

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Sixth Sunday of Easter – 5th May 2024

Our second reading for Mass today comes from the first letter of John. It is a central teaching on love, "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love." Pope Francis' catechesis for today, which he gave on Wednesday, 9 June 2021, encourages us to persevere in love as we persevere in prayer.

Perseverance in love

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

In this catechesis on prayer we are going to speak about perseverance in praying. It is an invitation, indeed, a command that comes to us from Sacred Scripture. The spiritual journey of the *Russian Pilgrim* begins when he comes across a phrase of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Thessalonians: "Pray constantly, always and for everything give thanks" (cf. 5:17-18). The Apostle's words strike the man and he wonders how it is possible to pray without interruption, given that our lives are fragmented into so many different moments, which do not always make concentration possible. From this question he begins his search, which will lead him to discover what is called the prayer of the heart. It consists in repeating with faith: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!". "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!". A simple prayer, but very beautiful. A prayer that, little by little, adapts itself to the rhythm of breath and extends throughout the day. Indeed, breath never stops, not even while we sleep; and prayer is the breath of life.

How, then, is it possible to always preserve a state of prayer? The *Catechism* offers us beautiful quotations from the history of spirituality, which insist on the need for continuous prayer, that it may be the fulcrum of Christian existence. I will look at some of them.

The monk Evagrius Ponticus states: "We have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast continually" — no, this is not demanded — "but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing" (CCC 2742). The heart in prayer. There is therefore an ardour in the Christian life, which must never fail. It is a little like that sacred fire that was kept in the ancient temples, that burned without interruption and that the priests had the task of keeping alive. So too must there be a sacred fire in us, which burns continuously and which nothing can extinguish. And it is not easy, but it must be so.

Saint John Chrysostom, another pastor who was attentive to real life, preached: "Even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, while buying or selling, or even while cooking" (CCC 2743). Little prayers: "Lord, have mercy on us", "Lord, help me". So, prayer is a kind of musical staff, where we arrange the melody of our lives. It is not in contrast with daily work; it does not contradict the many small obligations and appointments; if anything, it is the place where every action finds its meaning, its reason and its peace.

Certainly, putting these principles into practice is not easy. A father and a mother, caught up in a thousand tasks, may feel nostalgia for a time in their life in which it was easy to find regular times and spaces for prayer. Then come children, work, family life, ageing parents.... One has the impression that it will never be possible to get through it all. It is good then for us to think that God, our Father, who must take care of the entire universe, always remembers each one of us. Therefore, we too must always remember Him!

We can also remember that in Christian monasticism, work has always been held in great esteem, not only because of the moral duty to provide for oneself and others, but also for a sort of balance, an inner balance: it is risky for man to cultivate an interest so abstract that he loses contact with reality. Work helps us to stay in touch with reality. The monk's folded hands bear the calluses of one who holds shovels and hoes. When, in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 10:38-42), Jesus tells Saint Martha that the only thing that is truly necessary is to listen to God, in no way does he mean to disparage the many services that she was performing with such dedication.

Everything in the human being is "binary": our body is symmetrical, we have two arms, two eyes, two hands... And so, work and prayer are also complementary. Prayer — which is the "breath" of everything — remains as the vital backdrop of work, even in moments in which this is not explicit. It is inhuman to be so absorbed by work that you can no longer find the time for prayer.

At the same time, a prayer that alienates itself from life is not healthy. A prayer that alienates us from the concreteness of life becomes spiritualism, or worse, ritualism. Let us remember that Jesus, after revealing his glory to the disciples on Mount Tabor, did not want to prolong that moment of ecstasy, but instead came down from the mountain with them and resumed the daily journey. Because that experience had to remain in their hearts as the light and strength of their faith; also a light and strength for the days that were soon to come: those of the Passion. In this way, the time dedicated to being with God revives faith, which helps us in the practicalities of living, and faith, in turn, nurtures prayer, without interruption. In this circularity between faith, life and prayer, one keeps alight that flame of Christian love that God expects of us.

And let us repeat the simple prayer that it is so good to repeat during the day. All together: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on prayer, we now consider the importance of perseverance in prayer. Reflecting on Saint Paul's encouragement to pray unceasingly (cf. *1Thess* 5:17), the Church's spiritual writers have questioned how it is possible to remain in a constant state of prayer. The Russian ascetic tradition developed the prayer of the heart, based on repeating the words, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner", until they become like the air we breathe. The Greek monk Evagrius compared prayer to a flame burning perpetually in our hearts even as we carry out our daily tasks. Prayer thus becomes the backdrop against which every action of our lives finds its deepest meaning. If God can find time for each of us, surely we can find time for him! The monastic tradition teaches the spiritual fruitfulness of balancing prayer and work. By maintaining that balance in our own lives, we too can grow in our union with God and keep the fire of divine love daily burning in our hearts.