

# POPE FRANCIS



## CATECHESSES ON PRAYER

CATECHESSES 27 - 38



## ***27. Praying in communion with Mary***

Today the catechesis is dedicated to prayer in communion with Mary. It occurs precisely on the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Annunciation. We know that the main pathway of Christian prayer is the humanity of Jesus. In fact, the confidence typical of Christian prayer would be meaningless if the Word had not become incarnate, giving us, in the Spirit, his filial relationship with the Father. We heard in the Reading of the gathering of the disciples, the pious women and Mary, praying after Jesus' Ascension. The first Christian community was awaiting Jesus' gift, Jesus' promise.

Christ is the Mediator, the bridge that we cross to turn to the Father (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2674). He is the only Redeemer: there are no co-redeemers with Christ. He is the Mediator *par excellence*. He is *the* Mediator. Each prayer we raise to God is through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, and is fulfilled thanks to his intercession. The Holy Spirit extends Christ's mediation to every time and every place: there is no other name by which we can be saved (cf. *Acts* 4:12). Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and humanity.

Other references Christians find for their prayer and devotion take on meaning from Christ's sole mediation, first among them, the Virgin Mary, Jesus' Mother.

She occupies a privileged place in the lives of Christians, and therefore, in their prayer as well, because she is the Mother of Jesus. Eastern Churches have often depicted her as the *Odigitria*, the one who "shows the way"; that is, her Son, Jesus Christ. The beautiful, ancient painting of the *Odigitria* in the Cathedral of Bari comes to my mind. It is simple. Our Lady who shows Jesus, naked. Then they put a shirt on him to cover his nakedness, but the truth is that Jesus is depicted naked, to reveal that he, man, born of Mary, is the Mediator. And she indicates the Mediator: she is

the *Odigitria*. Her presence is everywhere in Christian iconography, sometimes very prominently, but always in relation to her Son and in connection with him. Her hands, her eyes, her behaviour are a living “catechesis”, always indicating the cornerstone, the centre: Jesus. Mary is completely directed toward him (cf. CCC, 2674) to such an extent that we can say she is more disciple than Mother. That indication, at the wedding at Cana, Mary states: “do whatever he will tell you”. She always refers to Christ. She is the first disciple.

This is the role Mary fulfilled throughout her entire earthly life and which she forever retains: to be the humble handmaid of the Lord, nothing more. At a certain point in the Gospels, she almost seems to disappear; but she reappears in the crucial moments, such as at Cana, when her Son, thanks to her caring intervention, performs his first “sign” (cf. *Jn* 2:1-12), and then on Golgotha at the foot of the cross.

Jesus extended Mary’s maternity to the entire Church when he entrusted her to his beloved disciple shortly before dying on the cross. From that moment on, we have all been gathered under her mantle, as depicted in certain medieval frescoes or paintings. Even the first Latin antiphon — *sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genitrix*. Our Lady, who, as the Mother to whom Jesus entrusted us, ‘enfolds’ us all; but as a Mother, not as a goddess, not as co-redeemer: as a Mother. It is true that Christian piety has always given her beautiful titles, as a child gives his or her mom: how many beautiful things children say to their mom whom they love so much! But let us be careful: the beautiful things that the Church, the Saints, say about Mary, take nothing away from Christ’s sole Redemption. He is the only Redeemer. They are expressions of love like a child for his or her mom — some are exaggerated. But love, as we know, always makes us exaggerate things, but out of love.

And so, we began to pray to her using several expressions present in the Gospels directed to her: “full of grace”, “blessed are you among women” (cf. CCC, 2676s.). Sanctioned by the Council of Ephesus, the title “Theotokos”, “Mother of God”, was soon added to the Hail Mary. And, analogously as with the Our Father, after the praise we add the supplication: we ask Mary to pray for us sinners, that she intercede with her tenderness, “now and at the hour of our death”. Now, in life’s concrete situations, and in the final moment, so that she may accompany us — as Mother, as the first disciple — in our passage to eternal life.

Mary is always present at the bedside of her children when they depart this world. If someone is alone and abandoned, she is Mother, she is nearby, as she was beside her Son when everyone had abandoned him.

Mary has been and is present in these days of the pandemic, close to the people who, unfortunately, have ended their earthly journey in a condition of isolation, without the comfort of the closeness of their loved ones. Mary is always there beside us, with her maternal tenderness.

Prayers said to her are not in vain. The Woman who said “yes”, who promptly welcomed the Angel’s invitation, also responds to our supplications; she hears our voices, even those that remain closed in our hearts that do not have the strength to be uttered but which God knows better than we ourselves do. She listens as Mother. Just like, and more than, every good mother, Mary protects us from danger, she is concerned about us even when we are focused on our own matters and lose a sense of the way, and endanger not only our health, but also our salvation. Mary is there, praying for us, praying for those who do not pray. Praying with us. Why? Because she is our Mother.

*(24<sup>th</sup> March 2021)*

## **28. *Praying in communion with the Saints***

Today, I would like to reflect on the connection between prayer and the communion of saints. In fact, when we pray, we never do so alone: even if we do not think about it, we are immersed in a majestic river of invocations that precedes us and proceeds after us.

Contained in the prayers we find in the Bible, that often resound in the liturgy, are the traces of ancient stories, of prodigious liberations, of deportations and sad exiles, of emotional returns, of praise ringing out before the wonders of creation... And thus, these voices are passed on from generation to generation, in a continual intertwining between personal experience and that of the people and the humanity to which we belong. No one can separate themselves from their own history, the history of their own people. We always carry this inheritance in our attitudes, and also in prayer. In the prayers of praise, especially those that blossom from the hearts of the little ones and the humble, echo parts of the *Magnificat* that Mary lifted up to God in front of her relative Elizabeth; or of the exclamation of the elderly Simeon who, taking Baby Jesus in his arms, said: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word" (*Lk 2:29*).

Prayers — those that are good — are "expansive", they propagate themselves continuously, with or without being posted on social media: from hospital wards, from moments of festive gatherings to those in which we suffer silently... The suffering of each is the suffering of all, and one's happiness is transmitted to someone else's soul. Suffering and happiness are part of a single history: they are stories that create history in one's own life. This history is relived in one's own words, but the experience is the same.

Prayer is always born again: each time we join our hands and open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous

saints and recognized saints who pray with us and who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters who have preceded us on this same human adventure. In the Church there is no grief that is borne in solitude, there are no tears shed in oblivion, because everyone breathes and participates in one common grace. It is no coincidence that in the ancient church people were buried in gardens surrounding a sacred building, as if to say that, in some way, the multitude who preceded us participate in every Eucharist. Our parents and grandparents are there, our godfathers and godmothers are there, our catechists and other teachers are there... That faith that was passed on, transmitted, that we received. Along with faith, the way of praying and prayer were also transmitted.

Saints are still here, not far away from us; and their representations in churches evoke that "cloud of witnesses" that always surrounds us (cf. *Heb* 12:1). At the beginning, we heard the Reading of the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. They are witnesses that we do not adore — certainly, we do not adore these saints — but whom we venerate and who, in thousands of different ways, bring us to Jesus Christ, the only Lord and Mediator between God and humanity. A "saint" who does not bring you to Jesus Christ is not a saint, not even a Christian. A saint makes you remember Jesus Christ because he or she journeyed along the path of life as a Christian. Saints remind us that holiness can blossom even in our lives, however weak and marked by sin. In the Gospels we read that the first saint to be "canonized" was a thief, and he was "canonized", not by a Pope, but by Jesus himself. Holiness is a journey of life, of a long, short or instantaneous encounter with Jesus, but always a witness. A saint is a witness, a man or woman who encountered Jesus and followed Jesus. It is never too late to convert to the Lord who is good and great in love (cf. *Pss* 103:8).

The Catechism explains that the saints “contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth.[...] Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (*CCC*, 2683). There is a mysterious solidarity in Christ between those who have already passed to the other life and we pilgrims in this one: our deceased loved ones continue to take care of us from Heaven. They pray for us, and we pray for them and we pray with them.

We already experience this connection in prayer here in this earthly life, this connection of prayer between ourselves and the saints, that is, between us and those who have already reached the fullness of life, this bond of prayer: we pray for each other, we ask for and offer prayers... The first way to pray for someone is to speak to God about him or her. If we do this frequently, every day, our hearts are not closed but open to our brothers and sisters. To pray for others is the first way to love them and it moves us toward concretely drawing near. Even in moments of conflict, a way of dissolving the disagreement, of softening it, is to pray for the person with whom I am in conflict. And something changes with prayer. The first thing that changes is my heart, my attitude. The Lord changes it to make an encounter possible, a new encounter, to prevent the conflict from becoming a never-ending war.

The first way to face a time of anguish is to ask our brothers and sisters, the saints above all, to pray for us. The name given to us at Baptism is not a label or a decoration! It is usually the name of the Virgin, or a Saint, who expects nothing other than to “give us a hand” in life, to give us a hand to obtain the grace we need from God. If the trials in our life have not reached breaking point, if we are still capable of persevering, if despite everything we proceed trustingly, perhaps, more than to our own merits, we owe all this to the intercession of many saints, some who are in Heaven, others who are pilgrims like us on earth, who have protected and



accompanied us, because we all know there are holy people here on this earth, saintly men and women who live in holiness. They do not know it; nor do we know it. But there are saints, everyday saints, hidden saints, or as I like to say, the “saints next door”, those who share their lives with us, who work with us and live a life of holiness.

Therefore, blessed be Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world, together with this immense flowering of saintly men and women who populate the earth and who have made their life a hymn to God. For — as Saint Basil said — “The Spirit is truly the dwelling of the saints since they offer themselves as a dwelling place for God and are called his temple” (*Liber de Spiritu Sancto* 26, 62: *PG* 32, 184A; cf. *CCC*, 2684)

(7<sup>th</sup> April 2021)

## **29. *The Church, teacher of prayer***

The Church is a great school of prayer. Many of us learned how to whisper our first prayers while on our parents' or grandparents' laps. We might, perhaps, cherish the memory of our mommy and daddy who taught us to say our prayers before going to bed. These moments of recollection are often those in which parents listen to some intimate secret from their children and can give their advice inspired by the Gospel. Then, while growing up, there are other encounters, with other witnesses and teachers of prayer (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2686-2687). This is good to remember.

The life of a parish and of every Christian community is marked by liturgical moments and moments of community prayer. We become aware that that gift we received with simplicity in childhood is a great heritage, a rich inheritance and that the experience of prayer is worth deepening more and more (cf. *ibid.*, 2688). The garment of faith is not starched, but develops with us; it is not rigid, it grows, even through moments of crisis and resurrection. Actually, there is no growth without moments of crisis because crises makes you grow. Experiencing crisis is a necessary way to grow. And the breath of faith is prayer: we grow in faith inasmuch as we learn to pray. After certain passages in life, we become aware that without faith we could not have made it and that our strength was prayer — not only personal prayer, but also that of our brothers and sisters, and of the community that accompanied and supported us, of the people who know us, of the people we ask to pray for us.

For this reason too, communities and groups dedicated to prayer constantly flourish in the Church. Some Christians even feel the call to make prayer the primary action of their day. In the Church there are monasteries, convents, hermitages where persons consecrated to God live. They often become centres of spiritual

light. They are communities of prayer that radiate spirituality. They are small oases in which intense prayer is shared and fraternal communion is constructed day by day. They are cells that are vital not only for the ecclesial fabric, but for society itself. Let us think, for example, of the role that monasticism played in the birth and growth of European civilization, and other cultures as well. Praying and working in community keeps the world going. It is a driving force!

Everything in the Church originates in prayer and everything grows thanks to prayer. When the Enemy, the Evil One, wants to fight the Church, he does so first by trying to drain her fonts, preventing them from praying. For example, we see this in certain groups who agree on moving ecclesial reforms forward, changes in the life of the Church... There are all the organizations, there is the media that informs everyone... But prayer is not evident, there is no prayer. "We need to change this; we need to make this decision that is a bit tough...". The proposal is interesting. It is interesting, only with discussion, only through the media. But where is prayer? Prayer is what opens the door to the Holy Spirit, who inspires progress. Changes in the Church without prayer are not changes made by the Church. They are changes made by groups. And when the Enemy — as I said — wants to fight the Church, he does it first of all by trying to drain her fonts, preventing prayer and [encouraging] these other proposals to be made. If prayer ceases, for a little while it seems that everything can go ahead like always — by inertia — but after a short time, the Church becomes aware that she has become like an empty shell, that she has lost her bearings, that she no longer possesses her source of warmth and love.

Holy women and men do not have easier lives than other people. Indeed, they too have their own problems to address, and, what is more, they are often the objects of opposition. But their strength is prayer, which they always draw from the inexhaustible "well" of

Mother Church. Through prayer they nourish the flame of their faith, as oil would do for lamps. And thus, they move ahead walking in faith and hope. The saints, who often count for little in the eyes of the world, are in reality the ones who sustain it, not with the weapons of money and power, of the communications media, and so forth, but with the weapon of prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus poses a dramatic question that always makes us reflect: "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (*Lk* 18:8), or will he find only organizations, like groups of "entrepreneurs of faith", everyone well organized, doing charitable works, many things ... or will he find faith? "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?". This question comes at the end of a parable that demonstrates the need to pray with perseverance, without tiring (cf. vv. 1-8). Therefore, we can conclude that the lamp of faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer. The lamp of the Church's true faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer. It is this that leads faith forward, and leads forward our poor, weak, sinful life, but prayer leads it securely forward. The question that we Christians need to ask ourselves is: Do I pray? Do we pray? How do I pray? Like parrots or do I pray with my heart? How do I pray? Do I pray, certain that I am in the Church and that I pray with the Church? Or do I pray somewhat according to my ideas and make my ideas become prayer? This is pagan prayer, not Christian. I repeat: We can conclude that the lamp of faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer.

And this is the Church's essential task: to pray and to teach how to pray. To transmit the lamp of faith and the oil of prayer from generation to generation. The lamp of faith that illuminates, that sets things as they truly are, but that can only go forward with the oil of faith. Otherwise, it is extinguished. Without the light of this lamp, we would not be able to see the path of evangelization, or rather, we would not be able to see the path in order to believe

well; we would not be able to see the faces of our brothers and sisters to draw near and serve; we would not be able to illuminate the room where we meet in community... Without faith everything collapses; and without prayer faith is extinguished. Faith and prayer together. There is no other way. For this reason the Church, which is the house and school of communion, is the house and school of faith and prayer.

*(14<sup>th</sup> April 2021)*

### **30. *The vocal prayer***

Prayer is dialogue with God; and every creature, in a certain sense, “dialogues” with God. Within the human being, prayer becomes *word*, invocation, hymn, poetry... The divine Word is made flesh, and in each person’s flesh the word returns to God in prayer.

We create words, but they are also our mothers, and to some extent they shape us. The words of a prayer get us safely through a dark valley, lead us towards green pastures rich in water, and enable us to feast in the presence of an enemy, as the Psalm teaches us (cf. *Ps* 23). Words are born from feelings, but there is also the reverse path, whereby words shape feelings. The Bible educates people to ensure that everything comes to light through the word, that nothing human is excluded, censored. Above all, pain is dangerous if it stays hidden, closed up within us... Pain that is closed up within us, that cannot express or give vent to itself, can poison the soul. It is deadly.

This is why Sacred Scripture teaches us to pray, sometimes even with bold words. The sacred writers do not want to deceive us about the human person: they know that our hearts also harbour unedifying feelings, even hatred. None of us is born holy, and when these negative feelings come knocking at the door of our hearts, we must be capable of defusing them with prayer and with God’s words. We also find very harsh expressions against enemies in the Psalms — expressions that the spiritual masters teach us are to be directed to the devil and to our sins — yet they are words that belong to human reality and ended up in the riverbed of the Sacred Scriptures. They are there to testify to us that if, in the face of violence, no words existed to make negative feelings harmless, to channel them in such a way that they do no harm, then the world would be overwhelmed.

The first human prayer is always a vocal recitation. The lips always move first. Although we are all aware that praying does not mean repeating words, vocal prayer is nevertheless the surest, and can always be practised. Feelings, on the other hand, however noble, are always uncertain: they come and go, they leave us and return. Not only that, but the graces of prayer are also unpredictable: at times consolations abound, but on the darkest days they seem to evaporate completely. The prayer of the heart is mysterious, and at certain times it is lacking. Instead, the prayer of the lips that is whispered or recited together, is always accessible, and is as necessary as manual labour. The *Catechism* teaches us about this, and states that: "Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. To his disciples, drawn by their Master's silent prayer, Jesus teaches a vocal prayer, the Our Father" (n. 2701). "Teach us how to pray", the disciples asked Jesus, and Jesus taught them a vocal prayer: the Lord's Prayer. And everything is there, in that prayer.

We should all have the humility of certain elderly people who, in church, perhaps because their hearing is no longer acute, recite quietly the prayers they learned as children, filling the nave with whispers. That prayer does not disturb the silence, but testifies their fidelity to the duty of prayer, practised throughout their lives without fail. These practitioners of humble prayer are often the great intercessors in parishes: they are the oaks that from year to year spread their branches to offer shade to the greatest number of people. Only God knows when and how much their hearts have been united to those prayers they recited: surely these people too had to face nights and moments of emptiness. But one can always remain faithful to vocal prayer. It is like an anchor: one can hold on to the rope and remain, faithful, come what may.

We all have something to learn from the perseverance of the Russian pilgrim, mentioned in a famous work on spirituality, who learned the art of prayer by repeating the same invocation over

and over again: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord, have mercy on us, sinners!" (cf. CCC, 2616; 2667). He only repeated this. If his life received graces, if prayer became so warm one day as to perceive the presence of the Kingdom among us, if his gaze was transformed until it became like that of a child, it is because he insisted on reciting a simple Christian exclamation. In the end, it became part of his breathing. The story of the Russian pilgrim is beautiful: it is a book that is accessible to all. I recommend you read it; it will help you to understand what vocal prayer is.

Therefore, we must not disregard vocal prayer. One might say, "Ah, this is for children, for ignorant folk; I am seeking mental prayer, meditation, the inner void so that God might come to me". Please, one must not succumb to the pride of scorning vocal prayer. It is the prayer of the simple, the one Jesus taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven.... The words we speak take us by the hand; at times they restore flavour, they awaken even the sleepest of hearts; they reawaken feelings we had forgotten. And they lead us by the hand towards the experience of God. And above all, they are the only ones that, in a sure way, address to God the questions that he wants to hear. Jesus did not leave us in a fog. He told us: "when you pray, say this". And he taught the Lord's Prayer (cf. *Mt* 6:9).

*(21<sup>st</sup> April 2021)*



## **31. *The meditation***

Today we will talk about the form of prayer called *meditation*. For a Christian, to “meditate” is to seek meaning: it implies placing oneself before the immense page of Revelation to try to make it our own, assuming it completely. And the Christian, after having welcomed the Word of God, does not keep it closed up within him or herself, because that Word must be met with “another book”, which the *Catechism* calls “the book of life” (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2706). This is what we try to do every time we meditate on the Word.

The practice of meditation has received a great deal of attention in recent years. It is not only Christians who talk about it: the practice of meditation exists in almost all the world’s religions. But it is also a widespread activity among people who do not have a religious view of life. We all need to meditate, to reflect, to discover ourselves, it is a human dynamic. Especially in the voracious western world, people seek meditation because it represents a barrier raised against the daily stress and emptiness that is rife everywhere. Here, then, is the image of young people and adults sitting in recollection, in silence, with eyes half closed... But what are these people doing, we might ask? They are meditating. It is a phenomenon to be looked on favourably. Indeed, we are not made for rushing all the time, we have an inner life that cannot always be trampled on. Meditating is therefore a need for everyone. Meditating, so to speak, is like stopping and taking a breath in life.

But we realise that this word, once accepted in a Christian context, takes on a uniqueness that must not be eradicated. Meditating is a necessary human dimension, but meditating in the Christian context goes further: it is a dimension that must not be eradicated. The great door through which the prayer of a baptised person passes — let us remind ourselves once again — is Jesus Christ. For

the Christian, meditation enters through the door of Jesus Christ. The practice of meditation also follows this path. And when Christians pray, they do not aspire to full self-transparency, they do not seek the deepest centre of the ego. This is legitimate, but the Christian seeks something else. The prayer of the Christian is first of all an encounter with the Other, with a capital "O": the transcendent encounter with God. If an experience of prayer gives us inner peace, or self-mastery, or clarity about the path to take, these results are, so to speak, side effects of the grace of Christian prayer, which is the encounter with Jesus. That is, meditating means going to the encounter with Jesus, guided by a phrase or a word from Holy Scripture.

Throughout history, the term "meditation" has had various meanings. Even within Christianity it refers to different spiritual experiences. Nevertheless, some common lines can be traced, and in this we are helped again by the *Catechism*, which says the following: "There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters... But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus" (n. 2707). And here, a travelling companion is indicated, one who guides us: the Holy Spirit. Christian meditation is not possible without the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us to the encounter with Jesus. Jesus said to us, "I will send you the Holy Spirit. He will teach you and explain to you. He will teach you and explain to you". And in meditation too, the Holy Spirit is the guide to going forward in our encounter with Jesus Christ.

Thus, there are many methods of Christian meditation: some are very simple, others more detailed; some highlight the intellectual dimension of the person, others the affective and emotional one instead. They are methods. They are all important and all worthy of practice, inasmuch as they can help the experience of faith to become an integral act of the person: one does not only pray with

the mind; the entire person prays, the person in his or her entirety, just as one does not pray only with one's feelings. The ancients used to say that the organ of prayer is the heart, and thus they explained that the whole person, starting from the centre — the heart — enters into a relationship with God, not just a few faculties. We must thus always remember that the method is a path, not a goal: any method of prayer, if it is to be Christian, is part of that *Sequela Christi* that is the essence of our faith. The methods of meditation are paths to travel in order to arrive at the encounter with Jesus, but if you stop on the road, and just look at the path, you will never find Jesus. You will make a "god" out of the path. However, the path is a means to bring you to Jesus. The *Catechism* specifies: "Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilisation of the faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ" (n. 2708).

Here, then, is the grace of Christian prayer: Christ is not far away, but is always in a relationship with us. There is no aspect of his divine-human person that cannot become a place of salvation and happiness for us. Every moment of Jesus' earthly life, through the grace of prayer, can become immediate to us, thanks to the Holy Spirit, the guide. But, you know, one cannot pray without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us! And thanks to the Holy Spirit, we too are present at the River Jordan when Jesus immerses himself to receive baptism. We too are guests at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus gives the best wine for the happiness of the couple, that is, it is the Holy Spirit who connects us with these mysteries of the life of Christ because in contemplation of Jesus we experience prayer, to join us more closely to him. We too are astonished onlookers of the thousands of healings performed by the Master. We take the Gospel, and meditate on those mysteries in the Gospel, and the Spirit guides

us to being present there. And in prayer — when we pray — we are all like the cleansed leper, the blind Bartimaeus who regains his sight, Lazarus who comes out of the tomb... We too are healed by prayer just as the blind Bartimaeus was healed, the other one, the leper... We too rose again, as Lazarus rose again, because prayer of meditation guided by the Holy Spirit leads us to relive these mysteries of the life of Christ and to encounter Christ, and to say, with the blind man, "Lord, have pity on me! Have pity on me!" — "And what do you want?" — "To see, to enter into that dialogue". And Christian meditation, led by the Spirit, leads us to this dialogue with Jesus. There is no page of the Gospel in which there is no place for us. For us Christians, meditating is a way to encounter Jesus. And in this way, only in this way, we rediscover ourselves. And this is not a withdrawal into ourselves, no: going to Jesus, and from Jesus, discovering ourselves, healed, risen, strong by the grace of Jesus. And encountering Jesus, the Saviour of all, myself included. And this, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank you.

*(28<sup>th</sup> April 2021)*

## **32. *Contemplative Prayer***

Let us continue the catechesis on prayer and in this catechesis, I would like to reflect on *contemplative prayer*.

The contemplative dimension of the human being — which is not yet contemplative prayer — is a bit like the “salt” of life: it gives flavour, it seasons our day. We can contemplate by gazing at the sun that rises in the morning, or at the trees that deck themselves out in spring green; we can contemplate by listening to music or to the sounds of the birds, reading a book, gazing at a work of art or at that masterpiece that is the human face.... When Carlo Maria Martini was sent to be Bishop of Milan, he entitled his first Pastoral Letter *The contemplative dimension of life*: the truth is that those who live in a large city, where everything — we might say — is artificial and where everything is functional, risk losing the capacity to contemplate. First of all to contemplate is not a way of doing, but *a way of being*. To be contemplative.

And being contemplative does not depend on the eyes, but on the heart. And here prayer enters into play as an act of faith and love, as the “breath” of our relationship with God. Prayer purifies the heart and, with it, it also sharpens our gaze, allowing it to grasp reality from another point of view. The *Catechism* describes this transformation of the heart, which prayer effects, by citing a famous testimony of the Holy Curé of Ars who said this: “Contemplation is a *gaze* of faith, fixed on Jesus. ‘I look at him and he looks at me’: this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle.... The light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2715). Everything comes from this: from a heart that feels that it is looked on with love. Then reality is contemplated with different eyes.

"I look at him and he looks at me!". It is like this: loving contemplation, typical of the most intimate prayer, does not need many words. A gaze is enough. It is enough to be convinced that our life is surrounded by an immense and faithful love that nothing can ever separate us from.

Jesus was a master of this gaze. His life never lacked the time, space, silence, the loving communion that allows one's existence not to be devastated by the inevitable trials, but to maintain beauty intact. His secret was his relationship with his heavenly Father.

Let us think about the Transfiguration. The Gospels place this episode at the critical point of Jesus' mission when opposition and rejection were mounting all around him. Even among his disciples, many did not understand him and left him; one of the Twelve harboured traitorous thoughts. Jesus began to speak openly of the suffering and death that awaited him in Jerusalem. It is in this context that Jesus climbs up a high mountain with Peter, James and John. The Gospel of Mark says: "He was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (9:2-3). Right at the moment in which Jesus is not understood — they were going away, they were leaving him alone because they did not understand him — in this moment that he is misunderstood, just when everything seems to become blurred in a whirlwind of misunderstanding, that is where a divine light shines. It is the light of the Father's love that fills the Son's heart and transfigures his entire Person.

Some spiritual masters of the past understood contemplation as opposed to action, and exalted those vocations that flee from the world and its problems to dedicate themselves entirely to prayer. In reality, in Jesus Christ, in his person and in the Gospel, there is no opposition between contemplation and action. No. In the Gospel and in Jesus there is no contradiction. This may have come

from the influence of some Neoplatonic philosopher but it surely has to do with a dualism that is not part of the Christian message.

There is only one great call in the Gospel, and it is that of following Jesus on the way of love. This is the summit and it is the centre of everything. In this sense, charity and contemplation are synonymous; they say the same thing. Saint John of the Cross believed that a small act of pure love is more useful to the Church than all the other works combined. What is born of prayer and not from the presumption of our ego, what is purified by humility, even if it is a hidden and silent act of love, is the greatest miracle that a Christian can perform. And this is the path of contemplative prayer: I look at him and he looks at me. This act of love in silent dialogue with Jesus does so much good for the Church.

*(5<sup>th</sup> May 2021)*

### ***33. The Struggle of Prayer***

I am happy to resume this face-to-face meeting, because I will tell you something: it is not nice to speak in front of nothing, to a video camera. It is not nice. And now, after many months, thanks to the courage of Msgr Sapienza, who said, "No, let's do it there", we are gathered here again. Msgr Sapienza is good! And finding people, finding you here, each one of you with your own story, people who come from all over, from Italy, from the United States, from Colombia, then that little football team of four Swiss brothers, I think ... who are over there ... four. The little sister is missing, I hope she arrives.... And seeing each one of you pleases me, as we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord, and looking at each other helps us to pray for one another. Also the people who are far away but always make themselves close to us. The ever-present Sister Geneviève who comes from Lunapark, people who work.... There are so many, and they are all here. Thank you for your presence and your visit. Take the Pope's message to everyone. The Pope's message is that I pray for everyone, and I ask you to pray for me, united in prayer.

And speaking of prayer, Christian prayer, like all Christian life, is not a "walk in the park". None of the great people of prayer that we meet in the Bible and in the history of the Church found prayer "comfortable". Yes, one can pray like a parrot — blah, blah, blah, blah, blah — but this is not prayer. Prayer certainly gives great peace, but through inner struggle, sometimes difficult, which can accompany even long periods of life. Praying is not something easy, and this is why we flee from it. Every time we want to pray, we are immediately reminded of many other activities, which at that moment seem more important and more urgent. This happens to me too: I go to pray a little ... and no, I must do this and that.... We flee from prayer; I don't know why, but that is how it is. Almost always, after putting off prayer, we realize that those things were not essential at all, and that we may have wasted



time. This is how the Enemy deceives us. All Godly men and women report not only the joy of prayer, but also the tediousness and fatigue it can bring: at times it is a difficult struggle to keep to the time and ways of praying. Some saints continued it for years without finding any satisfaction in it, without perceiving its usefulness. Silence, prayer and concentration are difficult exercises, and sometimes human nature rebels. We would rather be anywhere else in the world, but not there, in that church pew, praying. Those who want to pray must remember that faith is not easy, and sometimes it moves forward in almost total darkness, without points of reference. There are moments in the life of faith that are dark, and therefore some saints call this "the dark night", because we hear nothing. But I continue to pray.

The *Catechism* lists a long series of enemies of prayer, those that make it difficult to pray, that put us in difficulty (cf. nn. 2726-2728). Some doubt that prayer can truly reach the Almighty: why does God remain silent? If God is Almighty, he could say a couple of words and end the matter. Faced with the elusiveness of the divine, others suspect that prayer is merely a psychological operation; something that may be useful, but is neither true nor necessary: and one could even be a practitioner without being a believer; and so on, many explanations.

However, the worst enemies of prayer are found within us. The *Catechism* describes them in this way: "Discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have 'great possessions', we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift" (2728). This is clearly a summary list that could be lengthened.

What should be done in the time of temptation, when everything seems to waver? If we look at the history of spirituality, we

immediately see that the masters of the soul were very clear about the situation we have described. To overcome it, each of them offered some contribution: a word of wisdom, or a suggestion for facing moments fraught with difficulty. It is not a question of systematically developed theories, no, but of advice born of experience, which shows the importance of resisting and persevering in prayer.

It would be interesting to review at least some of these pieces of advice, because each one deserves to be explored further. For example, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola is a short book of great wisdom that teaches how to put one's life in order. It makes us understand that the Christian vocation is militancy, it is the decision to stand under the banner of Jesus Christ and not under that of the devil, trying to do good even when it becomes difficult.

In times of trial, it is good to remember that we are not alone, that someone is at our side, watching over and protecting us. Saint Anthony the Abbot, the founder of Christian monasticism, also faced terrible times in Egypt, when prayer became a difficult struggle. His biographer, Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, recounts one of the worst episodes in the life of the hermit saint when he was about 35, a time of middle age that for many people involves a crisis. Anthony was disturbed by the ordeal, but he resisted. When calm finally returned, he turned to his Lord with an almost reproachful tone: "But Lord, where were you? Why did you not come immediately to put an end to my suffering?" And Jesus answered: "Anthony, I was there. But I was waiting to see you fight" (*Life of Anthony*, 10). Fighting in prayer. And very often, prayer is combat. I am reminded of something I experienced close up, when I was in the other diocese. There was a married couple with a nine-year-old daughter, with an illness that the doctors were unable to diagnose. And in the end, in hospital, the doctor said to the mother: "Madam, call your husband". And the husband

was at work; they were labourers, they worked every day. And he told the father: "The child will not survive the night. There is an infection; there is nothing we can do". Perhaps that man did not attend Mass every Sunday, but he had great faith. He left, weeping; he left his wife there with the little girl in the hospital, he took the train and he travelled seventy kilometres towards the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, Patroness of Argentina. And there — the Basilica was already closed, it was almost ten o'clock at night, in the evening — he clung to the grates of the Basilica and spent all night praying to Our Lady, fighting for his daughter's health. This is not a figment of the imagination: I saw him! I saw him myself. That man there, fighting. At the end, at six o'clock in the morning, the church opened, and he entered to salute Our Lady: all night "fighting", and then he returned home. When he arrived he looked for his wife but could not find her. And he thought: "She has left us. No, Our Lady cannot do this to me". Then he found her, smiling as she said: "I don't know what happened. The doctors said that something changed, and now she is cured". That man, fighting with prayer, received the grace of Our Lady. Our Lady listened to him. And I saw this: prayer works miracles, because prayer goes directly to the heart of the tenderness of God, who loves us like a father. And when he does not grant us a grace, he will grant us another that in time we will see. But always, it is necessary to battle in prayer to ask for grace. Yes, at times we ask for a grace we do not need, but we ask for it without truly wanting it, without fighting. But serious things are not asked for this way. Prayer is combat, and the Lord is always with us.

Jesus is always with us: If in a moment of blindness we cannot perceive his presence, we will succeed in the future. We will also end up repeating the same sentence that the patriarch Jacob said one day: "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it" (*Gen 28:16*). At the end of our life, looking back, we too will be

able to say: "I thought I was alone, but I was not: Jesus was with me". We will all be able to say this.

*(12<sup>th</sup> May 2021)*

### **34. *Distractions, time of barrenness, sloth***

Continuing along the same lines of the *Catechism*, in this catechesis we refer to the lived experience of prayer, trying to show some very common difficulties, which must be identified and overcome. Praying is not easy: many difficulties present themselves in prayer. It is necessary to know them, recognize them and overcome them.

The first problem that emerges to those who pray is *distraction* (cf. *CCC*, 2729). You start to pray and then your mind wanders, it wanders all over the world; your heart is here, your mind is there ... distraction from prayer. Prayer often co-exists with distraction. Indeed, the human mind struggles to dwell for long on a single thought. We all experience this constant whirlwind of images and illusions in perpetual motion, which accompanies us even during sleep. And we all know that it is not good to follow this inclination towards disorder.

The battle to achieve and maintain concentration does not relate only to prayer. If one does not attain a sufficient level of concentration, one cannot study profitably, nor can one work well. Athletes know that contests are not won solely through physical training, but also with mental discipline: above all, with the capacity to concentrate and to remain focused.

Distractions are not to blame, but they must be fought. In the heritage of our faith there is a virtue that is often forgotten, but which is quite present in the Gospel. It is called "vigilance". And Jesus said, "Keep vigil. Pray". The *Catechism* mentions it explicitly in its instruction on prayer (cf. no. 2730). Jesus often calls the disciples to the duty of a sober life, guided by the thought that sooner or later He will return, like a bridegroom from a wedding or a master from a journey. Not knowing the day and hour of his return, however, all the minutes of our lives are precious and

should not be wasted on distractions. In a moment that we do not know, the voice of our Lord will resound: on that day, blessed will be those servants whom he will find diligent, still focused on what really matters. They did not stray in pursuit of every attraction that entered their minds, but tried to walk the right path, doing good and performing their own task.

This is distraction: the imagination wanders, it wanders and wanders.... Saint Teresa used to call this imagination that wanders and wanders in prayer "the madwoman in the house"; it is like a madwoman that leads you to wander here and there ... We must stop it and put it in a cage, with attention.

*The time of barrenness* warrants a different discourse. The *Catechism* describes it this way: "the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb" (n. 2731). Barrenness makes us think of Good Friday, at night, and Holy Saturday, the whole day: Jesus is not there, he is in the tomb; Jesus is dead: we are alone. And this is the "mother-thought" of barrenness. Often we do not know what the reasons for barrenness are: it may depend on ourselves, but also on God, who permits certain situations in the exterior or interior life. Or, at times, it may be a headache or a sick feeling that stops us from entering into prayer. Often we do not really know the reason. Spiritual teachers describe the experience of faith as a continuous alternation between times of consolation and desolation; there are times when everything is easy, while others are marked by great weightiness. Very often, when we encounter a friend, we say, "How are you?" — "Today I am down". Very often we are "down", or rather, we don't have feelings, we don't have consolation, we can't do it. They are those grey days ... and there are so many of them in life! But the danger is having a grey heart: when this "feeling down" reaches the heart and sickens it ... and there are people who live with a grey heart.

This is terrible: one cannot pray, one cannot feel consolation with a grey heart! Or, one cannot emerge from spiritual barrenness with a grey heart. The heart must be open and luminous, so that the light of the Lord can enter. And if it does not enter, we need to wait for it, with hope. But do not close it up in greyness.

Then, a different thing is *sloth*, another flaw, another vice, which is a real temptation against prayer and, more generally, against the Christian life. Sloth is "a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart" (CCC, 2733). It is one of the seven "deadly sins" because, fuelled by conceit, it can lead to the death of the soul.

So what can we do in this succession of enthusiasms and discouragements? One must learn to always walk. True progress in spiritual life does not consist in multiplying ecstasies, but in being able to persevere in difficult times: walk, walk, walk on... and if you are tired, stop a bit and then start walking again. But with perseverance. Let us remember Saint Francis' parable on perfect joy: it is not in the infinite fortunes rained down from Heaven that a friar's skill is measured, but in walking with consistency, even when one is not acknowledged, even when one is mistreated, even when everything has lost its initial flavour. All the saints have passed through this "dark valley", and let us not be scandalized if, in reading their diaries, we find accounts of evenings of listless prayer, lived without enthusiasm. We must learn to say: "Even though You, my God, seem to be doing everything to make me stop believing in You, I still continue to pray to You". Believers never shut off prayer! It may sometimes resemble the prayer of Job, who does not accept that God treats him unjustly, protests and calls him to judgment. But, very often, even protesting before God is a way of praying or, as that little old lady said, "getting angry with God is a way to pray too", because a son often gets angry with his father: it is a way of relating to the father; since he recognizes him as "father", he gets angry....

And we too, who are far less holy and patient than Job, know that in the end, at the end of this time of desolation, during which we have raised silent cries to Heaven and many times have asked "why?", God will answer us. Do not forget the prayer that asks "why?". It is the prayer of children when they begin not to understand things, which psychologists call "the why stage", because the child asks his father, "Daddy, why? Daddy, why? Daddy, why?" But let us be careful: the child does not listen to his father's answer. The father starts to reply, but the child interrupts with another "why?". He simply wants to draw his father's attention to himself; and when we get a little angry with God and start asking *why?*, we are attracting our Father's heart towards our misery, towards our difficulty, towards our life. But yes, have the courage to say to God: "But why?". Because at times, getting a little angry is good for you, because it reawakens that son-father, daughter-father relationship we must have with God. And he will accept even our harshest and bitterest expressions with a father's love, and will consider them as an act of faith, as a prayer.

*(19<sup>th</sup> May 2021)*



### **35. *The certainty of being heard***

There is a radical objection to prayer, which derives from an observation that we all make: we pray, we ask, and yet sometimes our prayers seem to go unheard: what we have asked for — for ourselves or for others — is not fulfilled. We often have this experience. If the reason for which we prayed was noble (such as intercession for the health of a sick person, or for the end of a war, for instance), the non-fulfilment seems scandalous. For example, for wars: we are praying for wars to end, these wars in so many parts of the world. Think of Yemen, think of Syria, countries that have been at war for years, for years. Countries ravaged by wars; we pray, and they do not come to an end. But how can this be? “Some even stop praying because they think their petition is not heard” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2734). But if God is Father, why does he not listen to us? He who assured us that he gives good things to his children who ask for them (cf. Mt 7:10), why does he not respond to our requests? We have all experienced this: we have prayed, prayed, for the illness of a friend, of a father, of a mother, and then they were gone. But God did not grant our request! It is an experience we have all had.

The *Catechism* offers us a good summary of the matter. It puts us on guard against the risk of not living an authentic experience of faith, but of transforming the relationship with God into something magical. Prayer is not a magic wand: it is a dialogue with the Lord. Indeed, when we pray we can fall into the risk that it is not we who serve God, but we expect it to be He who serves us (cf. 2735). This is, then, a prayer that is always demanding, that wants to direct events according to our own design, that admits no plans other than our own desires. Jesus, on the other hand, had great wisdom in teaching us the *Lord's Prayer*. It is a prayer of questions only, as we know, but the first ones we utter are all on God's side. They ask for the fulfilment not of our plan, but of his will for the

world. Better to leave it to him: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done" (*Mt* 6:9-10).

And the Apostle Paul reminds us that we do not even know what is appropriate to ask (cf. *Rm* 8:26). We ask for our necessities, our needs, things that we want: "But is this more appropriate or not?" Paul tells us, we do not even know what we ought to ask. When we pray, we need to be humble: this is the first attitude for going to pray. Just as there is the habit in many places that, before going to pray in a church, women don a veil or people use holy water as they begin to pray, so too we must tell ourselves before praying what is most appropriate; may God give me what is most appropriate. He knows. When we pray we must be humble, so that our words may actually be prayers and not just idle talk that God rejects. We can also pray for the wrong reasons: such as to defeat the enemy at war, without asking ourselves what God thinks of such a war. It is easy to write "God is with us" on a banner; many are eager to ensure that God is with them, but few bother to check whether they are actually with God. In prayer, it is God who must convert us, not we who must convert God. It is humility. I go to pray but You, Lord, convert my heart so that it will ask for what is appropriate, for what will be best for my spiritual health.

However, the scandal remains: when people pray with a sincere heart, when they ask for things that correspond to the Kingdom of God, when a mother prays for her sick child, why does it sometimes seem that God does not listen to them? To answer this question, we have to meditate calmly on the Gospels. The accounts of Jesus' life are full of prayers: many people wounded in body and in spirit ask him to be healed; there are those who pray for a friend who can no longer walk; there are fathers and mothers who bring him their sick sons and daughters. They are all prayers imbued with suffering. It is an immense chorus that invokes: "Have mercy on us!"

We see that at times Jesus' response is immediate, whereas in some other cases it is delayed: it seems that God does not answer. Think of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus for her daughter: this woman has to insist for a long time to be heard (cf. *Mt* 15:21-28). She even has the humility to hear a word from Jesus that seems a little offensive towards her: we must not throw bread to the dogs, to the pooches. But humiliation does not matter to this woman: her daughter's health is what matters. And she goes on: "Yes, but even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table", and Jesus likes this. Courage in prayer. Or think of the paralytic brought by his four friends: Jesus initially forgives his sins and only later heals his body (cf. *Mk* 2:1-12). On some occasions, therefore, the solution to the problem is not immediate. In our life too, each one of us has this experience. Let us look back a little: how many times have we asked for a grace, a miracle, let's say, and nothing has happened. Then, over time, things have worked out but in God's way, the divine way, not according to what we wanted in that moment. God's time is not our time.

From this point of view, the healing of Jairus' daughter is worthy of particular attention (cf. *Mk* 5:21-33). There is a father who is rushing, out of breath: his daughter is ill and for this reason he asks for Jesus' help. The Master immediately accepts, but on their way home another healing occurs, and then news arrives that the girl has died. It seems to be the end, but instead Jesus says to the father: "Do not fear, only believe" (*Mk* 5:36). "Continue to have faith": because it is faith that sustains prayer. And indeed, Jesus will awaken that child from the sleep of death. But Jairus had to walk in the dark for some time, with only the flame of faith. Lord, give me faith! May my faith grow! Ask for this grace, to have faith. Jesus, in the Gospel, says that faith moves mountains. But, having real faith. Jesus, before the faith of his poor, of his people, is won over; he feels special tenderness, before that faith. And he listens.

The prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father in Gethsemane also seems to go unheard. "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me". It seems that the Father does not listen to him. The son must drink fully from the cup of the passion. But Holy Saturday is not the final chapter, because on the third day, Sunday, is the Resurrection. Evil is lord of the penultimate day: remember this well. Evil is never lord of the last day, no: the penultimate, the moment when the night is darkest, just before the dawn. There, on the penultimate day, there is temptation, when evil makes us think it has won: "Did you see? I won!". Evil is lord of the penultimate day: on the last day there is the Resurrection. But evil is never lord of the last day: God is the Lord of the last day. Because that belongs to God alone, and it is the day when all human longings for salvation will be fulfilled. Let us learn this humble patience, of waiting for the Lord's grace, waiting for the final day. Very often, the penultimate day is very hard, because human sufferings are hard. But the Lord is there. And on the last day, he resolves everything.

*(26<sup>th</sup> May 2021)*

## **36. Jesus, model and soul of all prayer**

The Gospels show us how prayer was fundamental in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. This can already be seen in the choice of those who would later become the Apostles. Luke places their election in a precise context of prayer, and he says: "In these days he went out to the mountain *to pray*; and all night he continued *in prayer to God*. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (6:12-13). Jesus chooses them after a night of prayer. It seems that there is no criterion in this choice other than prayer, the dialogue of Jesus with the Father. Judging from how those men were to behave, it would seem that the choice was not the best, as they all fled, they left him alone before the Passion; but it is precisely this, especially the presence of Judas, the future betrayer, that demonstrates that those names were inscribed in God's plan.

Prayer on behalf of his friends continually resurfaces in the life of Jesus. The Apostles sometimes become a cause of concern for him, but as he had received them from the Father, after prayer, Jesus carries them in his heart, even in their errors, even when they fall. In all this we discover how Jesus was both teacher and friend, always willing to wait patiently for the disciple's conversion. The highest point of this patient waiting is the "web" of love that Jesus weaves around Peter. At the Last Supper He says to him: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:31-32). It is impressive to know that at that moment, during the time of weakness, Jesus' love does not cease. "But father, if I am in mortal sin, does Jesus love me?" — "Yes" — "And does Jesus continue to love me?" — "Yes" — "But if I have done worse things, and committed many sins ... does Jesus continue to love me?" — "Yes". Jesus' love and prayer for each

one of us does not cease, it does not cease, but rather becomes more intense, and we are at the centre of his prayer! We must always keep this in mind: Jesus prays for me, he is praying now before the Father and makes him see the wounds he carried with him, to show the Father the price of our salvation, it is the love that he holds for us. But in this moment, let each one of us, let us think: in this moment, is Jesus praying for me? Yes. This is a great certainty that we must have.

Jesus' prayer returns punctually at a crucial time of his journey, that of the verification of his disciples' faith. Let us listen again to the evangelist Luke: "As [Jesus] was *praying* alone, the disciples were with him; and he asked them, 'Who do the people say that I am?' And they answered, 'John the Baptist; but others say, Eli'jah, and others, that one of the old prophets has risen'. And he asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered, on behalf of them all, 'The Christ of God'. But he charged and commanded them tell this to no one" (9:18-21). The great turning points of Jesus' mission are always preceded by prayer, but not just in passing, but rather by intense, prolonged prayer. There is always prayer in those moments. This test of faith seems to be the goal, but instead it is a renewed starting point for the disciples, because from then on, it is as if Jesus took on a new tone in his mission, speaking openly to them of his passion, death and resurrection.

With this prospect, which gives rise instinctively to repulsion, both in the disciples and in we who read the Gospel, prayer is the only source of light and strength. It is necessary to pray more intensely, every time the road takes an uphill turn.

And indeed, after announcing to the disciples what awaits him in Jerusalem, the episode of the Transfiguration takes place. Jesus "took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain *to pray*. *And as He was praying*, the appearance of his

countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Eli'jah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:28-31), that is, the Passion. Therefore, this anticipated manifestation of the glory of Jesus took place in prayer, while the Son was immersed in communion with the Father and fully consented to his will of love, to his plan of salvation. And out of that prayer came a clear word for the three disciples involved: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (Lk 9:35). From prayer comes the invitation to listen to Jesus, always from prayer.

From this quick journey through the Gospel, we learn that Jesus not only wants us to pray as he prays, but assures us that, even if our attempts at prayer are completely vain and ineffective, we can always count on his prayer. We must be aware of this: Jesus prays for me. Once, a good bishop told me that in a very bad moment in his life, a great trial, a moment of darkness, he looked up in the Basilica and saw this phrase written: "I, Peter, will pray for you". And this gave him strength and comfort. And this happens every time that each of us knows that Jesus prays for him or for her. Jesus prays for us. In this moment, in this very moment. Do this memory exercise, repeat this. When there is a difficulty, when you feel the orbital pull of distractions: Jesus is praying for me. But, father, is this true? It is true! He said it himself. Let us not forget that what sustains each of us in life is Jesus' prayer for every one of us, with our first and last name, before the Father, showing him the wounds that are the price of our salvation.

Even if our prayers were only stuttering, if they were compromised by a wavering faith, we must never cease to trust in him: I do not know how to pray but he prays for me. Supported by Jesus' prayer, our timid prayers rest on eagle wings and soar up to Heaven. Do not forget: Jesus is praying for me. Now? Now. In the moment of

trial, in the moment of sin, even in that moment, Jesus is praying for me with so much love.

*(2<sup>nd</sup> June 2021)*



## **37. Perseverance in love**

In this penultimate catechesis on prayer we are going to speak about perseverance in praying. It is an invitation, indeed, a command that comes to us from Sacred Scripture. The spiritual journey of the *Russian Pilgrim* begins when he comes across a phrase of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Thessalonians: "Pray constantly, always and for everything give thanks" (cf. 5:17-18). The Apostle's words strike the man and he wonders how it is possible to pray without interruption, given that our lives are fragmented into so many different moments, which do not always make concentration possible. From this question he begins his search, which will lead him to discover what is called the prayer of the heart. It consists in repeating with faith: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!". "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!". A simple prayer, but very beautiful. A prayer that, little by little, adapts itself to the rhythm of breath and extends throughout the day. Indeed, breath never stops, not even while we sleep; and prayer is the breath of life.

How, then, is it possible to always preserve a state of prayer? The *Catechism* offers us beautiful quotations from the history of spirituality, which insist on the need for continuous prayer, that it may be the fulcrum of Christian existence. I will look at some of them.

The monk Evagrius Ponticus states: "We have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast continually" — no, this is not demanded — "but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing" (CCC 2742). The heart in prayer. There is therefore an ardour in the Christian life, which must never fail. It is a little like that sacred fire that was kept in the ancient temples, that burned without interruption and that the priests had the task of keeping alive. So too must there be a sacred fire in us, which

burns continuously and which nothing can extinguish. And it is not easy, but it must be so.

Saint John Chrysostom, another pastor who was attentive to real life, preached: "Even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, while buying or selling, or even while cooking" (CCC 2743). Little prayers: "Lord, have mercy on us", "Lord, help me". So, prayer is a kind of musical staff, where we arrange the melody of our lives. It is not in contrast with daily work; it does not contradict the many small obligations and appointments; if anything, it is the place where every action finds its meaning, its reason and its peace.

Certainly, putting these principles into practice is not easy. A father and a mother, caught up in a thousand tasks, may feel nostalgia for a time in their life in which it was easy to find regular times and spaces for prayer. Then come children, work, family life, ageing parents.... One has the impression that it will never be possible to get through it all. It is good then for us to think that God, our Father, who must take care of the entire universe, always remembers each one of us. Therefore, we too must always remember Him!

We can also remember that in Christian monasticism, work has always been held in great esteem, not only because of the moral duty to provide for oneself and others, but also for a sort of balance, an inner balance: it is risky for man to cultivate an interest so abstract that he loses contact with reality. Work helps us to stay in touch with reality. The monk's folded hands bear the calluses of one who holds shovels and hoes. When, in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 10:38-42), Jesus tells Saint Martha that the only thing that is truly necessary is to listen to God, in no way does he mean to disparage the many services that she was performing with such dedication.

Everything in the human being is “binary”: our body is symmetrical, we have two arms, two eyes, two hands... And so, work and prayer are also complementary. Prayer — which is the “breath” of everything — remains as the vital backdrop of work, even in moments in which this is not explicit. It is inhuman to be so absorbed by work that you can no longer find the time for prayer.

At the same time, a prayer that alienates itself from life is not healthy. A prayer that alienates us from the concreteness of life becomes spiritualism, or worse, ritualism. Let us remember that Jesus, after revealing his glory to the disciples on Mount Tabor, did not want to prolong that moment of ecstasy, but instead came down from the mountain with them and resumed the daily journey. Because that experience had to remain in their hearts as the light and strength of their faith; also a light and strength for the days that were soon to come: those of the Passion. In this way, the time dedicated to being with God revives faith, which helps us in the practicalities of living, and faith, in turn, nurtures prayer, without interruption. In this circularity between faith, life and prayer, one keeps alight that flame of Christian love that God expects of us.

And let us repeat the simple prayer that it is so good to repeat during the day. All together: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”.

*(9<sup>th</sup> June 2021)*

### **38. *The Paschal prayer of Jesus for us***

We have recalled several times in this series of catecheses that prayer is one of the most evident characteristics of Jesus' life: Jesus prayed, and he prayed a lot. In the course of his mission, Jesus immersed himself in it because dialogue with the Father was the incandescent core of his entire existence.

The Gospels testify how Jesus' prayer became even more intense and deep at the hour of his passion and death. These culminating events of his life constitute the central core of Christian preaching: those last hours lived by Jesus in Jerusalem are the heart of the Gospel, not only because the Evangelists reserve proportionally greater space to this narrative, but also because the event of his death and resurrection — like a flash of lightning — sheds light on the rest of Jesus' life. He was not a philanthropist who took care of human suffering and illness: he was and is much more. In him there is not only goodness: there is something more, there is salvation, and not an episodic salvation — the type that might save me from an illness or a moment of despair — but total salvation, messianic salvation, which gives hope in the definitive victory of life over death.

In the days of his last Passover, we thus find Jesus fully immersed in prayer.

He prays dramatically in the garden of Gethsemane, as we heard, assailed by mortal anguish. And yet, precisely in that moment, Jesus addresses God as "*Abba*", Father (cf. Mk 14: 36). This word, in Aramaic, which was Jesus' language, expresses intimacy, it expresses trust. Just as he feels the darkness gather around him, Jesus breaks through it with that little word: *Abba*, Father.

Jesus also prays on the cross, obscurely shrouded in God's silence. And yet once again the word "Father" emerges from his lips. It is

the most ardent prayer, because on the cross, Jesus is the absolute intercessor. He prays for others. He prays for everyone, even for those who have condemned him, with no one, apart from a poor delinquent, taking his side. Everyone was against him or indifferent; only that criminal recognized the power. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (*Lk* 23:34). In the midst of the tragedy, in the excruciating pain of soul and body, Jesus prays with the words of the psalms; with the poor of the world, especially those forgotten by all. He pronounces the tragic words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 1). He felt abandonment, and he prayed. On the cross is the fulfilment of the gift of the Father who offers love, that is, our salvation is fulfilled. And also, once, he calls Him "My God", "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit": that is, everything, everything is prayer in the three hours of the Cross.

Jesus therefore prays in the decisive hours of his passion and death. And with the resurrection, the Father will grant the prayer. Jesus' prayer is intense, Jesus' prayer is unique, and it also becomes the model for our prayer. Jesus prayed for everyone: He even prayed for me, for each one of you. Every one of you can say: "Jesus, on the cross, prayed for me". He prayed. Jesus can say to every one of us: "I prayed for you at the Last Supper, and on the wood of the Cross". Even in the most painful of our suffering, we are never alone. Jesus' prayer is with us. "And now, Father, here, we who are listening to this, does Jesus pray for us?". Yes, he continues to pray so that his word may help us keep going forward. But pray, and remember that he prays for us.

And this seems to me the most beautiful thing to remember. This is the final catechesis of this series on prayer: to remember the grace that not only do we pray, but that, so to speak, we have been "prayed for". We have already been welcomed into Jesus' dialogue with the Father, in communion with the Holy Spirit. Jesus prays for me: each one of us can carry this in their heart. We

must not forget this. Even in the worst moments. We are already welcomed into Jesus' dialogue with the Father, in communion of the Holy Spirit. We were willed by Christ Jesus, and even in the hour of his passion, death and resurrection, everything was offered for us. And so, with prayer and with life, all that remains is only to have courage and hope, and, with this courage and hope, to deeply feel Jesus' prayer and to keep on going: so that our life may be one of giving glory to God in the knowledge that he prays for me to the Father, that Jesus prays for me.

*(26<sup>th</sup> June 2021)*



