

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Second Sunday of Lent – 25th February 2024

In today's readings we see Jesus showing himself in glory to his friends in the event of his Transfiguration. Through this experience they would be strengthened for future ministry. The desire to be present in God's company lies deep within us all. The prayer of contemplation deepens our awareness of God and allows him to be present with us. This contemplation is the topic of today's catechesis, which was first given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 5 May 2021.

Contemplative Prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider contemplative prayer. For Christians, contemplative prayer is an act of the heart by which we fix our gaze in faith upon Jesus, quietly pondering his word and his saving mysteries. As the simple farmer of Ars told Saint John Vianney: in praying before the Tabernacle, "I look at him and he looks at me". By gazing on our Lord in this way, we come to feel his loving gaze upon us and our hearts are purified. This in turn enables us to see others in the light of that truth and compassion which Jesus brings to all. Christ himself is the model for all contemplative prayer: amid the activity of his public ministry he always found time for a prayer that expressed his loving communion with the Father. At the Transfiguration, Jesus prepared the disciples for his coming passion and death by enabling them to contemplate his divine glory. Through our prayer, may we persevere in union with him on the path of love where contemplation and charity become one. For, as Saint John of the Cross, the Church's great master of contemplative prayer teaches us: one act of pure love is more useful to the Church than all the other works put together.