

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Third Sunday of Lent – 3rd March 2024

Today's catechesis was given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 17 June 2020. It is, in part, a reflection on Moses, a meek man, whom God spoke to in today's first reading, giving him the ten commandments to help us answer His call. As Moses was used by God in being a channel of God's commands for His chosen people, so too Moses became their intercessor before God.

The prayer of Moses

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In our itinerary on the theme of prayer, we are realizing that God never liked to deal with those who prayed the 'easy' way'. And Moses was not a 'weak' conversationalist either, from the very first day of his vocation.

When God called him, Moses was, in human terms, 'a failure'. The Book of Exodus portrays him in the land of Midian as a fugitive. As a young man he had felt compassion for his people, and had aligned himself in defence of the oppressed. But he soon discovered that, despite his good intentions, it was not justice, but violence that flowed from his hands. Thus his dreams of glory were shattered: Moses was no longer a promising official, destined to rise rapidly in his career, but rather one who gambled away opportunities, and now grazed a flock that was not even his own. And it was precisely in the silence of the Midian desert that God summoned Moses to the revelation of the burning bush: "'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Ex 3:6).

Moses resists God who speaks, who invites him to take care of the people of Israel once more, with his fears and his objections: he is not worthy of that mission, he does not know God's name, he will not be believed by the Israelites, he has a stammering tongue ... so many objections. The word that issues most frequently from Moses' lips, in every prayer he addresses to God, is the question: 'Why?' Why have you sent me? Why do you want to free this people? Why? In the Pentateuch, there is even a dramatic passage where God reproaches Moses for his lack of trust, a lack that will prevent him from entering the promised land (cf. Num 20:12).

With these fears, with this often wavering heart, how can Moses pray? Indeed, Moses appears human like us. And this happens to us too: when we have doubts, how can we pray? We do not feel like praying. And it is because of this, his weakness, as well as his strength, that we are impressed. Entrusted by God to transmit the Law to his people, founder of divine worship, mediator of the loftiest mysteries, he will not for this reason cease to maintain close bonds of solidarity with his people, especially in the hour of temptation and sin. He is always attached to his people. Moses never forgets his people. And this is a great characteristic of pastors: not forgetting the people, not forgetting one's roots. It is what Paul says to his beloved young Bishop Timothy: "Remember your mother and your grandmother, your roots, your people". Moses is so friendly with God that he can speak with Him face to face (cf. Ex 33:11); and he will remain so friendly with the people that he feels mercy for their sins, for their temptations, for the sudden nostalgia that the exiles feel for the past, recalling when they were in Egypt.

Moses does not reject God, but nor does he reject his people. He is faithful to his flesh and blood, he is faithful to God's voice. Moses is not therefore an authoritarian and despotic leader; the Book of Numbers defines him rather as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth"

(Num 12:3). Despite his privileged status, Moses never ceases to belong to the ranks of the poor in spirit who live by trusting in God as the viaticum of their journey. He is a man of his people. Thus, the manner of prayer most proper to Moses is through *intercession* (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2574). His faith in God is completely at one with the sense of fatherhood he feels toward his people. Scripture habitually portrays him with his hands outstretched toward God, as if to form with his own person a bridge between heaven and earth. Even in the most difficult moments, even on the day when the people repudiate God and Moses himself as leader and make themselves a golden calf, Moses does not feel inclined to set his people aside. They are my people. They are your people. They are my people. He does not reject God nor his people. And he says to God: “this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (Ex 32:31-32). Moses does not barter his people. He is the bridge; he is the intercessor. Both of them, the people and God, and he is in the middle. He does not sell out his people to advance his career. He does not climb the ladder; he is an intercessor: for his people, for his flesh and blood, for his history, for his people and for the God who called him. He is the bridge. What a beautiful example for all pastors who must be ‘bridges’. This is why they are called *pontifex*, bridges. Pastors are the bridges between the people they belong to, and God, to whom they belong by vocation. This is what Moses is: “Lord, forgive their sin, and if you do not forgive, blot me from the book you have written. I do not want to advance at the expense of my people”.

And this is the prayer that true believers cultivate in their spiritual life. Even if they experience people’s shortcomings and their distance from God, these prayerful people do not condemn them, they do not reject them. The intercessory attitude is proper to the saints who, in imitation of Jesus, are ‘bridges’ between God and his people. Moses, in this sense, was the first great prophet of Jesus, our advocate and intercessor (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2577). And today, too, Jesus is the *pontifex*; he is the bridge between us and the Father. And Jesus intercedes for us; he shows the Father the wounds that are the price of our salvation, and he intercedes. And Moses is the figure of Jesus who today prays for us, intercedes for us.

Moses urges us to pray with the same ardour of Jesus, to intercede for the world, to remember that despite all its frailties, it still belongs to God. Everyone belongs to God. The worst sinners, the most wicked people, the most corrupt leaders, are children of God, and Jesus feels this and intercedes for everyone. And the world lives and flourishes to the blessing of the righteous, to the prayer for mercy, this prayer for mercy that the holy, the righteous, the intercessor, the priest, the bishop, the Pope, the layperson, any baptized person unceasingly raises up for humanity, in every place and time in history. Let us think of Moses, the intercessor. And when we want to condemn someone and we become angry inside — getting angry can do good, but condemning does no good — let us intercede for him or her; this will help us a lot.

Today is the “Day of Conscience”, inspired by the witness of the Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who some 80 years ago decided to follow the voice of his conscience and saved the lives of thousands of Jews and other persecuted people. May freedom of conscience be respected always and everywhere; and may every Christian give the example of consistency with an upright conscience enlightened by the Word of God.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on prayer, we now consider the *prayer of Moses*. The book of Exodus portrays Moses — from a human point of view — as a failure. Yet at a certain point in his life, he encounters God in the wilderness. From a burning bush, the Lord calls Moses to return to Egypt in order to lead his people to freedom. But Moses, faced with the majesty of Almighty God and his demands, resists the call, protesting his unsuitability for such a great task. Nevertheless, God entrusts him with the responsibility of conveying the divine law to the people of Israel, and Moses becomes their great intercessor, especially when they are tempted or have sinned. With hands outstretched to God, Moses makes of himself a kind of bridge between earth and heaven, pleading for the people when they are most in need. In this way he prefigures Jesus, our

great intercessor and high priest. We Christians are also called to share in this type of prayer, interceding for those who need God's help, and for the redemption of the whole world.