein lies the truth.

To whom is praise helpful? To us or to God? A text of the Eucharistic liturgy invites us to pray to God in this way, it says this: "Although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness, but profit us for salvation" (*Roman Missal*, Common Preface IV). By giving praise, we are saved.

The prayer of praise is helpful to us. The *Catechism* defines it this way: it "shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory" (no. 2639). Paradoxically it must be practised not only when life fills us with happiness, but above all in difficult moments, in moments of darkness when the path becomes an uphill climb. That too is the time for praise, like Jesus who in the dark moment praises the Father. Because we learn that,

through that ascent, that difficult path, that wearisome path, those demanding passages, we get to see a new panorama, a broader horizon. Giving praise is like breathing pure oxygen: it purifies the soul, it makes you look far ahead, it does not leave you imprisoned in the difficult and dark moment of hardship.

There is a great teaching in that prayer that for eight centuries has never lost its beat, that Saint Francis composed at the end of his life: the "Canticle of Brother Sun" or "of the creatures". The *Poverello* did not compose it in a moment of joy, of well-being, but on the contrary, in the midst of difficulty. Francis was by then almost blind, and he felt in his soul the weight of a solitude he had never before experienced: the world had not changed since the beginning of his preaching, there were still those who let themselves be torn apart by quarrels, and in addition he was aware that death was approaching ever nearer.

It may have been a moment of disillusionment, of that extreme disillusionment and the perception of his own failure. But at that instant of sadness, in that dark instant Francis prays. How does he pray? "Praised be You, my Lord...". He prays by giving praise. Francis praises God for everything, for all the gifts of creation, and even for death, which he courageously calls "sister", "sister death". These examples of saints, of Christians, and also of Jesus, of praising God in difficult moments, open to us the gates of a great road towards the Lord, and they always purify us. Praise always purifies.

The Saints show us that we can always give praise, in good times and bad, because God is the faithful Friend. This is the foundation of praise: God is the faithful Friend, and his love never fails. He is always beside us. He always awaits us. It has been said that "he is the sentinel who is close to you and keeps you going forward with confidence". In difficult and dark moments, let us have the courage to say: "Blessed are you, O Lord". Praising the Lord. This will do us much good.

(13th January 2021)

22. *The prayer with the Sacred Scripture*

Today I would like to focus on the prayer we can do beginning with a Bible passage. The words of Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart. The Word of God goes to the heart. The *Catechism* affirms that: "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture" — the Bible cannot be read like a novel — "so that a dialogue takes place between God and man" (n. 2653). This is where prayer leads you, because it is a dialogue with God. That Bible verse was written for me too, centuries and centuries ago, to bring me a word of God. It was written for each of us. This experience happens to all believers: a passage from Scripture, heard many times already, unexpectedly speaks to me one day, and enlightens a situation that I am living. But it is necessary that I be present on that day for that appointment with the Word. That I be there, listening to the Word. Every day God passes and sows a seed in the soil of our lives. We do not know whether today he will find dry ground, brambles, or good soil that will make that seed grow (cf. *Mk* 4: 3-9). That they become for us the living Word of God depends on us, on our prayer, on the open heart with which we approach the Scriptures. God passes continually through Scripture. And here I return to what I said last week, to what Saint Augustine said: "I am afraid of God when he passes". Why is he afraid? That he will not listen to him. That he will not realize that he is the Lord.

Through prayer a new incarnation of the Word takes place. And we are the "tabernacles" where the words of God seek to be welcomed and preserved, so that they may visit the world. This is why we must approach the Bible without ulterior motives, without exploiting it. The believer does not turn to the Holy Scriptures to support his or her own philosophical and moral view, but because he or she hopes for an encounter; the believer knows that those words were written in

the Holy Spirit, and that therefore they should be welcomed and understood in that same Spirit, so that the encounter can occur.

It bothers me a little when I hear Christians who recite verses from the Bible like parrots. "Oh, yes... Oh, the Lord says... He wants this...". But did you encounter the Lord, with that verse? It is not only a question of memory: it is a question of the memory of the heart, which opens you to the encounter with the Lord. And that word, that verse, leads you to the encounter with the Lord.

Thus, we read the Scriptures so that they may "read us". And it is a grace to be able to recognize oneself in this passage or that character, in this or that situation. The Bible was not written for a generic humanity, but for us, for me, for you, for men and women in flesh and blood, men and women who have a name and a surname, like me, like you. And when the Word of God, infused with the Holy Spirit, is received with an open heart, it does not leave things as they were before: never. Something changes. And this is the grace and the power of the Word of God.

Christian tradition is rich in experiences and reflections on prayer with the Sacred Scripture. In particular, the method of "*Lectio divina*" was established; it originated in monastic circles, but is now also practised by Christians who frequent their parishes. It is first of all a matter of reading the biblical passage attentively: even more, I would say with "obedience" to the text, to understand what it means in and of itself. One then enters into dialogue with Scripture, so that those words become a cause for meditation and prayer: while remaining faithful to the text, I begin to ask myself what it "says to me". This is a delicate step: we must not slip into subjective interpretations, but rather become part of the living Tradition, which unites each of us to Sacred Scripture. The last step of *Lectio divina* is contemplation. Words and thoughts here give way to love, as between lovers for whom sometimes it is enough to just look at each other in silence.

The biblical text remains, but like a mirror, like an icon to be contemplated. And in this way, there is dialogue.

Through prayer, the Word of God comes to abide in us and we abide in it. The Word inspires good intentions and sustains action; it gives us strength and serenity, and even when it challenges us, it gives us peace. On “bad” and confusing days, it guarantees to the heart a core of confidence and of love that protects it from the attacks of the evil one.

In this way the Word of God is made flesh — allow me to use this expression: made flesh — in those who receive it in prayer. The intuition emerges in some ancient texts that Christians identify so completely with the Word that, even if all the Bibles in the world were to be burned, its “mould” could still be saved through the imprint it left on the life of the saints. This is a beautiful expression.

Christian life is at the same time a work of obedience and of creativity. Good Christians must be obedient, but they must be creative. Obedient, because they listen to the Word of God; creative, because they have the Holy Spirit within who drives them to be so, to lead them forward. At the end of one of his discourses addressed in the form of parables, Jesus makes this comparison: “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure” — the heart — “what is new and what is old” (*Mt* 13:52). The Holy Scriptures are an inexhaustible treasure. May the Lord grant us all to draw ever more from them, through prayer. Thank you.

(27th January 2021)

23. *Praying in the liturgy*

In the history of the Church, there has often been a temptation to practice an intimist Christianity that does not recognize the spiritual importance of public liturgical rites. Often, this tendency claimed the supposed greater purity of a religiosity that did not depend on external ceremonies, which were considered a useless or harmful burden. At the centre of the criticism was not a particular ritual form, or a particular way of celebrating, but rather the liturgy itself, the liturgical form of praying.

Indeed, one can find certain forms of spirituality in the Church that were unable to adequately integrate the liturgical moment. Many of the faithful, while participating assiduously in the rites, especially in Sunday Mass, drew nourishment for their faith and spiritual life more from other sources, of a devotional type.

Much has been achieved in recent decades. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council represents a pivotal point in this long journey. It comprehensively and organically reaffirms the importance of the divine liturgy for the life of Christians, who find therein that objective mediation required by the fact that Jesus Christ is not an idea or a sentiment, but a living Person, and his Mystery a historical event. The prayer of Christians passes through tangible mediations: Sacred Scripture, the Sacraments, liturgical rites, the community. In Christian life, the corporeal and material sphere cannot be disregarded, because in Jesus Christ it became the way of salvation. We could say that we should pray with the body too: the body enters into prayer.

Therefore, there is no Christian spirituality that is not grounded in the celebration of the sacred mysteries. The *Catechism* writes: "In the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of

the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays" (n. 2655). The liturgy, in itself, is not just spontaneous prayer, but something more, and more original: it is an act that founds the whole Christian experience and, therefore, prayer, too, is an event, it is a happening, it is presence, it is encounter. It is an encounter with Christ. Christ makes himself present in the Holy Spirit through the sacramental signs: hence the need for us Christians to participate in the divine mysteries. A Christianity without a liturgy, I dare say, is perhaps a Christianity without Christ. Without the Total Christ. Even in the barest of rites, such as the one some Christians have celebrated and continue to celebrate in places of incarceration, or in the hiddenness of a house in times of persecution, Christ is truly present and gives himself to his faithful.

Precisely because of its objective dimension, the liturgy asks to be celebrated with fervour, so that the grace poured out in the rite is not dispersed, but rather reaches the experience of each one. The Catechism explains it very well and says this: "Prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration" (ibid.). Many Christian prayers do not originate from the liturgy, but all of them, if they are Christian, presuppose the liturgy, that is, the sacramental mediation of Jesus Christ. Every time we celebrate a Baptism, or consecrate the bread and wine in the Eucharist, or anoint the body of a sick person with Holy Oil, Christ is here! It is he who acts and is present just as he was when he healed the weak limbs of a sick person, or when he delivered his testament for the salvation of the world at the Last Supper.

The prayer of the Christian makes the sacramental presence of Jesus his or her own. What is external to us becomes part of us: the liturgy expresses this even in the very natural gesture of eating. Mass cannot simply be "listened to": it is also an incorrect expression, "I am going

to listen to Mass". Mass cannot merely be listened to, as if we were just spectators of something that slips away without our involvement. Mass is always *celebrated*, and not only by the priest who presides it, but by all Christians who experience it. And the centre is Christ! All of us, in the diversity of gifts and ministries, join in his action, because he, Christ, is the Protagonist of the liturgy.

When the first Christians began to worship, they did so by actualizing Jesus' deeds and words, with the light and power of the Holy Spirit, so that their lives, reached by that grace, would become a spiritual sacrifice offered to God. This approach was a true "revolution". Saint Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (12:1). Life is called to become worship to God, but this cannot happen without prayer, especially liturgical prayer. May this thought help us all when we go to Mass: I go to pray in the community, I go to pray with Christ who is present. When we go to the celebration of a Baptism, for example, it is Christ present there, who baptizes. "But Father, this is an idea, a figure of speech": no, it is not a figure of speech. Christ is present, and in the liturgy you pray with Christ who is beside you.

(3^d February 2021)

24. Prayer in daily life

In the preceding catechesis we saw how Christian prayer is “anchored” in the Liturgy. Today, we will shed light on how it always returns into daily life from the Liturgy: on the streets, in offices, on public transportation... And there it continues the dialogue with God: one who prays is like someone in love who always carries the beloved person in his or her heart wherever they go.

Essentially, everything becomes a part of this dialogue with God: every joy becomes a reason for praise, every trial is an opportunity to ask for help. Prayer is always alive in our lives, like embers, even when the mouth does not speak, but the heart speaks. Every thought, even apparently “profane” ones, can be permeated by prayer. There is even a prayerful aspect in human intelligence; it is, in fact, a window peering into the mystery: it illuminates the few steps in front of us and then opens up to the entire reality, this reality that precedes it and surpasses it. This mystery does not have a disquieting or anxious face, no. Knowledge of Christ makes us confident that whatever our eyes and our minds’ eyes cannot see, rather than nothing being there, there is someone who is waiting for us; there is infinite grace. And thus, Christian prayer instils an invincible hope in the human heart: whatever experience may touch us on our journey, God’s love can turn it into good.

In this regard, the *Catechism* reads: “We learn to pray at certain moments by hearing the Word of the Lord and sharing in his Paschal Mystery, but his Spirit is offered us at all times, in the events of *each day*, to make prayer spring up from us... time is in the Father’s hands; it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today” (n. 2659). Today I meet God, today is always the day of the encounter.

There is no day more wonderful day than the one we are living. Those who live always thinking about the future: “But the future will be

better...”, but do not take each day as it comes are people who live in their fantasy, they do not know how to deal with concrete reality. And today is real, today is concrete. And prayer takes place today. Jesus comes to meet us today, the day we are living. And it is prayer that transforms this day into grace, or better, that transforms us: it quells anger, sustains love, multiplies joy, instills the strength to forgive. Sometimes it will seem that it is no longer we who are living, but that grace lives and works in us through prayer. And when an angry, an unhappy thought comes to us, that moves us toward bitterness, let us stop ourselves and say to the Lord: “Where are you? And where am I going?” And the Lord is there, the Lord will give us the right word, the advice to go ahead without that bitter taste of negativity. For prayer is always — to use a profane word — positive. Always. It will carry you forward. Each day that begins, if welcomed in prayer, is accompanied by courage, so that the problems we have to face no longer seem to be obstacles to our happiness, but rather appeals from God, opportunities for our encounter with him. And when one is accompanied by the Lord, he or she feels more courageous, freer, and even happier.

Thus, let us always pray for everything and for everyone, even for our enemies. Jesus counselled us to do this: “Pray for your enemies”. Let us pray for our dear ones, but also for those we do not know. Let us pray even for our enemies, as I said, as the Scriptures often invite us to do. Prayer inclines us toward a superabundant love. Let us pray above all for unhappy people, for those who weep in solitude and give up hope that there might still be someone who loves them. Prayer works miracles; and so the poor understand, by God’s grace that, even in their precarious situation, the prayer of a Christian makes Christ’s compassion present. Indeed, he looked with great tenderness on the weary and lost crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd (cf *Mk* 6:34). The Lord is — let us not forget — the Lord of compassion, of nearness, of tenderness: three words never to be forgotten. Because this is the Lord’s style: compassion, nearness, tenderness.

Prayer helps us love others, despite their mistakes and their sins. The person is always more important than his or her actions, and Jesus did not judge the world, but saved it. The life of people who always judge others, who are always condemning, judging, is a horrible one... It is a horrible, unhappy life. Jesus came to save us. Open your heart, forgive, give others the benefit of the doubt, understand, you, too, be close to others, be compassionate, be tender, like Jesus. We have to love each and every one, remembering in prayer that we are all sinners and at the same time loved individually by God. Loving the world in this way, loving it with tenderness, we will discover that each day and everything bears within it a fragment of God's mystery.

Again, the *Catechism* reads: "Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the Kingdom revealed to 'little children,' to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations; all forms of prayer can be the leaven to which the Lord compares the kingdom" (n. 2660).

Mankind — the human person, men and women, all of us — is like a breath, like a blade of grass (cf *Pss* 144:4; 103:15). The philosopher Pascal once wrote: "There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him".[1] We are fragile beings, but we know how to pray: this is our greatest dignity and it is also our strength. Have courage. Pray in every moment, in every situation because the Lord is near us. And when a prayer is said according to Jesus' heart, it obtains miracles.

(10th February 2021)

25. Prayer and the Trinity. 1

In our journey of catechesis on prayer, today and next week we will see how, thanks to Jesus Christ, prayer opens us up to the Trinity — to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — to the immense sea of God who is Love. It is Jesus who opened up Heaven to us and projected us into a relationship with God. It was he who did this: he opened up to us this relationship with the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is what the Apostle John says at the conclusion of the prologue of his Gospel: “No one has ever seen God: the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (*Jn* 1:18). Jesus revealed the identity to us, this identity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We really did not know how to pray: what words, what feelings and what language were appropriate for God. In that request the disciples addressed to the Teacher, which we have often recalled in the course of these catecheses, there is all of humanity’s fumbling, repeated attempts, often unsuccessful, to address the Creator: “Lord, teach us to pray” (*Lk* 11:1).

Not all prayers are equal, and not all are convenient: the Bible itself attests to the negative outcome of many prayers, which are rejected. Perhaps God at times is not pleased with our prayers and we are not even aware of this. God looks at the hands of those who pray: to make them pure it is not necessary to wash them; if anything, one should refrain from evil acts. Saint Francis prayed: “*Nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare*”, that is, “no man is worthy to mention Your name” (*Canticle of the Sun*).

But perhaps the most moving acknowledgment of the poverty of our prayer came from the lips of the Roman centurion who one day begged Jesus to heal his sick servant (cf. *Mt* 8:5–13). He felt totally inadequate: he was not a Jew, he was an officer in the detested occupying army. But his concern for his servant emboldens him, and he says: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed” (v. 8). It is the

phrase we also repeat in every Eucharistic liturgy. To dialogue with God is a grace: we are not worthy of it, we have no rights to claim, we "limp" with every word and every thought... But Jesus is the door that opens us to this dialogue with God.

Why should humanity be loved by God? There are no obvious reasons, there is no proportion.... So much so that most mythologies do not contemplate the possibility of a god who cares about human affairs; on the contrary, they are considered bothersome and boring, entirely negligible. Let us remember God's phrase to his people, repeated in Deuteronomy: "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us?". This closeness of God is the revelation! Some philosophers say that God can only think of himself. If anything, it is we humans who try to persuade the deity and be pleasing to his eyes. Hence the duty of "religion", with the procession of sacrifices and devotions to be offered continuously to ingratiate ourselves with a mute God, an indifferent God. There is no dialogue. It was only Jesus, it was only the revelation of God to Moses before Jesus, when God introduced himself; it was only the Bible that opened us up to the path of dialogue with God. Let us remember: "What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as ours?"; this closeness of God that opens us up to dialogue with him.

A God who loves humanity: we would never have had the courage to believe in him, had we not known Jesus. The knowledge of Jesus made us understand this, it revealed this to us. It is the scandal that we find inscribed in the parable of the merciful father, or in that of the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep (cf. *Lk 15*). We would not have been able to conceive or even comprehend such stories if we had not encountered Jesus. What God is prepared to die for people? What God loves always and patiently, without demanding to be loved in return? What God accepts the tremendous lack of gratitude of a son who asks for his inheritance in advance and leaves home, squandering ev-ery-thing? (cf. *Lk 15:12–13*).

It is Jesus who reveals God's heart. Thus Jesus tells us through his life the extent to which God is Father. *Tam Pater nemo* : No one is Father as he is. The paternity that is closeness, compassion and tenderness. Let us not forget these three words, that are God's style: closeness, compassion and tenderness. It is his way of expressing his paternity towards us. It is difficult for us to imagine from afar the love with which the most Holy Trinity is filled, and the depth of the reciprocal benevolence that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Eastern icons offer us a glimpse of this mystery that is the origin and joy of the whole universe.

Above all, it was beyond us to believe that this divine love would expand, landing on our human shore: we are the recipients of a love that has no equal on earth. The Catechism explains: "The sacred humanity of Jesus is therefore the way by which the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray to God our Father" (no. 2664). And this is the grace of our faith. We really could not have hoped for a higher vocation: the humanity of Jesus — God made himself close in Jesus — made available to us the very life of the Trinity; he opened, he threw wide open this door of the mystery of the love of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

(3^d March 2021)

26. *Prayer and the Trinity. 2*

Today we will complete the catechesis on prayer as a relationship with the Holy Trinity, in particular with the Holy Spirit.

The first gift of every Christian existence is the Holy Spirit. It is not one of many gifts, but rather the fundamental *Gift*. The Spirit is the gift that Jesus had promised to send us. Without the Spirit there is no relationship with Christ and with the Father, because the Spirit opens our heart to God's presence and draws it into that "vortex" of love that is the very heart of God. We are not merely guests and pilgrims journeying on this earth; we are also guests and pilgrims in the mystery of the Trinity. We are like Abraham, who, one day, welcoming three wayfarers in his own tent, encountered God. If we can truly invoke God, calling him "Abba — Dad", it is because the Holy Spirit dwells in us; he is the One who transforms us deep within and makes us experience the soul-stirring joy of being loved by God as his true children. All the spiritual work within us towards God is performed by the Holy Spirit, this gift. He works within us to carry Christian life forward towards the Father, with Jesus.

The Catechism, in this respect, says: "Every time we begin to pray to Jesus it is the Holy Spirit who draws us on the way of prayer by his prevenient grace. Since he teaches us to pray by recalling Christ, how could we not pray to the Spirit too? That is why the Church invites us to call upon the Holy Spirit every day, especially at the beginning and the end of every important action" (n. 2670). This is the work of the Spirit in us. He "reminds" us of Jesus and makes him present to us — we might say that he is our Trinitarian memory, he is the memory of God in us — and he makes it present to Jesus, so that he is not reduced to a character from the past: that is, the Spirit brings Jesus to the present in our consciousness. If Christ were only far away in time, we would be alone and lost in the world. Yes, we will remember Jesus, there, far away, but it is the Spirit that brings him today, now, at this moment, in our heart. But in the Spirit everything is brought

to life: the possibility of encountering Christ is open to Christians of every time and place. The possibility of encountering Christ, not only as a historical figure, is open. No: he attracts Christ to our hearts; it is the Spirit who makes us encounter Jesus. He is not distant, the Spirit is with us: Jesus still teaches his disciples by transforming their hearts, as he did with Peter, with Paul, with Mary Magdalene, with all the apostles. But why is Jesus present? Because it is the Spirit who brings him to us.

This is the experience of so many people who pray: men and women whom the Holy Spirit has formed according to the "measure" of Christ, in mercy, in service, in prayer, in catechesis.... It is a grace to be able to meet people like this: you realize that a different life pulsates in them, their gaze sees "beyond". Let us not think only of monks and hermits; they are also found among ordinary people, people who have woven a long history of dialogue with God, sometimes of inner struggle, which purifies faith. These humble witnesses have sought God in the Gospel, in the Eucharist received and adored, in the face of a brother or sister in difficulty, and they safeguard his presence like a secret flame.

The first task of Christians is precisely to keep alive this flame that Jesus brought to the earth (cf. Lk 12:49); and what is this flame? It is love, the Love of God, the Holy Spirit. Without the fire of the Spirit, the prophecies are extinguished, sorrow supplants joy, routine substitutes love, service turns into slavery. The image of the lighted lamp next to the Tabernacle, where the Eucharist is reserved, comes to mind. Even when the church empties and evening falls, even when the church is closed, that lamp remains lit, and continues to burn; no one sees it, yet it burns before the Lord. This is how the Spirit, in our heart, is always present like that lamp.

Again we read in the Catechism: "The Holy Spirit, whose anointing permeates our whole being, is the interior Master of Christian prayer. He is the artisan of the living tradition of prayer. To be sure, there

are as many paths of prayer as there are persons who pray, but it is the same Spirit acting in all and with all. It is in the communion of the Holy Spirit that Christian prayer is prayer in the Church" (n. 2672). Very often it happens that we do not pray, we don't feel like praying, or many times we pray like parrots, with the mouth, but our heart is not in it. This is the moment to say to the Spirit: "Come, come Holy Spirit, warm my heart. Come and teach me to pray, teach me to look to the Father, to look to the Son. Teach what the path of faith is like. Teach me how to love and, above all, teach me to have an attitude of hope". It means calling on the Spirit continually, so he may be present in our lives.

It is therefore the Spirit who writes the history of the Church and of the world. We are open books, willing to receive his handwriting. And in each of us the Spirit composes original works, because there is never a Christian who is completely identical to another. In the infinite field of holiness, the one God, the Trinity of Love, makes the variety of witnesses flourish: all are equal in dignity, but also unique in the beauty that the Spirit has willed to emanate in each of those whom God's mercy has made his children. Let us not forget, the Spirit is present; he is present in us. Let us listen to the Spirit, let us call to the Spirit — he is the gift, the gift that God has given us — and let us say to him: "Holy Spirit, I do not know your face — we do not know it — but I know that you are the strength, that you are the light, that you are able to make me go forth and to teach me how to pray. Come, Holy Spirit". This is a beautiful prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit".

(17th March 2021)

