

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Fourth Sunday of Lent – 10th March 2024

Our readings today remind us of human frailties and failings which have been a part of the life of God's people from time immemorial. In this week's catechesis given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 25 November 2020 he reflects on the elements of the early Christian Church, which helped to give strength for it to grow and flourish. These are needed also in our own days.

The prayer of the nascent Church

Dear Brothers and Sisters Good morning!

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.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on prayer, we now reflect on how constant prayer was the driving force of the missionary activity of the first Christians. Saint Luke tells us that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (*Acts* 2:42). Today too the Church's life is centred on prayer, which unites us to Christ, and inspires our witness to the Gospel and our charitable service to those in need. In prayer, we

experience the life of the risen Jesus who, in the power of the Spirit, continues to be present to our world, especially in the Church's teaching and sacraments, and our efforts to advance his kingdom of reconciliation, justice and peace. The Catechism teaches that the Holy Spirit "keeps the memory of Christ alive in his Church" (n. 2625), and grants courage and conviction to all those missionaries, who, in our day too, face arduous journeys, dangers and persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Like the early Christians, may we learn, through the cultivation of personal and communal prayer, to be ever more closely united to the Triune God of love, and to bring that same love to the world around us.