

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer  
Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Second Week of Advent – Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2023

In this Sunday's readings the prophet Isaiah speaks God's words of consolation, "*Console my people, console them ...*" (Isa 40 :1-5, 9-11). God tells his people that their sin is atoned for, and their time of servitude is ended. He goes on to ask his people to prepare a way for the Lord.

In his catechesis on prayer given on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020 pope Francis reflects on God's blessings on us, his children. God who speaks goodness (*dice-bene*) is he who blesses us (*bene-dice*). God's love for us is present even amidst our sinfulness. As part of his talk Pope Francis compares God to a prisoner's mother: "*Many mothers queue up to see their imprisoned child: they do not stop loving their child and they know that the people passing by on the bus are thinking: "Ah that is a prisoner's mother". Yet they are not embarrassed about this; or better yet, they are embarrassed, but they go ahead because their child is more important than their embarrassment. Thus, we are more important to God than all the sins we can commit, because he is a father, he is a mother, he is pure love, he has blessed us forever. And he will never stop blessing us.*"

### **The blessing**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today we will reflect on an essential dimension of prayer: *blessing*. We are continuing the reflections on prayer. In the creation accounts (cf. *Gen* 1-2), God continually blesses life, always. He blesses the animals (1:22); he blesses the man and the woman (1:28); finally, he blesses the Sabbath, the day of rest and the enjoyment of all of creation (2:3). It is God who blesses. In the first pages of the Bible, there is a continual repetition of blessings. God blesses, but men give blessings as well, and soon they discover that the blessing possesses a special power that accompanies those who receive it throughout their entire life, and disposes man's heart to allow God to change it (cf. Second Vatican Council Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 61).

At the world's beginning, there is thus God who "speaks goodness" [*dice-bene*], he blesses [*bene-dice*], he speaks goodness [*dice-bene*]. He sees that every work of his hands is good and beautiful, and when he creates man, and creation is complete, he recognizes that it is "very good" (*Gen* 1:31). Shortly thereafter, the beauty that God had imprinted within his work will change, and the human being will become a degenerate creature, capable of spreading evil and death in the world; but nothing will ever take away God's original imprint, an imprint of goodness that God placed in the world, in human nature, in all of us: the capacity to bless and the fact of being blessed. God did not make a mistake with creation nor with the creation of man. *The hope of the world* lies entirely in *God's blessing*: he continues to *love us, to wish us well*; he is the first, as the poet Péguy said, to continue to hope for our good (*The Portico of the Mystery of the Second Virtue*, first ed. 1911).

God's great blessing is Jesus Christ; his Son is God's greatest gift. He is a blessing for all of humanity. He is the blessing that saved us all. He is the eternal Word with which the Father blessed us "while we were yet sinners" (*Rom* 5:8), Saint Paul says, the Word made flesh and offered for us on the cross.

Saint Paul proclaims God's plan of love with emotion. And he says it like this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the

Beloved” (*Eph* 1:3-6). There is no sin that can completely erase the image of Christ present in each one of us. No sin can erase that image that God has given us — the image of Christ. Sin can disfigure it, but not remove it from God’s mercy. A sinner can remain in error for a long time, but God is patient till the end, hoping that [the sinner’s] heart will eventually open and change. God is like a good father and like a good mother — he is also a good mother: they never stop loving their child, no matter what he or she may do wrong, always. What comes to my mind is the many times that I have seen people queue to enter a prison.

Many mothers queue up to see their imprisoned child: they do not stop loving their child and they know that the people passing by on the bus are thinking: “Ah, that is a prisoner’s mother”. Yet they are not embarrassed about this; or better yet, they are embarrassed, but they go ahead, because their child is more important than their embarrassment. Thus we are more important to God than all of the sins that we can commit, because he is a father, he is a mother, he is pure love, he has blessed us forever. And he will never stop blessing us.

It is an impressive experience to read these biblical texts of blessing in a prison, or in a rehabilitation group. To let these people feel that they are still blessed, notwithstanding their grave errors, that the heavenly Father continues to desire their good and to hope that they will open themselves to the good, in the end. Even if their closest relatives have abandoned them since by now they judge them to be irredeemable, they are always children to God. God cannot erase in us the image of sons and daughters; each one of us is his son, his daughter. At times we see miracles happen: men and women who are reborn because they find this blessing that has anointed them as children. For God’s grace changes lives: he takes us as we are, but he never leaves us as we are.

Let us think about what Jesus did with Zacchaeus (cf. *Lk* 19:1-10), for example. Everyone saw evil in him; instead, Jesus spots a glimmer of good, and from that — from his curiosity to see Jesus — He allows the mercy that saves to pass through. Thus, first Zacchaeus’ heart was changed, and then his life. Jesus sees the indelible blessing of the Father in the people who are rejected and repudiated. Zacchaeus was a public sinner; he had done so many awful things, but Jesus saw that indelible sign of the Father’s blessing and because of that, he had compassion. That phrase that is repeated often in the Gospel, “He was moved with compassion”, and that compassion leads Him to help him and to change his heart. What’s more, Jesus came to identify himself with every person in need (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). In the passage about the final protocol on which all of us will be judged, Matthew 25, Jesus says: “I was hungry, I was naked, I was in prison, I was in hospital, I was there...”.

To God who blesses, we too respond by *blessing* — God has taught us how to bless and we must bless — through the prayer of praise, of adoration, of *thanksgiving*. The Catechism writes: “The prayer of blessing is man’s response to God’s gifts: because God blesses, the human heart can in return bless the One who is the source of every blessing” (n. 2626). Prayer is joy and thanksgiving. God did not wait for us to convert before beginning to love us, but he loved us long before, when we were still in sin.

We cannot just bless this God who blesses us; we must bless everyone in him, all people, bless God and bless our brothers and sisters, bless the world: this is the root of Christian meekness, the ability to feel blessed and the ability to bless. If we were all to do this, wars would surely not exist. This world needs blessings, and we can give blessings and receive blessings. The Father loves us, and the only thing that remains for us is the joy of blessing him, and the joy of thanking him, and of learning from him not to curse, but to bless. Here, just one word for the people who have the habit of cursing, people who always have a bad word, a curse, on their lips and in their hearts. Each of us can think: do I have this habit of cursing like this? And ask the Lord for the grace to change this habit because we have a blessed heart and curses cannot come out of a blessed heart.

May the Lord teach us never to curse, but to bless.