

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Fifth Sunday of Easter -28th April 2024

In today's gospel Jesus says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask what you will and you shall get it." This takes us into the realm of petitionary prayer. Pope Francis' catechesis on some aspects of petition was given on Wednesday, 9 December 2020.

The prayer of petition

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Good morning!*

Let us continue our reflections on prayer. Christian prayer is fully human — we pray as humans, as what we are — it includes praise and supplication. Indeed, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he did so with the "Our Father", so that we might place ourselves in a relationship of filial trust with God, and ask him all *our questions*. We implore God for the highest gifts: the sanctification of his name among men, the advent of his lordship, the fulfilment of his will for good in relation to the world. The *Catechism* recalls that: "There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the Kingdom, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming" (n. 2632). But in the "Our Father" we also pray for the simplest gifts, for more everyday gifts, such as "daily bread" — which also means health, home, work, everyday things; and it also means for the Eucharist, necessary for life in Christ; just as we pray for the forgiveness of sins — which is a daily matter; we are always in need of forgiveness — and then for peace in our relationships; and finally, that he help us during temptation and deliver us from evil.

To ask, to supplicate. This is very human. Let us listen to the *Catechism* again: "By prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have turned away from our Father. Our petition is already a turning back to him" (no. 2629).

If one feels bad because he has done bad things — he is a sinner — when he prays the "Our Father" he is already approaching the Lord. At times we may believe we do not need anything, that we are enough for ourselves, and that we live in complete self-sufficiency. This happens at times! But sooner or later this illusion vanishes. The human being is an invocation, that at times becomes a cry, often withheld. The soul resembles a dry, parched land, as the Psalm says (cf. Psalm 63:2). We all experience, at some time or another in our existence, a time of melancholy, or of loneliness. The Bible is not ashamed of showing our human condition, marked by disease, injustice, the betrayals of friends, or the threat of enemies. At times it seems that everything is collapsing, that the life lived so far has been in vain. And in these situations, seemingly dead ends, there is only one way out: the cry, the prayer "Lord, help me!". Prayer can open up a sliver of light in the densest darkness. "Lord, help me!". This opens up the road, it opens up the path.

We human beings share this invocation of help with the rest of creation. We are not the only ones "praying" in this boundless universe: every fragment of creation bears the desire for God. And Saint Paul himself expressed it in this way. He says: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (Rom 8:22-24). The multiform cry of creatures resounds in us: of trees, of rocks, of animals. Everything yearns for fulfilment. Tertullian wrote: "Every creature prays; cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees; and when they issue from the layers and lairs, they look up heavenward with no idle mouth, making their breath vibrate after their own manner. Nay, the birds too, rising out of the nest, upraise themselves heavenward, and instead of hands, expand the cross of their wings, and somewhat to seem like prayer" (*De oratione*, XXIX). This is a poetic expression commenting on what Saint Paul says: "*the whole creation has been groaning*". But we are the only ones who pray consciously, who know that we are addressing the Father, and entering into dialogue with the Father.

Therefore, we should not be shocked if we feel the need to pray, we should not be ashamed. And, especially when we are in need, to ask. Jesus, in speaking of a dishonest man, who had to settle the accounts with his landlord, says this: "To ask, I am ashamed". And many of us have this feeling: we are ashamed to ask, to ask for help, to ask something of someone who can help us, to reach our purpose, and also ashamed to ask God. One should not be ashamed to pray and to say: "Lord, I need this", "Lord, I am in difficulty", "Help me!": It is the cry of the heart to God who is the Father. And we have to learn to do so also in happy moments, to thank God for everything that is given to us, and not to take anything for granted or as if it were owed to us: everything is grace. The Lord always gives to us, always, and everything is grace, everything. The grace of God. However, we must not suffocate the supplication that rises up in us spontaneously. Prayer of petition goes in step with acceptance of our limitations and our nature as creatures. One may even not reach the point of belief in God, but it is difficult not to believe in prayer: it simply exists, it presents itself to us as a cry; and we all know this inner voice that may remain silent for a long time, but one day awakens and cries out.

Brothers and sisters, we know that God will respond. There is no one at prayer in the Book of Psalms who raises a lament that remains unheard. God always answers: [it may be] today, tomorrow, but he always answers, in one way or another. He always answers. The Bible repeats it countless times: God listens to the cry of those who invoke him. Even our reluctant questions, those that remain in the depths of our heart, that we are ashamed to even express: the Father listens to them and wishes to give us the Holy Spirit, who inspires every prayer and transforms everything. It is always a question of patience, of withstanding the wait. Now we are in the season of Advent, a time that is typically of expectation of Christmas. We are in waiting. This is clear to see. But all our life is also *in waiting*. And prayer is always in expectation, because we know that the Lord will answer. Even death trembles when a Christian prays, because it knows that everyone who prays has an ally who is stronger than it: the Risen Lord. Death has already been defeated in Christ, and the day will come when everything will be final, and it will no longer scorn our life and our happiness.

Let us learn to remain in expectation of the Lord. The Lord comes to visit us, not only during these great feasts — Christmas, Easter — but rather the Lord visits us every day, in the intimacy of our heart if we are in waiting. And very often we do not realize that the Lord is nearby, that he knocks on our door, and we let him pass by. Saint Augustine used to say: I am afraid of God when he passes; I am afraid he will pass and I will not realize. And the Lord passes, the Lord comes, the Lord knocks. But if your ears are filled with other noise, you will not hear the call of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, to be waiting: this is the prayer.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now turn to the prayer of petition. The Catechism explains that in every prayer we ask for the coming of God's Kingdom in our lives and in our world. Jesus taught us to pray to our heavenly Father, acknowledging our total dependence on him and trusting entirely in his providential care, even at the darkest moments in our lives. Prayer of petition arises naturally in human hearts. In the Bible we see countless prayers to God to intervene in the face of our helplessness before situations of sickness, injustice, betrayal and despair. Even the simple cry, "Lord, help me!" is itself a powerful prayer. God always hears the cry of those who call upon him. Saint Paul tells us that our prayers echo the yearning of all creation for the coming of the Kingdom (cf. *Rom 8:22-24*) and the fulfilment of God's saving plan. We make our prayers of petition with confidence in him who has triumphed over all evil through the cross and resurrection of his Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit, who intercedes on our behalf and quietly works to transform all things.