

## 2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

### Third Sunday of the Year (Sunday of the Word of God) 21<sup>st</sup> January 2024

Our Sunday readings this week help us to see the Lord teaching us his ways. Through them we are taught to consider how we use our time on earth, to use our lives for God, to repent of sin and to believe and share God's good news. As we ponder on the scriptures, we see we are called to follow Christ and to imitate his ways. Pope Francis reflects on how Jesus prays and how we might pray in similar ways in his catechesis given on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

#### **Jesus, man of prayer**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!*

Today, in this audience, as we have done in the previous audiences, I will stay here. I would very much like to come down and greet each one of you, but we must keep our distance, because if I come down, then a crowd immediately forms to greet me, and this is contrary to the measures and the precautions we must take in order to face this "lady" that is called Covid and harms us so much. Therefore, please excuse me if I do not come down to greet you: I will greet you from here but I hold all of you in my heart. And you, please hold me in your heart, and pray for me. From a distance, we can pray for each other; thank you for your understanding.

In our itinerary of catechesis on prayer, after travelling through the Old Testament, we now arrive at Jesus. And Jesus prayed. The beginning of his public ministry takes place with his baptism in the River Jordan. The Evangelists are in agreement in attributing fundamental importance to this episode. They narrate how all the people came together *in prayer*, and specify that this gathering had a clearly *penitential* nature (cf. *Mk 1:5; Mt 3:8*). The people went to John to be baptized, for the forgiveness of sins: it is of a penitential character, of conversion.

Jesus' first public act is therefore participation in a choral prayer of the people, a prayer of the people who went to be baptized, a penitential prayer, in which everyone recognizes him or herself as a sinner. This is why the Baptist wishes to oppose it, and says: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (*Mt 3:14*). The Baptist understands who Jesus is. But Jesus insists: His is an act of obedience to the will of the Father (v. 15), an act of solidarity with our human condition. He prays with the sinners of the People of God. Let us keep this clearly in mind: Jesus is the Righteous One; he is not a sinner. But he wished to come down to us, sinners, and he prays with us, and when we pray he is with us, praying; he is with us because he is in heaven, praying for us. Jesus always prays with his people, he always prays with us: always. We never pray alone; we always pray with Jesus. He does not stay on the opposite side of the river — "I am righteous, you are sinners" — to mark his difference and distance from the disobedient people, but rather he immerses his feet in the same purifying waters. He acts as if he were a sinner. And this is the greatness of God, who sent his Son and annihilated himself, and appeared as a sinner.

Jesus is not a distant God, and he cannot be so. Incarnation revealed him in a complete and humanly unthinkable way. Thus, inaugurating his mission, Jesus places himself at the forefront of a people of penitents, as if charging himself with opening a breach through which all of us, after him, must have

the courage to pass. However, the road, the journey, is difficult; but he goes ahead, opening the way. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that this is the newness of the fullness of time. It says: “his *filial prayer*, which the Father awaits from his children, is finally going to be lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for men” (no. 2599). Jesus prays with us. Let us keep this clear in our mind and in our heart: Jesus prays with us.

On that day, on the bank of the River Jordan, there is therefore all of humanity, with its unexpressed yearning for prayer. There is, above all, the population of sinners: those who thought they could not be loved by God, those who did not dare cross the threshold of the temple, those who did not pray because they did not consider themselves worthy. Jesus came for everyone, even for them, and he begins precisely by joining them. At the forefront.

The Gospel of Luke, in particular, highlights the climate of prayer in which the baptism of Jesus took place: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened” (3:21). By praying, Jesus opens the door to the heavens, and the Holy Spirit descends from that breach. And from on high a voice proclaims the wonderful truth: “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased” (v. 22). This simple phrase encloses an immense treasure; it enables us to intuit something of Jesus’ ministry and of his heart, always turned to the Father. In the whirlwind of life and the world that will come to condemn him, even in the hardest and most sorrowful experiences he will have to endure, even when he experiences that he has no place to lay his head (cf. *Mt* 8:20), even when hatred and persecution are unleashed around him, Jesus is never without the refuge of a dwelling place: he dwells eternally in the Father.

This is the unique greatness of Jesus’ prayer: the Holy Spirit takes possession of his person and the voice of the Father attests that he is the beloved, the Son in whom he fully reflects himself.

This prayer of Jesus, which on the banks of the River Jordan is totally personal — and will be thus for all his earthly life — in Pentecost becomes the grace of prayer for all those baptized in Christ. He himself obtained this gift for us, and he invites us to pray as he prayed.

Therefore, if during an evening of prayer we feel sluggish and empty, if it seems to us that life has been completely useless, we must at that moment beg that Jesus’ prayer also become our own. “I cannot pray today, I don’t know what to do: I don’t feel like it, I am unworthy”. In that moment, it is necessary to entrust ourselves to him so that he may pray for us. In this moment he is before the Father, praying for us; he is the intercessor; he shows the wounds to the Father, for us. Let us trust in this! If we are trustful, we will then hear a voice from heaven, louder than the voice rising from the depths of ourselves, and we will hear this voice whispering words of tenderness: “You are God’s beloved, you are a son, you are the joy of the Father in heaven”. Precisely for us, for each one of us, echoes the word of the Father: even if we were rejected by all, sinners of the worst kind. Jesus did not descend into the waters of the Jordan for himself, but for all of us. It was the entire People of God who went to the Jordan to pray, to ask for forgiveness, to receive that baptism of penance. And as that theologian said, they approached the Jordan with a “bare soul and bare feet”. This is humility. It takes humility to pray. He opened the heavens, as Moses had opened the waters of the Red Sea, so that we could all pass behind Him. Jesus gave us his own prayer, which is his loving dialogue with the Father. He gave it to us like a seed of the Trinity, which he wants to take root in our hearts. Let us welcome him! Let us welcome this gift, the gift of prayer. Always with him. And we will not err. Thank you.