

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Fifth Sunday of Lent – 17th March 2024

In today's catechesis, given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 10 June 2020, he reflects on struggles and difficulties in prayer, using the biblical example of Jacob. In our second reading we see Paul's words that Christ himself, "offered up prayer and entreaty aloud and in silent tears." And that he "learned to obey through suffering." Does this help us to understand our own struggles in prayer and to persevere?

The prayer of Jacob

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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

Forced to flee far from his brother, he seems to succeed in every undertaking in his life. He is adept at business: he greatly enriches himself, becoming the owner of an enormous flock. With tenacity and patience he manages to marry Laban's most beautiful daughter, with whom he is truly in love. Jacob — as we would say in modern terms — is a "self-made" man; with his ingenuity, his cunning, he manages to obtain everything he wants. But he lacks something. He lacks a living relationship with his own roots. And one day he hears the call of home, of his ancient homeland, where his brother Esau, with whom he has always had a terrible relationship, still lives. Jacob sets out, undertaking a long journey with a caravan of many people and animals, until he reaches the final leg, the Jabbok stream. Here the Book of Genesis offers us a memorable page (cf. 32:23-33). It recounts that after having all his people and all the livestock — which was numerous — cross the stream, the patriarch remains alone on the foreign riverbank. And he ponders: What awaits him the following day? What attitude will his brother Esau, whose birthright he had stolen, assume? Jacob's mind is a whirlwind of thoughts.... And, as it is growing dark, a stranger suddenly grabs him and begins to wrestle with him. The Catechism explains: "From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance" (ccc, 2573).

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

Wrestling with God: a metaphor for prayer. At other times Jacob had revealed himself capable of dialoguing with God, of sensing him as a friendly and close presence. But that night, through a lengthy struggle that nearly makes him succumb, the patriarch emerges changed. A change of name, a change in his way of life and a change in personality: he emerges changed. For once he is no longer master of the

situation — his cunning is of no use to him — he is no longer a strategic and calculating man. God returns him to his truth as a mortal man who trembles and fears, because in the struggle, Jacob was afraid. For once Jacob has nothing but his frailty and powerlessness, and also his sins, to present to God. And it is *this* Jacob who receives God's blessing, with which he limps into the promised land: vulnerable and wounded, but with a new heart. Once I heard an elderly man — a good man, a good Christian, but a sinner who had great trust in God — who said: “God will help me; he will not leave me alone. I will enter Heaven; limping, but I will enter”. At first, Jacob was a self-assured man; he trusted in his own shrewdness. He was a man who was impervious to grace, resistant to mercy; he did not know what mercy was. “Here I am, I am in command!”. He did not think he needed mercy. But God saved what had been lost. He made him understand that he was limited, that he was a sinner who needed mercy, and He saved him.

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

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on *prayer* we now consider the *prayer of Jacob*. At a certain point in his life, Jacob — always clever and self-assured — finds himself at a crossroads. Returning home, he must face his older brother Esau, whose blessing he had extracted from their father Isaac. One night, alone and fearing for his life, Jacob encounters the Lord in the guise of a mysterious stranger with whom he wrestles all night. The Church's spiritual tradition sees this “fight with God” as a metaphor for prayer. Prayer is not always easy; often it demands of us a struggle with God and a recognition of our weakness and frailty before him and his will. Yet it is precisely in that struggle and in our woundedness that we experience the healing power of grace and grow in faith. Let us pray for the gift always to be open to this encounter with God, to the conversion of our hearts, and to the many blessings the Lord wishes to pour upon us.