

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Fifth Sunday of the Year – 4th February 2024

In our Sunday readings today, we are introduced to the virtue of persevering in what is good, despite pressures from our own thoughts, or from other people's promptings, to abandon the way of perseverance in prayer and holy life. In the book of Job we see suggestions that our life on earth seems like drudgery or pressed service. In the gospel we see Jesus determined to journey on, sharing the Good News with many rather than remaining in one place which welcomed him. Pope Francis gave a catechesis on The persevering prayer on Wednesday, 11 November 2020.

The persevering prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

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.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our catechesis on prayer, we have seen that Jesus prayed to his Father with *perseverance*. Three parables in Luke's Gospel emphasize how we too need to be constant in our prayer. The first parable, in which a man asks for help from a friend in the middle of the night and does not give up until his friend responds, teaches us the need to pray with *insistence*. In the second parable we see in the widow who persists in asking the unrighteous judge for justice, the importance of *patience*. The third parable, that of the publican and the Pharisee at prayer in the Temple, reveals that God responds to those who pray with *humility*. We see these three attitudes – insistence, patience and humility – reflected in the saints who persevered in prayer through moments of darkness when God seemed to be silent or absent. May we continue to persevere in prayer conscious that we never pray alone, but with Christ himself, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Saint Augustine succinctly puts it: Jesus "prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our Head, and as our God he is the one to whom we pray" (cf. CCC, 2616).