# A School of Prayer

POPE BENEDICT XVI

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WEDNESDAY AUDIENCES
FROM MAY 2011 TO MAY 2012

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# INTRODUCTION: PRAYER AS A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON

## Prayer in Ancient Cultures

St. Peter's Square, May 4, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to begin a new series of catecheses. After the series on the Fathers of the Church, on the great theologians of the Middle Ages, and on great women, I would now like to choose a topic that is dear to all our hearts: It is the theme of prayer, and especially Christian prayer, the prayer, that is, which Jesus taught and which the Church continues to teach us. It is, in fact, in Jesus that man becomes able to approach God in the depth and intimacy of the relationship of fatherhood and sonship. Together with the first disciples, let us now turn with humble trust to the Teacher and ask him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1).

In the upcoming catechesis, in comparing sacred Scripture, the great tradition of the Fathers of the Church, the teachers of spirituality, and the Liturgy, let us learn to live our relationship with the Lord even more intensely, as if it were a "school of prayer."

We know well, in fact, that prayer should not be taken for granted. It is necessary to learn how to pray, as though acquiring this art ever anew; even those who are very advanced in the spiritual life always feel the need to learn from Jesus, to learn how to pray authentically. We receive the first lesson from the Lord by his example. The Gospels describe Jesus to us in intimate and constant conversation with the Father: It is a profound communion of the

One who came into the world not to do his will but that of the Father who sent him for the salvation of man.

As an introduction to this first catechesis, I would like to look at several examples of prayer found in ancient cultures in order to show that practically always and everywhere they were addressed to God.

I shall start with ancient Egypt. Here a blind man, asking the divinity to restore his sight, testifies to something universally human. This is a pure and simple prayer of petition by someone who is suffering. This man prays: "My heart longs to see you.… You who made me see the darkness, create light for me, so that I may see you! Bend your beloved face over me."[1] "That I may see you" is the essence of this prayer.

In the religions of Mesopotamia, an arcane, paralyzing sense of guilt predominated—which, however, was not devoid of the hope of redemption and liberation on God's part. We may thus appreciate this entreaty by a believer of those ancient cultures, formulated in these words: "O God, who are indulgent even in the greatest sin, absolve me from my sin.… Look, O Lord, at your tired servant and blow your breeze upon him: forgive him without delay. Alleviate your severe punishment. Freed from bonds, grant that I may breathe anew, break my chains, loosen the fetters that bind me."[2] These words demonstrate how the human being, in his search for God, had intuited, if only vaguely, his own guilt on the one hand and, on the other, aspects of divine mercy and goodness.

In the pagan religion of ancient Greece, a very significant development may be seen: Prayers, while still invoking divine help to obtain heavenly favors in every circumstance of daily life and receive material benefits, gradually became oriented to more disinterested requests, which enabled the believer to deepen his or her relationship with God and become a better person.

For example, the great philosopher Plato records a prayer of his teacher, Socrates, considered one of the founders of Western thought. This was Socrates' prayer: "Grant to me that I be made beautiful in my soul within, and that all external possessions be in harmony with my inner man. May I consider the wise man rich; and may I have such wealth as only the self-restrained man can bear or endure."[3] Rather than seeking to possess plenty of money, he wanted above all to be beautiful and wise within.

In the Greek tragedies, those sublime literary masterpieces of all time which still, after twenty-five centuries, are read, thought about, and

performed today, there is an element of prayer which expresses the desire to know God and worship his majesty. One of these tragedies says: “O Earth’s Upbearer, thou whose throne is Earth, Who’er thou be, O past our finding out, Zeus, be thou Nature’s Law, or Mind of man, Thee I invoke; for, treading soundless paths, To Justice’ goal thou bringest all mortal things.”[4] God remains somewhat nebulous; nevertheless, man knows this unknown god and prays to the one who guides the ways of the world.

Among the Romans, too, who made up that great Empire in which Christianity first came into being and spread, prayer—even if it is associated with a utilitarian conception and fundamentally associated with the request for divine protection in the civil community—sometimes begins with invocations that wonderfully express the fervor of personal devotion that is transformed into praise and thanksgiving. In the second century AD, Apuleius, an author from Roman Africa, attested to this. In his writings, he expresses his contemporaries’ dissatisfaction with traditional religion and their desire for a more authentic relationship with God. In his masterpiece, entitled *Metamorphoses*, a believer addresses these words to a goddess: “You are holy, you are in every epoch a savior of the human species, you, in your generosity, always help mortals, offer to the wretch in travail the tender affection of a mother. Neither a day nor a night nor even a second pass without you filling it with your benefits.”[5]

In the same period the Emperor Marcus Aurelius— another philosopher that reflected on the human condition— affirmed the need to pray in order to establish a fruitful cooperation between divine action and human action. He wrote in his *Meditations*: “Who told you that the gods do not help us also in what depends on us? So begin to pray to them and you will see.”[6]

This advice of the emperor-philosopher was effectively put into practice by innumerable generations prior to Christ, thereby demonstrating that human life without prayer (which opens our existence to the mystery of God) lacks sense and direction. Always expressed in every prayer, in fact, is the truth of the human creature who experiences weakness and impoverishment, addresses his supplication to heaven, and is endowed with an extraordinary dignity, so that, in preparing to receive the divine revelation, he finds himself able to enter into communion with God.

Dear friends, in these examples of prayer of different epochs and civilizations emerge the human being’s awareness of his creaturely condition and his dependence on Another superior to him who is the source of all good.

The human being prays because he cannot fail to wonder about the meaning of his life, which remains obscure and discomforting if it is not put in relation to the mystery of God and his plan for the world.

Human life is a fabric woven of good and evil, of undeserved suffering and joy and beauty that spontaneously and irresistibly impel us to ask God for that light and inner strength that support us on earth and reveal a hope beyond the boundaries of death.

The pagan religions remain an invocation from earth that awaits a word from heaven. One of the last great pagan philosophers, Proclus of Constantinople, who lived fully in the Christian era, gives voice to this expectation, saying: "Unknowable, no one contains you. All that we think belongs to you. Our evils and our good come from you, on you our every yearning depends, O Ineffable One, whom our souls feel present, raising to you a hymn of silence."[7]

In the examples of prayer from the various cultures we have considered, we can see a testimony of the religious dimension and the desire for God engraved on the heart of every human being, which receives fulfillment and full expression in the Old and in the New Testament. The revelation is purifying and brings to its fullness man's original yearning for God, offering to him, in prayer, the possibility of a deeper relationship with the heavenly Father.

At the beginning of our journey in the "school of prayer," let us now ask the Lord to illumine our minds and hearts so that the relationship with him in prayer may be ever more intense, affectionate, and constant. Once again, let us say to him: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1).

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1. A. Barucq and F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Egypte ancienne* (Paris, 1980).
2. M. J. Seux, *Hymnes et Prières aux Dieux de Babylone et d'Assyrie* (Paris: Cerf, 1980).
3. Plato, *Phaedrus*, Harold North Fowler, translator (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classic Library, 1999).
4. Euripedes, *Trojan Women*, 884–886, English trans.: Loeb, Arthur S. Way.
5. Apuleius of Madaura, *Metamorphoses* ix, 25.
6. Marcus Aurelius, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* xii/2, col. 2213.
7. Proclus of Constantinople, *Hymni*, ed. Vogt, in *Preghiere dell'umanità*, (Wiesbaden, 1957) p. 61.

# On the Universal Religious Sense

St. Peter's Square, May 11, 2011

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,

Today I wish to continue my reflection on how prayer and the sense of religion have been part of man throughout his history.

We live in an age in which the signs of secularism are glaringly obvious. For some people, God seems to have disappeared from the horizon or has become a reality that is met with indifference. Yet at the same time we see many signs of a reawakening of the religious sense, a rediscovery of the importance of God to the human being's life, a need for spirituality, for going beyond a purely horizontal and materialistic vision of human life.

A look at recent history reveals the failure of the predictions of those who, in the Age of the Enlightenment, foretold the disappearance of religion and exalted absolute reason, detached from faith—a reason that was to dispel the shadows of religious dogmatism and dissolve the "world of the sacred," restoring to the human being freedom, dignity, and autonomy. The experience of the past century, with the tragedy of the two world wars, disrupted the progress that autonomous reason— man without God—promised to guarantee.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "In the act of creation, God calls every being from nothingness into existence.… Even after losing through his sin his likeness to God, man remains an image of his Creator, and retains the desire for the one who calls him into existence. All religions bear witness to man's essential search for God" (CCC, 2566). We could say—as I explained in my last catecheses—that there has been no great civilization, from the most distant epoch to our day, which has not been religious.

Man is religious by nature; he is *homo religiosus* just as he is *homo*

*sapiens* and *homo faber*. “The desire for God” the *Catechism* says further, “is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God” (CCC, 27). The image of the Creator is impressed on his being, and man feels the need to find light to give a response to the questions that concern the deep sense of reality—a response that he cannot find in himself, in progress, or in empirical science.

The *homo religiosus* does not only appear in the sphere of antiquity; he passes through the whole of human history. In this regard, the rich terrain of human experience has seen the religious sense develop in various forms, in the attempt to respond to the desire for fullness and happiness. The “digital” man, like the cave man, seeks in the religious experience ways to overcome his finiteness and guarantee his precarious adventure on earth. Moreover, life without a transcendent horizon would not have the full meaning and happiness for which we all seek, spontaneously projected towards the future in a tomorrow that has yet to come.

In the Declaration *Nostra aetate*, the Second Vatican Council stressed in summary: “Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?”[1]

Man knows that by himself he cannot respond to his own fundamental need to understand. However much he is deluded and still deludes himself that he is self-sufficient, he experiences his own insufficiency. He needs to open himself to something more, to something or to someone that can give him what he lacks; he must come out of himself towards the One who is able to fill the breadth and depth of his desire.

Man bears within him a thirst for the infinite, a longing for eternity, a quest for beauty, a desire for love, a need for light and truth which impel him towards the Absolute; man bears within himself the desire for God. And man knows, in a certain way, that he can turn to God; he knows he can pray to him.

St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of history, defines prayer as “an expression of man’s desire for God.” This attraction to God,

which God himself has placed in man, is the soul of prayer, and it takes on a great many forms in accordance with the history, the time, the moment, the grace, and even the sin of every person praying. Man's history has known various forms of prayer, because he has developed different kinds of openness to the "Other" and the "Beyond," and thus we may recognize prayer as an experience present in every religion and culture.

Indeed, dear brothers and sisters, prayer is not linked to a specific context, but is written on the heart of every person, in every civilization. Of course, when we speak of prayer as an experience of the human being as such, of the *homo orans*, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is an inner attitude before being a series of practices and formulas—a manner of being in God's presence before performing acts of worship or speaking words.

Prayer is centered and rooted in the inmost depths of the person; it is therefore not easily decipherable and, for the same reason, it can be subject to misunderstanding and mystification. In this sense, too, we can understand the feeling that prayer is difficult. In fact, prayer is the place par excellence of free giving, of striving for the Invisible, the Unexpected, and the Ineffable. Therefore, the experience of prayer is a challenge to everyone, a "grace" to invoke, a gift of the One to whom we turn.

In prayer, during every period of history, man considers himself and his situation before God, from God, and in relation to God, and experiences being a creature in need of help, incapable of obtaining on his own the fulfillment of his life and his hope. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "Prayer means feeling that the world's meaning is outside the world."

In the dynamic of this relationship with the One who gives meaning to existence, prayer has one of its typical expressions in the gesture of kneeling. It is a gesture that has in itself a radical ambivalence. In fact, I can be forced to kneel—a condition of indigence and slavery—but I can also kneel spontaneously, declaring my limitations and therefore my being in need of Another. To him, I declare that I am weak, needy—"a sinner."

In the experience of prayer, the human creature expresses all his self-awareness, all that he succeeds in grasping of his own existence, and, at the same time, he turns with his whole being to the One before whom he stands. He directs his soul to that Mystery from which he expects the fulfillment of his deepest desires and help to overcome the neediness of his own life. In this turning to "Another," in directing himself "beyond" lies the essence of prayer: an experience of a reality that overcomes the tangible and the

contingent.

Yet only in God who reveals himself does man's seeking find complete fulfillment. The prayer that is openness and elevation of the heart to God thus becomes a personal relationship with him. And even if man forgets his Creator, the living, true God does not cease to call man first to the mysterious encounter of prayer.

As the *Catechism* says: "In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation" (CCC, 2567).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn to pause longer before God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, let us learn to recognize in silence, in our own hearts, his voice that calls us and leads us back to the depths of our existence, to the source of life, to the source of salvation, to enable us to go beyond the limitations of our life and to open ourselves to God's dimension, to the relationship with him, which is Infinite Love.

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1. Declaration of the Relation of the Church on Non-Christian Religions *Nostra aetate*, 1

# PRAYER IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

# Abraham's Prayer

St. Peter's Square, May 18, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In the last two catecheses, we reflected on prayer as a universal phenomenon that—although in different forms—is present in all cultures and in all times.

Today I would like to start out on a biblical path that will guide us to deepen the dialogue of the covenant between God and man, the covenant that enlivened the history of salvation to its culmination: the definitive Word that is Jesus Christ.

This path will lead us to reflect on certain important texts and paradigmatic figures of the Old and New Testaments. Abraham, the great patriarch, the father of all believers (see Rom 4:11–12, 16–17), offers us a first example of prayer in the episode of intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And I would also like to ask you to benefit from the journey we shall be making in the forthcoming catecheses by becoming more familiar with the Bible, which I hope you have in your homes. During the week, pause to read and meditate upon it in prayer, in order to know the marvelous history of the relationship between God and man, between God who communicates with us and man who responds.

The first text on which we shall reflect is in chapter 18 of the Book of Genesis. It is recounted that the evil of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had reached such a height of depravity that they required an intervention of God, an act of justice that would prevent the evil from destroying those cities.

It is here that Abraham comes in, with his prayer of intercession. God decides to reveal to him what is about to happen and acquaints him with the

gravity of the evil and its terrible consequences, because Abraham is his chosen one, chosen to become the father of a great people and bring divine blessing to the whole world. His is a mission of salvation that must counter the sin that has invaded human reality; the Lord wishes to bring humanity back to faith, obedience, and justice through Abraham. And now this friend of God, seeing the reality and neediness of the world, prays for those who are about to be punished and begs that they be saved.

Abraham immediately postulates the problem in all its gravity, saying to the Lord: "Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gn 18:23–25).

Speaking these words with great courage, Abraham confronts God with the need to avoid a perfunctory form of justice: if the city is guilty, it is right to condemn its crime and to inflict punishment, but—the great patriarch affirms—it would be unjust to punish all the inhabitants indiscriminately. If there are innocent people in the city, they must not be treated as the guilty. God, who is a just judge, cannot act in this way, Abraham says rightly to God.

However, if we read the text more attentively, we realize that Abraham's request is even more pressing and more profound because he does not stop at asking for salvation for the innocent. Abraham asks forgiveness for the whole city and does so by appealing to God's justice; indeed, he says to the Lord: "Will you then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?" (Gn 18:24b).

In this way he brings a new idea of justice into play: not one that is limited to punishing the guilty, as men do, but a different, divine justice that seeks goodness and creates it through forgiveness that transforms the sinner, converts, and saves him. With his prayer, therefore, Abraham does not invoke a merely compensatory form of justice but rather an intervention of salvation which, taking into account the innocent, also frees the wicked from guilt by forgiving them.

Abraham's thought, which seems almost paradoxical, could be summed up like this: Obviously it is not possible to treat the innocent as guilty, as this would be unjust; it would be necessary instead to treat the guilty as innocent,

putting into practice a "superior" form of justice, offering them a possibility of salvation because, if evildoers accept God's pardon and confess their sin, letting themselves be saved, they will no longer continue to do wicked deeds —they too will become righteous and will no longer deserve punishment.

It is this request for justice that Abraham expresses in his intercession, a request based on the certainty that the Lord is merciful. Abraham does not ask God for something contrary to his essence; he knocks at the door of God's heart, knowing what he truly desires.

Sodom, of course, is a large city; fifty upright people seem few, but are not the justice and forgiveness of God perhaps proof of the power of goodness, even if it seems smaller and weaker than evil? The destruction of Sodom must halt the evil present in the city, but Abraham knows that God has other ways and means to stem the spread of evil. It is forgiveness that interrupts the spiral of sin, and Abraham, in his dialogue with God, appeals for exactly this. And when the Lord agrees to forgive the city if fifty upright people may be found in it, his prayer of intercession begins to reach the abysses of divine mercy.

Abraham—as we remember—gradually decreases the number of innocent people necessary for salvation: if fifty would not be enough, forty-five might suffice, and so on down to ten. He continued his entreaty, which became almost bold in its insistence: "Suppose forty … thirty … twenty … are found there" (see Gn 18:29–32). The smaller the number becomes, the greater God's mercy is shown to be. He patiently listens to the prayer; he hears it and repeats after each supplication: "I will spare … I will not destroy … I will not do it" (see Gn 18:26–32).

Thus, through Abraham's intercession, Sodom can be saved if there are even only ten innocent people in it. *This is the power of prayer.* Through intercession—the prayer to God for the salvation of others—the desire for salvation that God nourishes for sinful man is demonstrated and expressed. Evil, in fact, cannot be accepted; it must be identified and destroyed through punishment: The destruction of Sodom had exactly this function.

Yet the Lord does not want the wicked to die, but rather that they convert and live (see Ez 18:23; 33:11); his desire is always to forgive, to save, to give life, to transform evil into good. It is this divine desire itself which becomes in prayer the desire of the human being and is expressed through the words of intercession.

With his entreaty, Abraham is lending his voice and also his heart, to the

divine will. God's desire is for mercy and love as well as his wish to save; and this desire of God found in Abraham and in his prayer the possibility of being revealed concretely in human history, in order to be present wherever there is a need for grace. By voicing this prayer, Abraham was giving a voice to what God wanted, which was not to destroy Sodom but to save it, to give life to the converted sinner.

This is what the Lord desires, and his dialogue with Abraham is a prolonged and unequivocal demonstration of his merciful love. The need to find enough righteous people in the city decreases, and in the end ten would be enough to save the entire population.

The reason Abraham stopped at ten is not given in the text. Perhaps it is a figure that indicates a minimum community nucleus (still today, ten people are the necessary *quorum* for public Jewish prayer). However, this is a small number, a tiny particle of goodness with which to start in order to save the rest from a great evil.

However, not even ten just people were found in Sodom and Gomorrah, and so the cities were destroyed—a destruction paradoxically deemed necessary by the prayer of Abraham's intercession itself. That very prayer revealed the saving will of God: the Lord was prepared to forgive; he wanted to forgive, but the cities were locked into a totalizing and paralyzing evil, without even a few innocents from whom to start turning evil into good.

This was the very path to salvation Abraham too was seeking: Being saved does not mean merely escaping punishment but being delivered from the evil that dwells within us. It is not punishment that must be eliminated but sin—the rejection of God—which already bears the punishment in itself.

The prophet Jeremiah was to say to the rebellious people: "Your wickedness will chasten you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God" (Jer 2:19).

It is from this sorrow and bitterness that the Lord wishes to save man, liberating him from sin. Therefore, however, a transformation from within is necessary, some foothold of goodness, a beginning from which to start out in order to change evil into good, hatred into love, and revenge into forgiveness.

For this reason there must be righteous people in the city, and Abraham continuously repeats: "Suppose there are.…" "There": It is within the sick reality that there must be that seed of goodness which can heal and restore life. It is a word that is also addressed to us, so that in our cities the seed of

goodness may be found—that we may do our utmost to ensure that there are not only ten upright people, and to make our cities truly live and survive in order to save ourselves from the inner bitterness which is the absence of God. And in the unhealthy situation of Sodom and Gomorrah, that seed of goodness was not to be found.

Yet God's mercy in the history of his people extends further. If, in order to save Sodom, ten righteous people were necessary, the prophet Jeremiah was to say on behalf of the Almighty that only *one* upright person was necessary to save Jerusalem: "Run back and forth through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her" (Jer 5:1).

As the number dwindled further, God's goodness proved even greater. Nonetheless, this did not yet suffice; the superabundant mercy of God did not find the response of goodness that he sought, and under the siege of the enemy Jerusalem fell.

It was to be necessary for God himself to become that one righteous person. And this is the mystery of the Incarnation: to guarantee a just person, God himself becomes man. There will always be one righteous person, because it is he. God himself must become that just man. The infinite and surprising divine love was to be fully manifest when the Son of God became man, the definitive Righteous One, the perfect Innocent who would bring salvation to the whole world by dying on the cross, forgiving and interceding for those who "know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Therefore, the prayer of each one will find its answer; our every intercession will be fully heard.

Dear brothers and sisters, Abraham's prayer of intercession teaches us to open our hearts ever wider to God's superabundant mercy so that in daily prayer we may know how to desire the salvation of humanity and ask for it with perseverance and with trust in the Lord who is great in love.

# Jacob Wrestles with God

St. Peter's Square, May 25, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to reflect with you on a text from the Book of Genesis that recounts a rather curious incident in the narrative of the patriarch Jacob. It is a passage that is not easy to interpret, but it is important for our life of faith and prayer; it is the story of Jacob's struggle with God at the ford of the Jabbok.

As you will recall, Jacob had deprived his twin brother Esau of his birthright in exchange for a dish of lentils and then, by trickery, managed to receive the blessing from his father Isaac, now very elderly, taking advantage of the latter's blindness. Having fled from Esau's wrath, he took refuge with one of his relatives, Laban. He married, acquired some wealth, and was returning to his homeland, ready to face his brother, having first put into place some prudent provisions. After instructing those who were traveling with him to cross the ford of the stream that marked the boundary of Esau's territory, Jacob remained behind alone, where he was suddenly set upon by an unknown man with whom he wrestled the whole night. This hand-to-hand combat, which we find described in chapter 32 of the Book of Genesis, became for him a singular experience of God.

Night is the favorable time for acting secretly; it was the best time, therefore, for Jacob to enter his brother's territory unseen, perhaps thinking to take Esau by surprise. It is Jacob, however, who was surprised by an unforeseen attack, one for which he was unprepared. Having used his cleverness to try to escape a dangerous situation, he thought he had managed to have everything under control; instead, he now found himself forced to enter into a mysterious struggle that caught him alone and gave him no

opportunity to organize a proper defense. Unarmed, in the night, Jacob wrestled with someone. The text does not specify the identity of the aggressor; it uses a Hebrew word that indicates a "man" in the generic sense ("one, someone"); it is, therefore, a vague, indeterminate definition that purposely keeps the assailant shrouded in mystery. It was dark, Jacob did not manage to see his opponent clearly, and even for the reader, for us, he remained anonymous; someone was opposing the patriarch—this is the only certain data supplied by the narrator. Only at the end, when the wrestling was over and that "someone" has disappeared, will Jacob name him and be able to say that he had wrestled with God.

The episode, therefore, took place in darkness; it is difficult to ascertain not only the identity of Jacob's assailant, but also how the struggle went. On reading the passage, it is rather difficult to determine which of the two contenders gained the upper hand; the verbs used often lack a specific subject, and the actions take place almost in a contradictory manner, so that when it looks as though one of the two is winning, the next action immediately denies that and shows the other to be the victor. At the beginning, in fact, Jacob seemed to be the stronger and of his opponent, the text says, "he did not prevail against Jacob" (Gn 32:25); yet he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, dislocating it. Thus one thinks that Jacob would have had to give in, but instead it is his opponent who asked him to release him. Jacob refused, with one condition: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (Gn 32:27). The one who tricked his brother and robbed him of the blessing of the firstborn now claims it from the stranger, thus perhaps beginning to perceive some kind of divine meaning, without yet being able to recognize it for certain.

His rival, who seemed to be held back and therefore defeated by Jacob, rather than giving in to the patriarch's request, asked him his name. And the patriarch replied, "Jacob" (v. 28). Here the struggle takes an important turn. In fact, knowing someone's name implies a kind of power over that person because, in the biblical mentality, a name contains the most profound reality of the individual; it reveals the person's secret and destiny. Knowing one's name therefore means knowing the truth about the other person, and this allows one to dominate him. When, therefore, in answer to the unknown person's request Jacob disclosed his own name, he placed himself in the hands of his opponent; it was a form of surrender, a total handing over of self to the other.

However, in this act of surrender, paradoxically Jacob too emerged victorious because he received a new name with the recognition of his victory by his adversary, who says to him: "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed" (Gn 32:29). "Jacob" was a name that recalled the patriarch's problematic beginnings; in Hebrew, in fact, it recalls the term "heel" and takes the reader back to the time of Jacob's birth when, as he left his mother's womb, he held onto the heel of his twin brother (see Gn 25:26), almost prefiguring the unfair advantage he would take over his brother in adulthood. The name Jacob also recalls the verb "to deceive, to supplant." Now, in the struggle during this act of surrender and submission, the patriarch reveals his true identity as a deceiver, the one who supplants. However, the other, who is God, transforms this negative reality into something positive: Jacob the deceiver becomes Israel; he is given a new name as a sign of a new identity. Here, too, the account maintains its deliberate duplicity, because the more probable meaning of the name Israel is "God is strong, God is victorious."

Therefore Jacob prevailed, he won—his adversary himself says so—but his new identity, which he has received from the adversary himself, affirms and bears witness to God's victory. And when Jacob in turn asked his opponent his name, the latter refused to say it, but revealed himself in an unequivocal gesture by granting Jacob the blessing he had requested at the beginning of the struggle. However, it was not a blessing obtained through deceit, but one given freely by God, which Jacob was able to receive because he was now alone, without protection, without cunning or tricks; he gave himself over unarmed, agreed to surrender, and confessed the truth about himself. Therefore, at the end of the struggle, having received the blessing, the patriarch can finally recognize the other, the God of blessings. Truly, he says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gn 32:30), and now he can cross the ford, the bearer of a new name but "conquered" by God and marked forever, limping because of the injury he received (see Gn 32:31).

Biblical exegetes give many interpretations to this passage; the scholars in particular recognize in it literary connotations and components of various genres, as well as references to some popular accounts. But when these elements are taken up by the authors of the sacred texts and incorporated into the biblical narrative, they change their meaning and the text opens up to

broader dimensions. For the believer, the struggle at Jabbok thus becomes a paradigm in which the people of Israel speak of their own origins and outline the features of a particular relationship between God and humanity. Therefore, as is affirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church:* "From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance" (CCC, 2573). The Bible text speaks to us about a long night of seeking God and of the struggle to learn his name and see his face; it is the night of prayer that, with tenacity and perseverance, asks God for a blessing and a new name, a new reality that is the fruit of conversion and forgiveness.

For the believer, Jacob's night at the ford of Jabbok thus becomes a reference point for understanding the relationship with God that finds in prayer its greatest expression. Prayer requires trust, nearness, almost a hand-to-hand contact that is symbolic not of a God who is an enemy, an adversary, but a Lord of blessing who always remains mysterious and who seems beyond reach. Therefore, the author of the sacred text uses the symbol of the struggle, which implies strength of spirit, perseverance, and tenacity in obtaining what is desired. And if the object of one's desire is a relationship with God, his blessing and love, then the struggle cannot fail but ends in that self-giving to God and the recognition of one's own weakness that is overcome only by giving oneself over into God's merciful hands.

Dear brothers and sisters, our entire lives are like this long night of struggle and prayer, spent in desiring and asking for God's blessing. This blessing cannot be grabbed or won through our own strength but must be received with humility from God as a gratuitous gift that ultimately allows us to recognize the Lord's face. And when this happens, our entire reality changes; we receive a new name and God's blessing. Jacob, who received a new name and became Israel, also gives a new name to the place where he wrestled with God, where he prayed; he renames it Penuel, which means "The Face of God." With this name, he recognizes that this place is filled with the Lord's presence, making that land sacred and thus leaving a memorial of that mysterious encounter with God. Whoever allows himself to be blessed by God, whoever abandons himself to God, whoever permits himself to be transformed by God, renders a blessing to the world. May the Lord help us to fight the good fight of the faith (see 1 Tm 6:12; 2 Tm 4:7), and to ask in prayer for his blessing, that he may renew us in the expectation of beholding his Face.

# Moses' Intercessory Prayer

St. Peter's Square, June 1, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

As we read the Old Testament, we note one figure who stands out from among the others as a man of prayer: Moses, the great prophet and leader. At the time of the Exodus, he carried out his role as mediator between God and Israel by making himself a messenger to the people of God's words and divine commands, by leading the Israelites toward the freedom of the Promised Land and teaching them to live by obeying God and trusting in him during their long sojourn in the desert. However, above all, Moses fulfilled his role by praying.

Moses prayed for the pharaoh when God, with the plagues, was endeavoring to convert the Egyptians' hearts (see Ex 8—10); Moses asked the Lord to heal his sister Miriam, afflicted with leprosy (see Nm 12:9–13); he interceded for the people which had rebelled fearful of what those who had spied out the land would report (see Nm 14:1–19); he prayed when fire was about to burn down the camp (see Nm 11:1–2) and when poisonous serpents decimated the people (see Nm 21:4–9); he addressed the Lord and reacted by protesting when the burden of his mission became too heavy (see Nm 11:10–15); he saw God and spoke "to him face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex 33:11; see Ex 24:9–17; 33:7–23; 34:1–10, 28–35).

And on Sinai, even while the people were asking Aaron to make a golden calf, Moses prayed, explaining with symbols his own role as intercessor. The episode is recounted in chapter 32 of the Book of Exodus, and there is a parallel account in chapter 9 of Deuteronomy.

It is this episode on which I would like to reflect in today's catechesis—in particular, on Moses' prayer that we find in the Exodus narrative. The people

of Israel were at the foot of Sinai, whereas Moses, on the mountain, was waiting for the gift of the Tables of the Law, fasting for forty days and forty nights (see Ex 24:18; Dt 9:9). The number forty has a symbolic value and suggests the totality of the experience, whereas fasting indicates that life comes from God, that it is he who sustains it.

Indeed, the act of eating entails the assumption of the nourishment that keeps us going; hence fasting, giving up all food, in this case acquires a religious significance: It is a way of showing that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (see Dt 8:3). By fasting Moses showed that he was awaiting the gift of the divine Law as a source of life; this Law reveals God's will and nourishes the human heart, bringing men and women into a covenant with the Most High, who is the source of life—who is life itself.

Yet, on the mountain, while the Lord was giving the Law to Moses, at the bottom of the mountain the people were violating it. Unable to endure waiting and the absence of their mediator, the Israelites turned to Aaron, saying: "Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Ex 32:1). Weary of the journey with an invisible God, now that Moses, their mediator, had disappeared, the people clamored for an actual, tangible presence of the Lord, and in the calf of molten metal made by Aaron they found a god made accessible, manageable, and within human reach.

This is a constant temptation on the journey of faith: to avoid the divine mystery by constructing a comprehensible god who corresponds with one's own plans, one's own projects.

What happened on Sinai shows the sheer folly and deceptive vanity of this claim because, as Psalm 106:20 ironically affirms: "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." So it was that the Lord reacted and ordered Moses to come down from the mountain, revealing to him what the people were doing and ending with these words: "Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation" (Ex 32:10).

As he had revealed to Abraham with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, now too God revealed to Moses what his intentions were, almost as though he did not want to act without Moses' consent (see Am 3:7). He said: "Let … my wrath … burn hot." These words were spoken so that Moses might intervene

and ask God not to do it, thereby revealing that what God always wants is salvation.

Just as for the two cities in Abraham's day, the punishment and destruction—in which God's anger is expressed as the rejection of evil—demonstrate the gravity of the sin committed; at the same time, the request of the intercessor is intended to show the Lord's desire for forgiveness. God's salvation involves mercy, but it also contains the denunciation of the truth of the sin and evil that exists, so that the sinner, having recognized and rejected his sin, may let God forgive and transform him. In this way prayers of intercession make divine mercy active in the corrupt reality of sinful man—it finds a voice in the entreaty of the person praying and is made present through him wherever there is a need for salvation.

Moses' supplication was wholly based on the Lord's fidelity and grace. He referred first to the history of redemption that God began by bringing Israel out of Egypt and then recalled the ancient promise made to the fathers. The Lord brought about salvation by freeing his people from slavery in Egypt, so "Why," Moses asked, "should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?'" (Ex 32:12).

Once the work of salvation has been begun, it must be brought to completion; were God to let his people perish, this might be interpreted as a sign of God's inability to bring the project of salvation to completion. God cannot allow this—he is the good Lord who saves, the guarantor of life; he is the God of mercy and forgiveness, of deliverance from sin that kills.

Hence Moses appealed to the interior life of God against the exterior judgment. But, Moses then argued with the Lord, were his Chosen People to perish, even though guilty, God might appear incapable of overcoming sin. And this he could not accept.

Moses had a concrete experience of the God of salvation; he was sent as a mediator of divine liberation, and then, with his prayers he made himself the interpreter of a twofold anxiety: He was worried about his people's future and at the same time he was also worried about the honor due to the Lord and about the truth of his name. The intercessor wanted the people of Israel to be saved because this people was the flock which had been entrusted to him, but also because it was in this salvation that the true reality of God was made manifest.

The prayer of intercession is permeated by love of the brethren and love of

God; they are inseparable. Moses, the intercessor, is a man torn between two loves that overlap in prayer in a single desire for good.

Moses then appealed to God's faithfulness, reminding him of his promises: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said … 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever" (Ex 32:13). Moses recalls the founding story of their origin—of the fathers of the people and how the Israelites were freely chosen, a choice in which God alone took the initiative. Not for their own merits did they receive the promise, but because of God's free choice and his love (see Dt 10:15).

Moses then asked the Lord to continue in fidelity his record of choosing and salvation by forgiving his people. The intercessor did not ask for his people to be excused of their sin; he did not list any presumed merits, either the people's or his own, but rather appealed to God's bounty: a free God, total love, who does not cease to seek out those who have fallen away, who is always faithful to himself, who offers the sinner a chance to return to him and, through forgiveness, to become righteous and capable of fidelity. Moses asked God to show himself more powerful than sin and death, and with his prayer he elicited this divine revelation of himself.

As a mediator of life, the intercessor showed solidarity with the people: Anxious solely for the salvation that God himself desires, he gave up the prospect of it becoming a new people pleasing to the Lord. The words God had addressed to him, "Of you I will make a great nation," were not even taken into consideration by the "friend" of God, who instead was ready to take upon himself not only the guilt of his people, but also all its consequences.

When, after the destruction of the golden calf, he returned to the mountain to ask salvation for Israel once again, he would say to the Lord: "But now, if you will, forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray you, out of your book which you have written" (Ex 32:32).

With prayer, wanting what God wanted, the intercessor entered more and more deeply into knowledge of the Lord and his mercy, and became capable of a love that extended even to the total gift of himself. In Moses, face-to-face with God on the summit of the mountain, who made himself an intercessor for his people and offered himself ("blot me out"), the Fathers of the Church saw a prefigure of Christ who from the very top of the cross was truly before

God, not only as a friend but as Son. Not only did Christ offer himself—with his pierced heart he had himself blotted out—he himself became sin. As St. Paul himself says, he took *upon himself* our sins to ensure *our* salvation. His intercession was not only solidarity but identification with us: he bears all of us in his Body. And thus his whole life as a man and as the Son of God is a cry to God's heart; it is forgiveness, but a forgiveness that transforms and renews.

I think we should meditate upon this reality. Christ stands before God and is praying for me. His prayer on the cross is contemporary with all human beings, contemporary with me. He prays for me, he suffered and suffers for me, he identified himself with me, taking on the human body and soul. And he asks us to enter this identity of his, making ourselves one body, one spirit with him because from the summit of the cross he brought not new laws (tablets of stone), but himself, his Body and Blood, as the New Covenant. Thus he brings us into kinship with himself; he makes us one body with him, identifies us with him. He invites us to enter into this identification, to be united with him in our wish to be one body, one spirit with him. Let us pray to the Lord that this identification may transform and renew us, because forgiveness is renewal and transformation.

I would like to end this catechesis with the apostle Paul's words to the Christians of Rome: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? … Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities … nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, [which is] in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:33–35, 38–39).

# Elijah's Lessons in Prayer

St. Peter's Square, June 15, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

The prophets, with their teaching and their preaching, had great importance in the religious history of ancient Israel. Among them, the figure of Elijah stands out; he was impelled by God to bring the people to conversion. His name means "The Lord Is My God," and his life developed in accordance with this name—he was entirely dedicated to enkindling in the people gratitude to the Lord as the one God.

The Book of Sirach says of Elijah: "Then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word burned like a torch" (Sir 48:1). With this flame, Israel found its way back to God. In his ministry Elijah prayed: He called upon the Lord to restore to life the son of a widow who had given him hospitality (see 1 Kgs 17:17–24); he cried out to God in his weariness and anguish while fleeing to the desert when Queen Jezebel sought to kill him (see 1 Kgs 19:1–4). However, it was on Mount Carmel in particular that he showed his full power as an intercessor when, before all Israel, he prayed to the Lord, asking him to show himself and to convert the people's hearts. This is the episode recounted in chapter 18 of the First Book of Kings.

It was in the kingdom of the north, in the ninth century before Christ at the time of King Ahab, at a moment when Israel had created for itself a situation of blatant syncretism. Beside the Lord, the people worshipped Baal, the reassuring idol from which it was believed that the gift of rain came, and to which was therefore attributed the power of making fields fertile and giving life to people and animals.

In spite of claiming to follow the Lord, an invisible and mysterious God, the people also sought security in a comprehensible and predictable god from

whom they believed they could obtain fruitfulness and prosperity in exchange for sacrifices. Israel had capitulated to the seduction of idolatry— the continuous temptation of all believers—deluding itself that it could "serve two masters" (see Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13) and ease the impenetrable ways of faith in the Almighty by also placing its trust in a powerless god fashioned by men.

It was in order to unmask the deceptive foolishness of this attitude that Elijah gathered the people of Israel on Mount Carmel and confronted them with the need to make a decision: "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kgs 18:21). The prophet, a herald of God's love, did not abandon his people as they faced this decision; rather, he helped them by pointing out a sign that would reveal the truth. Both he and the prophets of Baal were to prepare a sacrifice and pray; the true God would then reveal himself, responding with fire that would burn the offering. Thus began the confrontation between the prophet Elijah and the followers of Baal, which was, in fact, between the Lord of Israel, the God of salvation, and the mute idol with no substance which could do nothing, neither good nor evil (see Jer 10:5). And so the confrontation also began between two completely different approaches to God and to prayer.

The prophets of Baal cried aloud, worked themselves up, danced and leapt about, falling into a state of ecstasy, even going so far as to cut themselves "with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them" (1 Kgs 18:28). They had recourse to themselves in order to call on their god, trusting their own devices to provoke his answer. In this way the idol's deceptive reality was revealed: It was thought up by human beings as something that could be used, something that could be managed with their own efforts, and something to which they could gain access through their own strength and their own vital force. Worship of an idol, instead of opening the human heart to Otherness, to a liberating relationship that permits the person to emerge from the narrow space of his own selfishness to enter the dimensions of love and of reciprocal giving, shuts the person into the exclusive and desperate circle of self-seeking. And the deception is such that in worshipping an idol people find themselves forced to extreme actions, in the vain attempt to subject the idol to their own will. For this reason, the prophets of Baal went so far as to hurt themselves, to wound their bodies—in a dramatically ironic action to get an answer, a sign of life out of their god, they covered themselves with blood, symbolically covering themselves with death.

Elijah's prayerful attitude was entirely different. He asked the people to

draw close, thereby involving them in his action and his supplication. The purpose of the challenge he addressed to the prophets of Baal was to restore to God the people that had strayed by following idols; therefore, he wanted Israel to be united with him, to become participators in and protagonists of his prayer and of everything that was happening. Then the prophet built an altar, using "twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying: 'Israel shall be your name'" (1 Kgs 18:31). Those stones represented the whole nation of Israel and are the tangible memorial of the choice, predilection, and salvation of which the people had been the object. This liturgical gesture of Elijah had crucial importance; the altar was a sacred place that indicated the Lord's presence, but those stones represented the people that now, through the prophet's mediation, were symbolically placed before God. Israel had become an "altar," a place of offering and sacrifice.

It was necessary for the symbol to become reality, for Israel to recognize the true God and to rediscover its own identity as the Lord's people. Elijah therefore asked God to show himself, and those twelve stones that were to remind Israel of its truth also served to remind the Lord of his fidelity, for which the prophet appealed in prayer. The words of his invocation are full of meaning and faith: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (1 Kgs 18:36–37). Elijah turned to the Lord, calling him the God of the Fathers, thus implicitly calling to mind the divine promises and the story of the covenant that bound the Lord indissolubly to his people. The involvement of God in human history is such that his name was inseparably connected with that of the patriarchs, and the prophet spoke that holy name so that God might remember and show himself to be faithful, and also so that Israel might feel called by name and rediscover its faithfulness. In fact, the divine title spoken by Elijah seems somewhat surprising. Instead of using the customary formula, "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," he used a lesser-known title: "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel." Replacing the name "Jacob" with "Israel" calls to mind Jacob's struggle at the ford of the Jabbok, with the change of name to which the narrator explicitly refers (see Gn 32:31). The substitution acquires a pregnant meaning in Elijah's invocation. The prophet is praying for the people of the kingdom of the north, which was

called Israel—as distinct from Judah, which indicated the kingdom of the south. And now, this people—who seemed to have forgotten their own origins and privileged relationship with the Lord—heard themselves called by name when the name of God, God of the Patriarch and God of the People, was spoken: "O Lord, God … of Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel."

The people for whom Elijah prayed were faced with their own truth. The prophet asked that the truth of the Lord might also be shown and that he would intervene to convert Israel, detaching it from the deception of idolatry and thereby bringing it to salvation. He requested that the people might finally realize and know fully who truly was their God and make a decisive choice to follow him alone, the one true God. For only in this way is God recognized for what he is, absolute and transcendent, ruling out the possibility of setting him beside other gods, which would relativize him. This is the faith that makes Israel the people of God; it is the faith proclaimed by the well-known text of the *Shema' Israel*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt 6:4–5). The believer must respond to God's absoluteness with an absolute, total love that binds his whole life, his strength, and his heart. It was for the very heart of his people that the prophet, with his prayers, implored that the people would be converted: "That this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (1 Kgs 18:37). Elijah, with his intercession, asked of God what God himself wanted to do—to show himself in all his mercy, faithful to his reality as the Lord of life who forgives, converts, and transforms.

And this is what happened: "Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, 'The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God'" (1 Kgs 18:38–39). Fire, the element both necessary and terrible, associated with the divine manifestations of the burning bush and of Sinai, then served to mark the love of God that responds to prayer and was revealed to his people. Baal, the mute and powerless god, had not responded to the invocations of his prophets; the Lord, on other hand, responded unequivocally, not only by burning the sacrifice but also drying up all the water that had been poured around the altar. The people of Israel could no longer have doubts; divine

mercy came to meet their weakness, their doubts, their lack of faith. Now Baal, a vain idol, was vanquished, and the people that seemed to be lost rediscovered the path of truth and rediscovered themselves as well.

Dear brothers and sisters, what does this history of the past tell us? What is the present truth of this history? First of all, the priority of the first commandment is called into question: worship God alone. Whenever God disappears, man falls into the slavery of idolatry, as totalitarian regimes have demonstrated in our time, and as the various forms of nihilism that make man dependent on idols also demonstrate: They enslave him. Secondly, the primary aim of prayer is conversion—the flame of God that transforms our hearts and enables us to see God, live in accordance with God, and live for others. Thirdly, the Fathers tell us that this history of a prophet is prophetic too if, they say, it foreshadows the future, the future Christ; it is a step on the journey towards Christ. And they tell us that here we see God's true fire: the love that guided the Lord even to the cross, to the total gift of himself. True worship of God, therefore, is giving oneself to God and to men and women; true worship is love. True worship of God does not destroy but renews and transforms. Of course, the fire of God, the fire of love, burns, transforms, and purifies, but in this it does not destroy but rather creates the truth of our being —it recreates our hearts. And thus, truly alive through the grace of the fire of the Holy Spirit and the love of God, we are worshippers in spirit and in truth.

# THE PSALMS: THE “PRAYER BOOK” PAR EXCELLENCE

# Learning to Pray with the Psalms

St. Peter's Square, June 22, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In recent catecheses we have reflected on some of the Old Testament figures that are particularly significant for our reflection on prayer. I have talked about Abraham, who interceded for foreign cities, about Jacob, who in his nocturnal struggle received the blessing, about Moses, who invoked forgiveness for his people, and about Elijah, who prayed for the conversion of Israel.

With today's catechesis, I would like to begin a new stretch of the journey: Instead of commenting on specific episodes of people praying, we shall enter the "book of prayer" par excellence, the Book of Psalms. In forthcoming catecheses we shall read and meditate on several of the most beautiful psalms that are dearest to the Church's tradition of prayer. Today I would like to introduce them by talking about the Book of Psalms as a whole.

The Psalter appears as a "formulary" of prayers, a collection of 150 psalms that the biblical tradition offers us as believers so that they become our prayer—our way of speaking and relating to God. The psalms express the entire human experience with its multiple facets and the whole range of sentiments that accompany human existence.

The Psalms are interwoven with joy and suffering; they express the longing for God and the perception of our own unworthiness, happiness, and the feeling of abandonment, trust in God and sorrowful loneliness, fullness of life, and fear of death. The whole reality of the believer converges in these prayers. The people of Israel first and then the Church adopted them as a privileged mediation in relations with the one God and an appropriate response to God's self-revelation in history.

Since the psalms are prayers, they are expressions of the heart and of faith with which everyone can identify and in which that experience of special closeness to God—to which every human being is called—is communicated. Moreover the whole complexity of human life is distilled in the complexity of the different literary forms of the various psalms: hymns, laments, individual entreaties and collective supplications, hymns of thanksgiving, penitential psalms, wisdom psalms, and the other genres that are to be found in these poetic compositions.

Despite this multiplicity of expression, two great areas that sum up the prayer of the Psalter may be identified: supplication, connected to lamentation, and praise. These are two related dimensions that are almost inseparable, since supplication is motivated by the certainty that God will respond, thus opening a person to praise and thanksgiving, and praise and thanksgiving stem from the experience of salvation received, implying the need for help which the supplication expresses.

In his supplication the person praying bewails and describes his situation of anguish, danger, or despair—or, as in the penitential psalms, he confesses his guilt and sin, asking forgiveness. He discloses his needy state to the Lord, confident that he will be heard. This involves the recognition of God as good, as desirous of goodness, and as one who "loves the living" (see Wis 11:26), ready to help, save, and forgive. In this way, for example, the psalmist in Psalm 31 prays: "In you, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame … take me out of the net which is hidden for me, for you are my refuge" (Ps 31:1, 5). In the lamentation, therefore, something like praise, which is foretold in the hope of divine intervention, can already emerge, and it becomes explicit when divine salvation becomes a reality.

Likewise, in the psalms of thanksgiving and praise, recalling the gift received or contemplating the greatness of God's mercy, we also recognize our own smallness and the need to be saved, which is at the root of supplication. In this way we confess to God our condition as creatures, inevitably marked by death, yet bearing a radical desire for life. The psalmist therefore exclaims: "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol" (Ps 86:12–13). In the prayer of the psalms, supplication and praise are interwoven in this manner and fused in a single hymn that celebrates the eternal grace of the Lord who stoops down to our frailty.

It was precisely in order to permit the people of faith to join in this hymn that the psalter was given to Israel and to the Church. Indeed, the psalms teach us how to pray. In them, the word of God becomes a word of prayer—the words of the inspired psalmist also become the word of the person who prays the psalms.

This is the beauty and special characteristic of this book of the Bible: the prayers it contains, unlike other prayers we find in sacred Scripture, are not inserted in a narrative plot that specifies their meaning and role. The Psalms are given to the believer exactly as the text of prayers whose sole purpose is to become the prayer of the person who assimilates them and addresses them to God. Since they are a word of God, anyone who prays the Psalms speaks to God using the very words that God has given to us. So it is that, in praying the Psalms, we learn to pray. The Psalms are a school of prayer.

Something similar happens when a child begins to speak; namely, he learns how to express his own feelings, emotions, and needs with words that do not belong to him innately but that he learns from his parents and from those around him. What the child wishes to express is his own experience, but his means of expression comes from others. Little by little, he makes them his own; the words received from his parents become his words, and through these words he also learns a way of thinking and feeling. He gains access to a whole new world of concepts, and in it he develops and grows; he learns to relate to reality, people, and God. In the end, his parents' language has become his language; he speaks with words he has received from others but which have now become his own.

This is what happens with the prayer of the Psalms. They are given to us so that we may learn to address God, communicate with him, speak to him of ourselves with his words, and develop a language for the encounter with God. And through those words, it will also be possible to know and accept the criteria of his action, to draw closer to the mystery of his thoughts and ways (see Is 55:8–9), so as to grow constantly in faith and in love.

Just as our words are not only words but teach us a real and conceptual world, so too these prayers teach us the heart of God, so not only can we speak to God but we can learn who God is and, in learning how to speak to him, we learn to be a human being—we learn to be ourselves.

In this regard the title that the Jewish tradition has given the Psalter is significant. It is called *tehillîm*, a Hebrew word that means "praise," from the etymological root that we find in the expression "Alleluia"—that is, literally

“praised be the Lord.” This book of prayers, therefore—although it is so multiform and complex with its different literary genres and its structure alternating between praise and supplication—is ultimately a book of praise that teaches us to give thanks, to celebrate the greatness of God’s gift, to recognize the beauty of his works, and to glorify his holy Name. This is the most appropriate response to the Lord’s self-manifestation and the experience of his goodness.

By teaching us to pray, the Psalms teach us that even in desolation, even in sorrow, God’s presence endures; it is a source of wonder and solace. We can weep, implore, intercede, and complain, but always with the awareness that we are walking toward the light, where praise can be definitive. As Psalm 36 teaches us: “With you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps 36:9).

The Jewish tradition also has given many psalms specific names, attributing most of them to King David. A figure of outstanding human and theological depth, David was a complex figure who went through the most varied fundamental experiences of life. When he was young, he was a shepherd of his father’s flock, and then, passing through checkered and at times dramatic vicissitudes, he became king of Israel and pastor of the people of God. A man of peace, he fought many wars; unflagging and tenacious in his quest for God, he betrayed God’s love—yet he always remained a seeker of God even though he sinned frequently and seriously. As a humble penitent, he received divine pardon, accepting both his punishment and a destiny marked by suffering. Thus David with all his weaknesses was a king after the heart of God (see 1 Sm 13:14), a passionate man of prayer, a man who knew what it meant to implore and to praise. The connection of the psalms with this outstanding king of Israel is therefore important because he is a messianic figure, an anointed one of the Lord, in whom, in a certain way, the mystery of Christ is foreshadowed.

Equally important and meaningful are the manner and frequency with which the words of the Psalms are taken up in the New Testament, assuming and accentuating the prophetic value suggested by the connection of the Psalter with the messianic figure of David. In the Lord Jesus, who prayed with the Psalms during his earthly life, they were definitively fulfilled and revealed their fullest and most profound meaning.

The prayers of the Psalter with which we speak to God, speak to us of the Son, providing us with an image of the invisible God (see Col 1:15), which

fully reveals to us the Father's face. Christians, therefore, in praying the Psalms pray to the Father in Christ and with Christ, gaining in those hymns a new perspective which has in the paschal mystery the ultimate key to its interpretation. The horizon of the person praying thus opens to unexpected realities: Every psalm acquires a new light in Christ, and the Psalter can shine out in its full infinite richness.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us therefore take this holy book in our hands. Let us allow God to teach us to turn to him, and let us make the Psalter a guide which helps and accompanies us daily on the path of prayer. Let us also ask, as did Jesus' disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1), opening our hearts to receive the Teacher's prayer, in which all prayers are brought to completion. Thus, made sons in the Son, we shall be able to speak to God, calling him "Our Father."

# Psalm 3 – A Psalm of Lament and Supplication

St. Peter's Square, September 7, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today we are resuming the audiences in St. Peter's Square and the "school of prayer" which we attend together during these Wednesday catecheses. I would like to begin by meditating on several psalms, which constitute the "prayer book" par excellence. The first psalm I shall consider is a psalm of lamentation and supplication, imbued with deep trust, in which the certainty of God's presence forms the basis of the prayer that springs from the condition of extreme peril in which the person praying finds himself.

It is Psalm 3, which Jewish tradition ascribes to David at the moment when he fled from his son Absalom (see verse 1). This was one of the most dramatic and anguishing episodes in the king's life, when his son usurped his royal throne and forced him to flee from Jerusalem for his life (see 2 Sm 15).

Thus, David's plight and anxiety serve as a background to this prayer, helping us to understand it by presenting a typical situation in which such a psalm may be recited. Every man and woman can recognize in the psalmist's cry those feelings of sorrow, bitter regret, and yet at the same time, trust in God, who, as the Bible tells us, had accompanied David on the flight from his city. The psalm opens with an invocation to the Lord: "O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of me, 'There is no help for him in God'" (Ps 3:1–2).

The praying man's description of the situation is therefore marked by intensely dramatic tones. The idea of "multitude" is conveyed with the triple use of "many"—three words that in the original text are different terms with the same Hebrew root so as to give further emphasis to the enormity of the

danger—in a repetitive manner, as it were, hammering it in. This insistence on the large number of his enemies serves to express the psalmist's perception of the absolute disproportion between him and his persecutors, which justifies and establishes the urgency of his plea for help. His oppressors are numerous; they get the upper hand, whereas the man praying is alone and defenseless, at the mercy of his assailants.

Yet the first word the psalmist says is "Lord"; his cry opens with a call to God. A multitude threatens him and rises up against him, generating fear that magnifies the threat, making it appear greater and even more terrifying—but the praying person does not let this vision of death prevail; he keeps his relationship with the God of life intact and turns to him first in search of help.

However, his enemies attempt to break this bond with God and injure their victim's faith. They insinuate that the Lord cannot intervene; they say that not even God can save him. Hence the attack is not only physical but involves the spiritual dimension too: "There is no help for him in God," they say, targeting the central principle of the psalmist's mind.

This is the extreme temptation to which the believer is subjected—the temptation to lose faith, to lose trust in God's closeness. The righteous pass the final test: They remain steadfast in faith, in the certainty of the truth and full trust in God; in this way they find life and truth. It seems to me that here the psalm touches us very personally. Beset by many problems, we are tempted to think that perhaps God does not save me, that he does not know me; perhaps he is not able to. The temptation to lose faith is our enemy's ultimate attack, and if we are to find God, if we are to find life, we must resist it.

Thus in our psalm the person praying is called to respond with faith to the attacks of the wicked. His foes deny that God can help him, yet he invokes God; he calls him by name, "Lord," and then he turns to him with an emphatic "thouyou" that expresses a solid, sturdy relationship and implies the certainty of the divine response: "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain" (Ps 3:3–4).

The vision of the enemies then disappears. They have not triumphed, because the one who believes in God is sure that God is his friend. Only the "thou-you" of God is left. Now only One opposes the "many," but this One is far greater, far more powerful, than many adversaries.

The Lord is help, defense, and salvation; as a shield he protects the person

who entrusts himself to him and enables him to lift his head in the gesture of triumph and victory. Man is no longer alone, and his foes are not as invincible as they had seemed, for the Lord hears the cry of the oppressed and answers from the place of his presence, from his holy mountain.

The human being cries out in anguish, in danger, in pain; the human being calls for help and God answers. In this interweaving of the human cry and the divine response, we find the dialectic of prayer and the key to reading the entire history of salvation. The cry expresses the need for help and appeals to the other's faithfulness; crying out means making an act of faith in God's closeness and his willingness to listen.

Prayer expresses the certainty of a divine presence already experienced and believed in, a certainty that is fully expressed in God's salvific answers. It is important that in our prayer the certainty of God's presence be given importance and be made present. Thus the psalmist, who feels besieged by death, professes his faith in the God of life who, as a shield, surrounds him with an invulnerable protection. The one who believed he was as good as lost can raise his head because the Lord saves him. The praying person, threatened and mocked, is in glory, because God is his glory.

The divine response that hears his prayer totally reassures the psalmist; even his fear is no more and his cry is soothed in peace, in deep inner tranquility. "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about" (Ps 3:5–6).

The praying person, even in peril, even in the midst of battle, can sleep serenely in an unequivocal attitude of trusting abandonment. His foes have pitched camp around him—they are numerous, they besiege him. They rise up against him, taunting and trying to make him fall, yet he lies down and sleeps, calm and serene, sure of God's presence. On reawakening he finds God still beside him, as a custodian who does not fall asleep (see Ps 121:3–4), sustains him, holds his hand, and never abandons him.

The fear of death is vanquished by the presence of One who never dies. And even the night that is peopled by atavistic fears, the sorrowful night of solitude and anguished waiting, is now transformed: what evoked death became the presence of the Eternal One.

The enemy's visible, massive, impressive attack is countered by the invisible presence of God with all his invincible power. And it is to him that the psalmist, after his trusting words, once again addresses the prayer: "Arise,

O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!" (Ps 3:7a). Although his assailants "are rising" (v. 1) against their victim, the One who will "arise" is the Lord and he will defeat them. God will deliver him, answering his cry. Thus the psalm ends with the vision of liberation from the peril that kills and from the temptation that can cause us to perish.

After addressing his plea to the Lord to arise and deliver him, the praying person describes the divine victory: his enemies—who, with their unjust and cruel oppression, are the symbol of all that opposes God and his plan of salvation— are defeated.

Struck on the mouth, they will no longer attack with their destructive violence and will be unable to instill evil and doubt about God's presence and action. Their senseless and blasphemous talk is denied once and for all and is reduced to silence by the Lord's saving intervention (see Ps 3:7bc). In this way the psalmist can conclude his prayer with a sentence with liturgical connotations that celebrates the God of life in gratitude and praise: "Deliverance belongs to the Lord; your blessing be upon your people" (v. 8).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 3 has presented us with a supplication full of trust and consolation. In praying this psalm, we can make the sentiments of the psalmist our own—a figure of the righteous person persecuted who finds his fulfillment in Jesus.

In sorrow, in danger, in the bitterness of misunderstanding and offense, the words of this psalm open our hearts to the comforting certainty of faith. God is always close—even in difficulties, problems, and the darkness of life, he listens and saves in his own way.

However, it is necessary to recognize his presence and accept his ways, as David did in his humiliating flight from his son, Absalom; as the just man who was persecuted in the Book of Wisdom did, and, ultimately and completely, as the Lord Jesus did on Golgotha. And when, in the eyes of the wicked, God does not seem to intervene and the Son dies, it is then that the true glory and the definitive realization of salvation is manifested to all believers.

May the Lord give us faith; may he come to our aid in our weakness and make us capable of believing and praying in every anxiety, in the sorrowful nights of doubt and the long days of sorrow, abandoning ourselves with trust to him, who is our "shield" and our "glory."

# Psalm 22 – The Prayer of the Innocent Victim

Paul VI Audience Hall, September 14, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In our catechesis today we will reflect on a psalm with strong Christological implications, Psalm 22. This psalm continually surfaces in accounts of Jesus' Passion, with its twofold dimension of humiliation and glory, death and life. It is a heartfelt, moving prayer with a human density and a theological richness that make it one of the most frequently prayed and studied psalms in the entire Psalter. It is a long poetic composition, so we shall reflect in particular on the first part, which centers on the lament, in order to examine in depth certain important dimensions of the prayer of supplication to God.

This psalm presents the figure of an innocent man, persecuted and surrounded by adversaries who clamor for his death. He turns to God with a sorrowful lament that, in the certainty of his faith, opens mysteriously to praise. The anguishing reality of the present and the consoling memory of the past alternate in his prayer in an agonized awareness of his own desperate situation in which, however, he does not want to give up hope. His initial cry is an appeal addressed to a God who appears remote, who does not answer and seems to have abandoned him: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Ps 22:1–2).

God is silent, and this silence pierces the soul of the person praying, who ceaselessly calls but receives no answer. Day and night succeed one another in an unflagging quest for a word, for help that does not come. God seems so distant, so forgetful, so absent. The prayer asks to be heard, to be answered; it

begs for contact and seeks a relationship that can give comfort and salvation. But if God fails to respond, the cry of help is lost in the void and loneliness becomes unbearable.

Yet, in his cry, the praying man of our psalm calls the Lord "my" God at least three times, in an extreme act of trust and faith. In spite of all appearances, the psalmist cannot believe that his link with the Lord is totally broken. While he asks the reason for what seems to be an incomprehensible abandonment, he affirms that "his" God cannot forsake him.

As is well known, the initial cry of the psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is recorded by the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as the cry uttered by Jesus dying on the cross (see Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34). It expresses all the desolation of the Messiah, the Son of God, who is facing the drama of death, a reality totally opposed to the Lord of life. Forsaken by almost all his followers, betrayed and denied by the disciples, surrounded by people who insult him, Jesus is under the crushing weight of a mission that was to pass through humiliation and annihilation. This is why he cried out to the Father, and his suffering took up the sorrowful words of the psalm. But his is not a desperate cry, nor was that of the psalmist who, in his supplication, takes a tormented path that nevertheless opens out at last into a perspective of praise, into trust in the divine victory.

And since, in the Jewish custom, citing the beginning of a psalm implied a reference to the whole poem, although Jesus' anguished prayer retains its burden of unspeakable suffering, it unfolds to the certainty of glory. "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" the risen Christ would say to the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:26). In his Passion, in his obedience to the Father, the Lord Jesus passes through abandonment and death to reach life and give it to all believers.

This initial cry of supplication in Psalm 22 is followed in sorrowful contrast by the memory of the past: "In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you did deliver them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed" (Ps 22:4–5).

The God who appears to be so remote to the psalmist is nonetheless the merciful Lord whom Israel experienced throughout its history. The people to whom the praying person belongs is the object of God's love and can witness to his fidelity to him. Starting with the patriarchs, then in Egypt and on the long pilgrimage through the wilderness, in the stay in the Promised Land in contact with aggressive and hostile peoples, to the night of the exile, the

whole of biblical history is a cry for help on the part of the people and of saving answers on the part of God.

The psalmist refers to the steadfast faith of his ancestors who "trusted"—this word is repeated three times—without ever being disappointed. However, it seems that this chain of trusting invocations and divine answers has been broken; the psalmist's situation seems to deny the entire history of salvation, making the present reality even more painful.

God, however, cannot deny himself, so here the prayer returns to describing the distressing plight of the praying person, to induce the Lord to have pity on him and to intervene as he always has in the past. The psalmist describes himself as "a worm, and no man, scorned by men, and despised by the people" (v. 6). He was mocked, people made grimaces at him (see v. 7), and wounded in his very faith. "He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" they said (v. 8).

Under the jeering blows of irony and contempt, it almost seems as though the persecuted man loses his own human features, like the suffering servant outlined in the Book of Isaiah (see Is 52:14; 53:2b–3). And like the oppressed righteous man in the Book of Wisdom (see Wis 2:12–20), and like Jesus on Calvary (see Mt 27:39–43), the psalmist saw his own relationship with the Lord called into question in the cruel and sarcastic emphasis of what is causing him to suffer: God's silence, his apparent absence. And yet God was present with an indisputable tenderness in the life of the person praying. The psalmist reminds the Lord of this: "Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you did keep me safe upon my mother's breasts. Upon you was I cast from my birth" (Ps 22:9–10a).

The Lord is the God of life who brings the newborn child into the world and cares for him with a father's affection. And though the memory of God's fidelity in the history of the people has first been recalled, the praying person now re-evokes his own personal history with the Lord, going back to the particularly significant moment of the beginning of his life. And here, despite the desolation of the present, the psalmist recognizes a closeness and a divine love so radical that he can now exclaim, in a confession full of faith and generating hope: "And since my mother bore me you have been my God" (v. 10b).

The lament then becomes a heartfelt plea: "Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help" (Ps 22:11). The only closeness that the psalmist can perceive is one that fills him with fear is the nearness of his

enemies. It is therefore necessary for God to make himself close and to help him, because enemies surround the praying man; they encircle him like strong bulls, like ravening and roaring lions (see Ps 22:12–13). Anguish alters his perception of the danger, magnifying it. The adversaries seem invincible; they become ferocious, dangerous animals, while the psalmist is like a small worm, powerless and defenseless.

Yet these images used in the psalm also serve to describe how, when man becomes brutal and attacks his brother, something brutal within him takes the upper hand—he seems to lose any human likeness. Violence always has something bestial about it, and only God's saving intervention can restore humanity to human beings.

Now, it seems to the psalmist, the object of so much ferocious aggression, that he no longer has any way out, and death begins to take possession of him: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint … my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws … they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots" (Ps 22:14, 15, 18).

The disintegration of the body of the condemned man is described with the dramatic images that we encounter in the accounts of Christ's Passion. The unbearable parching thirst that torments the dying man that is echoed in Jesus' request, "I thirst" (Jn 19:28), until we reach the definitive act of his tormentors, who, like the soldiers at the foot of the cross, divide the clothes of the victim whom they consider already dead (see Mt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:23–24).

Here then, once again comes the request for help: "But you, O Lord, be not far off! O you my help, hasten to my aid! … Save me" (Ps 22:19; 21a). This is a cry that opens the heavens, because it proclaims a faith, a certainty that goes beyond all doubt, all darkness, and all desolation. Thus the lament is transformed—it gives way to praise in the acceptance of salvation: "He has heard.… I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" (Ps 22:21c–22).

In this way the psalm expands into thanksgiving, into the great final hymn that sweeps up the whole people, the Lord's faithful, the liturgical assembly, the generations to come (see Ps 22:23–31). The Lord came to the rescue; he saved the poor man and showed his merciful face. Death and life are interwoven in an inseparable mystery, and life triumphs—the God of salvation shows himself to be the undisputed Lord whom all the ends of the

earth will praise and before whom all the families of the nations will bow down. It is the victory of faith that can transform death into the gift of life and the abyss of sorrow into a source of hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, this psalm has taken us to Golgotha, to the foot of the cross of Jesus, to relive his Passion and to share the fruitful joy of the Resurrection. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be invaded by the light of the paschal mystery even in God's apparent absence, even in God's silence, and—like the disciples of Emmaus—let us learn to discern the true reality beyond appearances, recognizing humiliation itself as the way to exaltation and the cross as the full manifestation of life on earth. Thus, placing in God the Father all our trust and hope, in every anxiety we will be able to pray to him with faith, and our cry of help will be transformed into a hymn of praise.

# Psalm 23 – "The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want"

St. Peter's Square, October 5, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Turning to the Lord in prayer implies a radical act of trust, with the awareness that one is entrusting oneself to God who is good, "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6; see Ps 86:15; Jl 2:13; Jn 4:2; Ps 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17). For this reason I would like to reflect with you today on a psalm that is totally imbued with trust, in which the psalmist expresses his serene certainty that he is guided and protected, safe from every danger, because the Lord is his Shepherd. It is Psalm 23, a text familiar to all and loved by all.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want": the beautiful prayer begins with these words, evoking the nomadic environment of sheep-farming and the experience of familiarity between the shepherd and the sheep that make up his little flock. The image calls to mind an atmosphere of trust, intimacy, and tenderness: the shepherd knows each one of his sheep and calls them by name; and they follow him because they recognize him and trust in him (see Jn 10:2–4).

He tends them, looks after them as precious possessions; he is ready to defend them, in order to guarantee their well-being and enable them to live a peaceful life. They lack nothing as long as the shepherd is with them. The psalmist refers to this experience by calling God his shepherd and letting God lead him to safe pastures: "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Ps 23:2–3).

The vision that unfolds before our eyes is that of green pastures and

springs of clear water, oases of peace to which the shepherd leads his flock. These are symbols of the places of life towards which the Lord leads the psalmist, who feels like the sheep lying on the grass beside a stream, resting rather than in a state of tension or alarm, peaceful and trusting, because it is a safe place, the water is fresh, and the shepherd is watching over them.

And let us not forget here that the scene elicited by the psalm is set in a land that is largely desert, on which the scorching sun beats down, where the Middle-Eastern seminomad shepherd lives with his flock in the parched steppes that surround the villages. Nevertheless, the shepherd knows where to find grass and fresh water, so essential to life; he can lead the way to oases in which the soul is "restored" and where it is possible to recover strength and new energy to start out afresh on the journey.

As the psalmist says, God guides him to "green pastures" and "still waters," where everything is superabundant; everything is given in plenty. If the Lord is the Shepherd, even in the desert, a desolate place of death, the certainty of a radical presence of life is not absent, so that the psalmist is able to say, "I shall not want." Indeed, the shepherd has at his heart the good of his flock; he adapts his own pace and needs to those of his sheep. He walks and lives with them, leading them on paths "of righteousness"—that is, paths suitable for them—paying attention to their needs and not his own. The safety of his sheep is a priority for him, and he complies with this in leading his flock.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we follow the Good Shepherd—no matter how difficult, tortuous, or long the pathways of our lives may seem, even through spiritual deserts without water and under the scorching sun of rationalism— with the guidance of Christ the Good Shepherd, we too, like the psalmist, may be sure that we are walking on "paths of righteousness" and that the Lord is leading us, is ever close to us, making sure that we "lack nothing." For this reason, the psalmist can declare his calm assurance without doubt or fear: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me" (Ps 23:4).

Those who walk with the Lord even in the dark valleys of suffering, doubt, and all human problems, feel safe. "You are with me"—this is our certainty; this is what supports us. The darkness of the night frightens us with its shifting shadows, with the difficulty of distinguishing dangers, with its silence taut with strange sounds. If the flock moves after sunset when

visibility fades, it is normal for the sheep to be restless. There is the risk of stumbling or even straying and getting lost, and there is also the fear of possible assailants lurking in the darkness.

To speak of the "dark" valley, the psalmist uses a Hebrew phrase that calls to mind the shadows of death, which is why the valley to be passed through is a place of anguish, terrible threats, and the danger of death. Yet the person praying walks on in safety, undaunted, since he knows that the Lord is with him. "You are with me" is a proclamation of steadfast faith and sums up the radical experience of faith; God's closeness transforms the reality, the dark valley loses all danger, it is emptied of every threat. Now the flock can walk in tranquility, accompanied by the familiar rhythmical beat of the staff on the ground, marking the shepherd's reassuring presence.

This comforting image ends the first part of the psalm and gives way to a different scene. We are still in the desert, where the shepherd lives with his flock, but we are now set before his tent which opens to offer us hospitality. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows" (Ps 23:5).

The Lord is now presented as the One who welcomes the person praying with signs of generous hospitality, full of attention. The divine host lays the food on the "table," a term which in Hebrew means, in its primitive sense, the animal skin that was spread out on the ground and on which the food for the common meal was set out. It is a gesture of sharing—not only of food but also of life in an offering of communion and friendship that create bonds and express solidarity. Then there is the munificent gift of scented oil poured on the head, which with its fragrance brings relief from the scorching of the desert sun, refreshes and calms the skin, and gladdens the spirit.

Lastly, the cup overflowing with its exquisite wine, shared with superabundant generosity, adds a note of festivity. Food, oil, and wine are gifts that bring life and give joy, because they go beyond what is strictly necessary and express the free giving and abundance of love. Psalm 104 proclaims: "You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart" (Ps 104:14–15).

The psalmist becomes the object of much attention; he sees himself as a wayfarer who finds shelter in a hospitable tent, whereas his enemies have to stop and watch, unable to intervene, since the one whom they considered

their prey has been led to safety and has become a sacred guest who cannot be touched. And *we* are that psalmist if we truly are believers in communion with Christ. When God opens his tent to us to receive us, nothing can harm us. Then, when the traveler sets out afresh, the divine protection is extended and accompanies him on his journey: "Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6).

The goodness and faithfulness of God continue to escort the psalmist when he comes out of the tent and resumes his journey. But it is a journey that acquires new meaning and becomes a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Lord, the holy place in which the praying person wants to "dwell" forever and to which he also wants to "return." The Hebrew verb used here has the meaning of "to return," but with a small vowel change it can be understood as "to dwell." Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of the modern translations. Both meanings may be retained: to return and dwell in the Temple as every Israelite desires, and to dwell near God, close to him and to his goodness. This is what every believer yearns for: to be able to truly live where God is, close to him. Following the Shepherd leads to God's house; this is the destination of every journey, the longed-for oasis in the desert, the tent of shelter in escaping from enemies, a place of peace where God's kindness and faithful love may be felt, day after day, in the serene joy of time without end.

With their richness and depth, the images of this psalm have accompanied the whole of the history and religious experience of the Israelites, and it accompanies Christians. The figure of the shepherd, in particular, calls to mind the original time of the Exodus, the long journey through the desert, as a flock under the guidance of the divine Shepherd (see Is 63:11–14; Ps 77:20–21; 78:52–54). In the Promised Land, the king had the task of tending the Lord's flock, like David, the shepherd chosen by God and a figure of the Messiah (see 2 Sm 5:1–2, 7:8; Ps 78:70–72).

Then, after the Babylonian Exile, as it were in a new exodus (see Is 40:3–5, 9–11; 43:16–21), Israel was brought back to its homeland like a lost sheep found and led by God to luxuriant pastures and resting places (see Ez 34:11–16, 23–31). However, it is in the Lord Jesus that all the evocative power of our psalm reaches completeness and finds the fullness of its meaning: Jesus is the "Good Shepherd" who goes in search of lost sheep, who knows his sheep and lays down his life for them (see Mt 18:12–14; Lk 15:4–7; Jn 10:2–4, 11–

18). He is the way, the true path that leads us to life (see Jn 14:6); he is the light that illuminates the dark valley and overcomes all our fears (see Jn 1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46).

He is the generous host who welcomes us and rescues us from our enemies, preparing for us the table of his body and blood (see Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:19–20) and the definitive table of the messianic banquet in heaven (see Lk 14:15ff; Rv 3:20; 19:9). He is the Royal Shepherd, the king in docility and forgiveness enthroned on the glorious wood of the cross (see Jn 3:13–15; 12:32; 17:4–5).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 23 invites us to renew our trust in God, abandoning ourselves totally in his hands. Let us therefore ask with faith the Lord to grant us on the difficult ways of our time that we will always walk on his paths as a docile and obedient flock. Let us ask that he welcome us to his house, to his table, and lead us to “still waters” so that, in accepting the gift of his Spirit, we may quench our thirst at his sources—springs of the living water “welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14; see 7:37–39).

# Psalm 126 – A Prayer that Sings with Joy

St. Peter's Square, October 12, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In the previous catecheses, we have meditated on a number of psalms of lament and of trust. Today, I would like to reflect with you on a notably joyous psalm, a prayer that sings with joy the marvels of God: Psalm 126, which extols the great things the Lord has done with his people, and which he continues to do with every believer.

The psalmist begins the prayer in the name of all Israel by recalling the thrilling experience of salvation: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (Ps 126:1–2a).

The psalm speaks of "restored fortunes"; that is, fortunes restored to their original state in all their former favorability. It begins with a situation of suffering and need to which God responds by bringing about salvation and restoring the man who prays to his former condition; indeed, one that is enriched and even changed for the better. This is what happens to Job, when the Lord restores to him all that he had lost, redoubling it and bestowing upon him an even greater blessing (see Jb 42:10–13), and this is what the people of Israel experience in returning to their homeland after the Babylonian exile.

This psalm is meant to be interpreted with reference to the end of the deportation to a foreign land: The expression "restore the fortunes of Zion" is read and understood by the tradition as a "return of the prisoners of Zion." In fact, the return from exile is paradigmatic of every divine and saving intervention, since the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation into Babylon were devastating experiences for the Chosen People, not only on the political

and social planes, but also and especially on the religious and spiritual ones. The loss of their land, the end of the Davidic monarchy and the destruction of the Temple appear as a denial of the divine promises, and the People of the Covenant, dispersed among the pagans, painfully question a God who seems to have abandoned them.

Therefore, the end of the deportation and their return to their homeland are experienced as a marvelous return to faith, to trust, and to communion with the Lord; it is a "restoring of fortunes" that involves a conversion of heart, forgiveness, a refound friendship with God, a knowledge of his mercy, and a renewed possibility of praising him (see Jer 29:12–14; 30:18–20; 33:6–11; Ez 39:25–29). It is an experience of overflowing joy, laughter, and cries of jubilation, so beautiful that "it seems like a dream." Divine help often takes surprising forms that surpass what man is able to imagine; hence the wonder and joy that are expressed in this psalm: "The Lord has done great things." This is what the nations said, and it is what Israel proclaims: "Then they said among the nations, 'the Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad" (Ps 126:2b–3).

God performs marvelous works in the history of men. In carrying out salvation, he reveals himself to all as the powerful and merciful Lord, a refuge for the oppressed, who does not forget the cry of the poor (see Ps 9:10, 13), who loves justice and right and of whose love the earth is filled (see Ps 33:5). Thus, standing before the liberation of the people of Israel, all the nations recognize the great and marvelous things God has accomplished for his people, and they celebrate the Lord in his reality as Savior.

Israel echoes the proclamation of the nations, taking it up and repeating it once more—but as the protagonist, as a direct recipient of the divine action: "The Lord has done great things for us"—"for us" or even more precisely, "with us" (in Hebrew, '*immanû*), thus affirming that privileged relationship that the Lord keeps with his chosen ones, which is found in the name Emmanuel ("God with us")—the name by which Jesus would be called, signifying his complete and full revelation (see Mt 1:23).

Dear brothers and sisters, in our prayer we should look more often at how, in the events of our own lives, the Lord has protected, guided, and helped us and we should praise him for all he has done and does for us. We should be more attentive to the good things the Lord gives to us. We are always attentive to problems and difficulties, and we are almost unwilling to perceive that there are beautiful things that come from the Lord. This attention, which

becomes gratitude, is very important for us; it creates in us a memory for the good and it helps us also in times of darkness. God accomplishes great things, and whoever experiences this—attentive to the Lord's goodness with an attentiveness of heart—is filled with joy. The first part of Psalm 126 concludes with this joyous note.

To be saved and to return to one's homeland from exile are like being returned to life: Freedom opens us up to laughter, but it does so together with waiting for a fulfillment still desired and implored. This is the second part of our psalm, which continues: "Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb! May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps 126:4–6).

If, at the beginning of the prayer, the psalmist celebrated the joy of a fortune already restored by the Lord, now instead he asks for it as something still to be realized. If we apply this psalm to the return from exile, this apparent contradiction could be explained by Israel's historical experience of a difficult and only partial return to their homeland, which prompts the man who prays to implore further divine help to bring the people's restoration to completeness.

But the psalm goes beyond the purely historical moment and opens to broader, theological dimensions. The consoling experience of freedom from Babylon is nevertheless still incomplete. It has "already" occurred, but it is "not yet" marked by a definitive fullness. Thus, while the prayer joyously celebrates the salvation received, it opens in anticipation of its full realization. Therefore, the psalm uses distinctive imagery that in its complexity calls to mind the mysterious reality of redemption, in which the gift received and yet still to be awaited, life and death, joys dreamed of and painful tears, are interwoven.

The first image refers to the dried-up streams of the Negeb desert, which with the rains are filled with rushing waters that restore life to the arid ground and make it flourish. Thus, the psalmist's request is that the restoration of the Israelites' fortunes and their return from exile be like those waters, roaring and unstoppable, capable of transforming the desert into an immense stretch of green grass and flowers.

The second image shifts from the arid and rocky hills of the Negeb to the fields that farmers cultivate for food. In describing salvation, the experience renewed every year in the world of agriculture is here recalled: the difficult

and tiring time of sowing and then the overflowing joy in the harvest. It is a sowing in tears, since one casts to the ground what could still become bread, exposing it to a time of waiting that is full of uncertainty. The farmer works, he prepares the earth, he scatters the seed, but—as the Parable of the Sower illustrates well—one never knows where the seed will fall, if the birds will eat it, if it will take root, or if it will become an ear of grain (see Mt 13:3–9; Mk 4:2–9; Lk 8:4–8).

To scatter the seed is an act of trust and of hope; man's industriousness is needed, but then he must enter into a powerless time of waiting, well aware that many deciding factors will determine the success of the harvest, and that the risk of failure is always lurking. And yet, year after year, the farmer repeats his gesture and scatters the seed. And when it becomes an ear of grain, and the fields fill with crops, this is the joy of he who stands before an extraordinary marvel.

Jesus knew this experience well, and he spoke of it with those who were his own: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how" (Mk 4:26–27). It is the hidden mystery of life, and these are the wondrous, "great things" of salvation that the Lord carries out in human history and whose secret men do not know.

When divine help is manifested in all its fullness, it has an overflowing dimension, like the watercourses of the Negeb and the grain of the fields—the latter also evoking a disproportion characteristic of the things of God: a disproportion between the effort of the sowing and the immense joy of the harvest; between the anxiety of waiting and the comforting vision of the granaries filled; between the little seeds thrown upon the ground and the great sheaves of grain made golden by the sun. At the harvest, all is transformed; the weeping has ended and given way to an exultant cry of joy.

This is what the psalmist refers to when he speaks of salvation, liberation, and the restoration of fortunes and return from exile. The deportation to Babylon, like every other situation of suffering and crisis, with its painful darkness filled with doubts and the apparent absence of God, in reality— our psalm says—is like a time of sowing. In the mystery of Christ—in the light of the New Testament—the message becomes even clearer and more explicit. The believer who passes through this darkness is like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies but bears much fruit (see Jn 12:24); or, borrowing another image that was dear to Jesus, the believer is like the woman who

suffers the pains of labor for the sake of attaining the joy of having brought a new life to light (see Jn 16:21).

Dear brothers and sisters, this psalm teaches us that in our prayer we must always remain open to hope and firm in our faith in God. Our personal history—even if often marked by suffering, uncertainty, and moments of crisis—is a history of salvation and of the "restoring of fortunes." In Jesus our every exile ends, and every tear is wiped away in the mystery of his cross—death transformed into life, like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and yields a harvest. Also for us, this discovery of Jesus Christ is the great joy of God's "yes," of the restoration of our fortunes. But like those who—having returned from Babylon filled with joy— found an impoverished, devastated land as well as difficulty in sowing. Weeping, they suffered, not knowing if at the end there would actually be a harvest. So also we, after the great discovery of Jesus Christ—our life, the truth, the way— entering into the terrain of faith, into the "land of faith," also often find that life is dark, hard, difficult—a sowing in tears—but we are certain that in the end, the light of Christ truly gives us the great harvest.

And we must learn this also during the dark nights: Do not forget that the light is there, that God is already in the midst of our lives, and that we can sow with great trust in the fact that God's "yes" is stronger than us all. It is important not to lose the memory of God's presence in our lives—this profound joy that God has entered into our lives, thus freeing us. It is gratitude for the discovery of Jesus Christ, who has come among us—and this gratitude is transformed into hope. It is a star of hope that gives us trust; it is light, since the very pains of sowing are the beginning of new life, of the great and definitive joy of God.

# Psalm 136 – A Great Hymn of Praise

St. Peter's Square, October 19, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to meditate with you on Psalm 136, a psalm that sums up the entire history of salvation recorded in the Old Testament. It is a great hymn of praise that celebrates the Lord in the multiple, with repeated expressions of his goodness throughout human history.

A solemn prayer of thanksgiving, known as the "Great Hallel," this psalm is traditionally sung at the end of the Jewish Passover meal, and it was probably also prayed by Jesus at the Last Supper celebrated with his disciples. In fact, the annotation of the Evangelists—"and when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (see Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26)—would seem to allude to it.

The horizon of praise thus appears to illumine the difficult path to Golgotha. The whole of Psalm 136 unfolds in the form of a litany, marked by the antiphonal refrain: "For his steadfast love endures forever." The many wonders God has worked in human history and his continuous intervention on behalf of his people are listed in the composition. Furthermore, to every proclamation of the Lord's saving action, the antiphon responds with the basic impetus of praise.

The eternal love of God is a love that—in accordance with the Hebrew term used, one suggestive of fidelity, mercy, kindness, grace, and tenderness—is the unifying motif of the entire psalm. The refrain always takes the same form, whereas the regular paradigmatic manifestations of God's love change: creation, liberation through the Exodus, the gift of land, the Lord's provident and constant help for his people and for every created being.

After a triple invitation to give thanks to God as sovereign (Ps 136:1–3),

the Lord is celebrated as the One who works "great wonders" (v. 4), the first of which is Creation: the heavens, the earth, the heavenly bodies (vv. 5–9). The created world is not merely a scenario into which God's saving action is inserted; rather, is the very beginning of that marvelous action. With Creation, the Lord shows himself in all his goodness and beauty; he commits himself to life, revealing a desire for goodness which gives rise to every other action of salvation.

And in our psalm, re-echoing the first chapter of Genesis, the principal elements of the created world are summed up, with special insistence on the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, and the stars, magnificent created things that govern the day and the night. Nothing is said here of the creation of human beings, but they are ever present; the sun and the moon are for men and women in order to structure human time, setting it in relation to the Creator, especially by denoting the liturgical seasons. And it is precisely the feast of Easter that is immediately evoked, when, passing to God's manifestation of himself in history, the great event of the Exodus (freedom from slavery in Egypt) begins, whose most significant elements are outlined.

The liberation from Egypt begins with the plague of killing the Egyptian firstborn, the Exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the journey through the desert followed by the entry into the Promised Land (Ps 136:10–20). This is the very first moment of Israel's history. God intervened powerfully to lead his people to freedom; through Moses, his envoy, he asserted himself before Pharaoh, revealing himself in his full grandeur and at last broke down the resistance of the Egyptians with the terrible plague of the death of the firstborn. Israel could thus leave the country of slavery, "defiantly" (Ex 14:8), taking with it the gold of its oppressors (see Ex 12:35–36), in the exulting sign of victory.

At the Red Sea, too, the Lord acted with merciful power. Before an Israel so terrified by the sight of the Egyptians in pursuit as to regret its departure from Egypt (see Ex 14:10–12), God, as our psalm says, "divided the Red Sea in sunder … and made the people of Israel pass through the midst of it … but overthrew Pharaoh and his host" (Ps 136:13–15). The image of the Red Sea "divided" in two calls to mind the idea of the sea as a great monster hacked in two and thereby rendered harmless. The might of the Lord overcomes the danger of the forces of nature and of soldiers deployed in battle array by men: the sea, which seemed to bar the way of the People of God, let Israel cross on dry ground and then swept over the Egyptians, submerging them. Thus the

full salvific force of the Lord's "mighty hand, and an outstretched arm" was demonstrated (see Dt 5:15; 7:19; 26:8): the unjust oppressor was vanquished, engulfed by the waters, while the people of God "walked on dry ground through the sea," continuing its journey to freedom.

Psalm 136 now refers to this journey, recalling in one short phrase Israel's long pilgrimage toward the Promised land: God "led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 136:16). These few words refer to a forty-year experience, a crucial period for Israel that, in letting itself be guided by the Lord, learned to live in faith, obedience, and docility to God's law. These were difficult years, marked by hardship in the desert, but also happy years, trusting in the Lord with filial trust. It was the time of "youth," as the prophet Jeremiah describes it in speaking to Israel in the Lord's name with words full of tenderness and nostalgia: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jer 2:2).

The Lord, like the shepherd of Psalm 23, guided, taught, and cherished his people for forty years, leading them right to the Promised Land, also overcoming the resistance and hostility of enemy peoples that wished to block their way to salvation (see Ps 136:17–20).

So, as the "great wonders" that Psalm 136 lists unfold, we reach the moment of the conclusive gift, the fulfillment of the divine promise made to the Fathers: God "gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures forever; a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 136:21–22). In celebrating the Lord's eternal love, the gift of land was commemorated, a gift that the people were to receive but without ever taking possession of it, continuing to live in an attitude of grateful acknowledgment.

Israel received the land it was to live in as "a heritage," a generic term that designates the possession of a good received from another person, a right of ownership which specifically refers to the paternal patrimony. One of God's prerogatives is "giving"; and now, at the end of the journey of the Exodus, Israel, the recipient of the gift, enters as a son or daughter into the land of the promise now fulfilled. The time of wandering, of living in tents, of living a precarious life, is over. It was then that the happy period of permanence began, of joy in building houses, of planting vineyards, of living in security (see Dt 8:7–13). Yet it was also a time of temptation to idolatry, contamination with pagans, and self-sufficiency that led to the Origin of the gift being forgotten.

Accordingly, the psalmist mentions Israel's low estate and their foes, the reality of death in which the Lord once again reveals himself as Savior: "He … remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps 136:23–24).

At this point a question arises: How can we make this psalm our own prayer? What is important is the psalm's setting, for at both the beginning and end is the Creation. Let us return to this point: Creation is God's great gift by which we live and in which he reveals himself in his great goodness. Therefore, to think of Creation as a gift of God is a common point for all of us.

The history of salvation then follows. We can of course say that this liberation from Egypt, the time in the desert, the entry into the Holy Land, and all the other subsequent problems are very remote from us—they are not part of our own history. However, we must be attentive to the fundamental structure of this prayer. The basic structure is that Israel remembers the Lord's goodness. In this history, dark valleys, arduous journeys, and death succeed one another, but Israel recalls that God was good and so can survive in this dark valley, in this valley of death, because it remembers. Israel remembers the Lord's goodness, his power, and that his mercy is effective forever. And it is also important for us to remember the Lord's goodness. Memory strongly sustains hope. Memory tells us: God exists, God is good, his mercy endures forever. So it is that memory unfolds, even in the darkest day or time, showing the way towards the future. It represents "great lights" and is our guiding star. We too have good memories of the goodness of God, of his merciful love that endures forever.

Israel's history is a former memory for us, too, of how God revealed himself, how he created a people of his own. Then God became man, one of us: he lived with us, he suffered with us, he died for us. He stays with us in the Sacrament and in the Word. It is a history, a memory of God's goodness that assures us of his goodness: his love endures forever. And then, in these 2,000 years of the Church's history, there is always, again and again, the Lord's goodness. After the dark period of the Nazi and Communist persecutions, God set us free; he showed that he is good, that he is powerful, that his mercy endures forever. And, as in our common, collective history, this memory of God's goodness is present; it helps us and becomes for us a star of hope so that each one also has his or her personal story of salvation.

We must truly treasure this story, and in order to trust, we must keep ever present in our minds the memory of the great things God has worked in our lives: His mercy endures forever. And if today we are immersed in the dark night, tomorrow he sets us free, for his mercy is eternal.

Let us return to Psalm 136, because at the end it returns to Creation. The Lord, it says, "gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever" (v. 25). The prayer of Psalm 136 concludes with an invitation to praise: "Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever."

The Lord is our good and provident Father, who gives his children their heritage and lavishes life-giving food upon all. God, who created the heavens and the earth and the great heavenly bodies, who entered human history to bring all his children to salvation, is the God who fills the universe with his presence of goodness, caring for life and providing bread.

The invisible power of the Creator and Lord of which this psalm sings is revealed in the humble sign of the bread he gives us, with which he enables us to live. And so it is that this daily bread symbolizes and sums up the love of God as Father and opens us to the fulfillment of the New Testament, to that "Bread of Life"—the Eucharist—which accompanies us in our lives as believers, anticipating the definitive joy of the messianic banquet in heaven.

Brothers and sisters, the praise and blessing of Psalm 136 has made us review the most important stages in the history of salvation, to finally reach the Paschal Mystery in which God's saving action reaches its culmination. Let us therefore celebrate with grateful joy the Creator, Savior, and faithful Father, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). In the fullness of time, the Son of God became man to give life for the salvation of each one of us and gave himself as bread in the Eucharistic Mystery to enable us to enter his Covenant that makes us his children. May both God's merciful goodness and his sublime "steadfast love forever" reach far afield!

I would therefore like to conclude this catechesis by making my own the words that St. John wrote in his First Letter, words that we must always have in mind in our prayers: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 Jn 3:1).

# Psalm 119 – The Acrostic Psalm

St. Peter's Square, November 9, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

We have meditated on several psalms that are examples of three typical forms of prayer: lamentation, trust, and praise. In today's catechesis, I would like to reflect on Psalm 119.

It is a very special psalm, unique of its kind. This is first of all because of its length. Indeed, it is composed of 176 verses divided into twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each. Moreover, its special feature is that it is an "acrostic in alphabetical order"—in other words, it is structured in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet that consists of twenty-two letters. Each stanza begins with a letter of this alphabet, and the first letter of the first word of each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with this letter. This is both an original and demanding literary genre in which the author of the psalm must have had to summon up all his skill.

However, what is most important for us is Psalm 119's central theme. In fact, it is an impressive, solemn canticle on the *Torah* of the Lord—that is, on his Law, a term which in its broadest and most comprehensive meaning should be understood as a teaching, an instruction, a rule of life. The *Torah* is a revelation; it is a word of God that challenges the human being and elicits his response of trusting obedience and generous love.

Psalm 119 is steeped in love for the Word of God, whose beauty, saving power, and capacity for giving joy and life it celebrates, recognizing that the divine Law is not the heavy yoke of slavery but a liberating gift of grace that brings happiness. "I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word," the psalmist declares (v. 16), and then: "Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it" (v. 35). And further: "Oh, how I love your

law! It is my meditation all the day" (v. 97).

The Law of the Lord, his Word, is the center of the praying person's life; he finds comfort in it, he makes it the subject of meditation, and he treasures it in his heart: "I have laid up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (v. 11). This is the secret of the psalmist's happiness. "The godless besmear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts" (v. 69).

The psalmist's faithfulness stems from listening to the Word, from pondering on it in his inmost self, meditating on it and cherishing it, just as Mary did, who "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." She pondered the words that had been addressed to her and the marvelous events in which God revealed himself, asking her for the assent of her faith (see Lk 2:19, 51). And if the first verses of our psalm begin by proclaiming "blessed" those "who walk in the law of the Lord" (v. 1b) and "who keep his testimonies" (v. 2a), it is once again the Virgin Mary who brings to completion the perfect figure of the believer described by the psalmist. It is she, in fact, who is the true "blessed," proclaimed such by Elizabeth because "she … believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45). Moreover, it was to her and to her faith that Jesus himself bore witness when he answered the woman who cried: "Blessed is the womb that bore you," with "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Lk 11:27–28). Of course, Mary is blessed because she carried the Savior in her womb, but especially because she accepted God's announcement and because she was an attentive and loving custodian of his Word.

Psalm 119 is thus woven around this Word of life and blessedness. If its central theme is the "word" and "Law" of the Lord, next to these terms in almost all the verses such synonyms recur as "precepts," "statutes," "commandments," "ordinances," "promises," and "judgment"; and then many verbs relating to them such as "observe," "keep," "understand," "learn," "love," "meditate," and "live."

The entire alphabet unfolds through the twenty-two stanzas of Psalm 119 and also encompasses the whole vocabulary of the believer's trusting relationship with God. We find in it praise, thanksgiving, and trust, but also supplication and lamentation. However, these are always imbued with the certainty of divine grace and of the power of the Word of God. Even the verses more heavily marked by grief and by a sense of darkness remain open

to hope and are permeated by faith.

"My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to your word", the psalmist trustingly prays (v. 25). "I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes" is his cry as a believer (v. 83). His fidelity, even when it is put to the test, finds strength in the Lord's word: "Then shall I have an answer for those who taunt me, for I trust in your word," he says firmly (v. 42); and even when he faces the anguishing prospect of death, the Lord's commandments are his reference point and his hope of victory: "They have almost made an end of me on earth; but I have not forsaken your precepts" (v. 87).

The Law of the Lord, the object of the passionate love of the psalmist as well as of every believer, is a source of life. The desire to understand it, to observe it, and to direct the whole of one's being by it is the characteristic of every righteous person who is faithful to the Lord, and who "on his law … meditates day and night," as Psalm 1:2 recites. The law of God is to be kept "in the heart," as the well known text of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy says: "Hear, O Israel.… And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Dt 6:4a, 6–7).

The Law of God, at the center of life, demands that the heart listen. It is a listening that does not consist of servile but rather of filial trusting and aware obedience. Listening to the Word is a personal encounter with the Lord of life, an encounter that must be expressed in concrete decisions and become a journey and a *sequela*. When Jesus is asked what one should do to inherit eternal life, he points to the way of observance of the Law, but he indicates what should be done to bring it to completion: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mk 10:21). Fulfillment of the Law is following Jesus, traveling on the road that Jesus took, in the company of Jesus.

Psalm 119 thus brings us to the encounter with the Lord and orients us to the Gospel. Verse 57 says: "The Lord is my portion; I promise to keep your words." In other psalms, too, the person praying affirms that the Lord is his "portion," his inheritance: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup," Psalm 16 says. "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" is the protestation of faith of the faithful person in Psalm 73:26b, and again, in Psalm 142:5b, the psalmist cries to the Lord: "You are my refuge, my portion

in the land of the living."

The term "portion" calls to mind the event that divided the Promised Land between the tribes of Israel, when no piece of land was assigned to the Levites because their "portion" was the Lord himself. Two texts of the Pentateuch, using the term in question, are explicit in this regard. The Lord said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any *portion* among them; I am your *portion* and your inheritance among the people of Israel," as Numbers 18:20 declares and as Deuteronomy reaffirms. "Therefore Levi has no *portion* or inheritance with his brothers; the Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him" (Dt 10:9; see also Dt 18:2; Jos 13:33; Ez 44:28).

The priests, who belong to the tribe of Levi, could not be landowners in the land that God was to bequeath as a legacy to his people, thus bringing to completion the promise he had made to Abraham (see Gn 12:1–7). The ownership of land, a fundamental element for permanence and survival, was a sign of blessing because it presupposed the possibility of building a house, raising children, cultivating the fields, and living on the produce of the earth.

Well, the Levites, mediators of the sacred and the divine blessing, unlike the other Israelites could not own possessions, the external sign of blessing and source of subsistence. Totally dedicated to the Lord, they had to live on him alone, reliant on his provident love and on the generosity of their brethren without any other inheritance. Since God was their portion, God was the land that enabled them to live to the full.

The person praying in Psalm 119 then applies this reality to himself: "The Lord is my portion." His love for God and his Word leads him to make the radical decision to have the Lord as his one possession and to treasure his words as a precious gift more valuable than any legacy or earthly possession. There are two different ways in which this verse may be translated; it could also be translated, "My portion Lord, as I have said, is to preserve your words." The two translations are not contradictory but on the contrary complete each other: the psalmist meant that his portion was the Lord, but that preserving the divine words was also part of his inheritance. As he was to say later in verse 111: "Your testimonies are my heritage forever; yea, they are the joy of my heart." This is the happiness of the psalmist—like the Levites, he has been given the Word of God as his portion, his inheritance.

Dear brothers and sisters, these verses are also of great importance for us. First of all, for priests, who are called to live on the Lord and his Word alone

with no other means of security, with him as their one possession and as their only source of true life. In this light one understands the free choice of celibacy for the kingdom of Heaven in order to rediscover it in its beauty and power.

Yet these verses are also important for all the faithful, the people of God that belong to him alone, "a kingdom and priests" for the Lord (see 1 Pt 2:9; Rv 1:6, 5:10), called to the radicalism of the Gospel, witnesses of the life brought by Christ, the new and definitive "High Priest" who gave himself as a sacrifice for the salvation of the world (see Heb 2:17; 4:14–16; 5:5–10; 9, 11ff.). The Lord and his Word— these are our "land," where we live in communion and in joy.

Let us therefore permit the Lord to instill this love for his Word in our hearts and grant that we may always place him and his holy will at the center of our life. Let us ask that our prayers and the whole of our life be illuminated by the Word of God, the lamp to light our footsteps and a light on our path, as Psalm 119:105 says, so that we may walk safely in the land of men. And may Mary, who generously welcomed the Word, be our guide and comfort, the polestar that indicates the way to happiness.

Then we, too, shall be able to rejoice in our prayers like the praying person of Psalm 16, in the unexpected gifts of the Lord and in the undeserved legacy that falls to us: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup.… The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage" (Ps 16:5, 6).

# Psalm 110 – A Royal Psalm of Christ

St. Peter's Square, November 16, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

I would like to end my catechesis on the prayer of the Book of Psalms by meditating on one of the most famous of the "royal Psalms," Psalm 110, a psalm that Jesus himself cited and that the New Testament authors referred to extensively and interpreted as referring to the Messiah, to Christ. It is a psalm very dear to the ancient Church and to believers of all times. This prayer may at first have been linked to the enthronement of a Davidic king, yet its meaning exceeds the specific contingency of an historic event, opening to broader dimensions and thereby becoming a celebration of the victorious Messiah, glorified at God's right hand.

The psalm begins with a solemn declaration: "The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps 110:1).

God himself enthrones the king in glory, seating him at his right, a sign of very great honor and of absolute privilege. The king is thus admitted to sharing in the divine kingship, of which he is mediator to the people. The king's kingship is also brought into being in the victory over his adversaries whom God himself places at his feet. The victory over his enemies is the Lord's, but the king is enabled to share in it, and his triumph becomes a sign and testimony of divine power.

The royal glorification expressed at the beginning of the psalm was adopted by the New Testament as a messianic prophecy. For this reason, this first verse is among those most frequently used by New Testament authors, either as an explicit quotation or as an allusion. With regard to the Messiah, Jesus himself mentioned this verse in order to show that the Messiah was greater than David, that he was David's Lord (see Mt 22:41–45; Mk 12:35–

37; Lk 20:41–44).

Peter returned to this verse in his discourse at Pentecost, proclaiming that this enthronement of the king was brought about through the resurrection of Christ and that Christ was henceforth seated at the right hand of the Father, sharing in God's kingship over the world (see Acts 2:29–35). Indeed, Christ is the enthroned Lord, the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven, as Jesus described himself during the trial before the Sanhedrin (see Mt 26:63–64; Mk 14:61–62; Lk 22:66–69).

He is the true King who, with the Resurrection, entered into glory at the right hand of the Father (see Rom 8:34; Eph 2:5; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1; 12:2), was made superior to angels, and is seated in heaven above every power with every adversary at his feet, until the time when the last enemy, death, will be defeated by him once and for all (see 1 Cor 15:24–26; Eph 1:20–23; Heb 1:3–4; 2:58; 10:12–13; 1 Pt 3:22).

And we immediately understand that this king, seated at the right hand of God, who shares in his kingship, is not one of those who succeeded David, but is actually the new David, the Son of God who triumphed over death and truly shares in God's glory. He is our King, who also gives us eternal life.

Hence, an indissoluble relationship exists between the king celebrated by Psalm 110 and God. The two of them govern together as one, so that the psalmist can say that it is God himself who extends the sovereign's scepter, giving him the task of ruling over his adversaries: "The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes!" (Ps 110:2).

The exercise of power is an office that the king receives directly from the Lord, a responsibility that he must exercise in dependence and obedience, thereby becoming a sign, within the people, of God's powerful and provident presence. Dominion over his foes, glory, and victory are gifts received that make the sovereign a mediator of the Lord's triumph over evil. He subjugates his enemies, transforming them; he wins them over with his love.

For this reason, the king's greatness is celebrated in the following verse. In fact, the interpretation of verse 3 presents some difficulty. In the original Hebrew text a reference was made to the mustering of the army to which the people generously responded, gathering round their sovereign on the day of his coronation. The Greek translation of the Septuagint that dates back to between the second and third centuries BC refers, however, to the divine sonship of the king, to his birth or begetting on the part of the Lord. This is the interpretation that has been chosen by the Church, which is why the verse

reads like this: “Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendor; before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you.”

This divine oracle concerning the king thus asserts a divine procreation, steeped in splendor and mystery, a secret and inscrutable origin linked to the arcane beauty of dawn and to the miracle of dew that sparkles in the fields in the early morning light and makes them fertile. In this way, the figure of the king, indissolubly bound to the heavenly reality, who really comes from God, is outlined—the Messiah who brings divine life to the people and is the mediator of holiness and salvation. Here, too, we see that all this is not achieved by the figure of a Davidic king but by the Lord Jesus Christ, who truly comes from God; he is the light that brings divine life to the world.

The first stanza of the psalm ends with this evocative and enigmatic image. It is followed by another oracle, which unfolds a new perspective along the lines of a priestly dimension connected with kingship. Verse 4 says: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’” Melchizedek was the priest-king of Salem who had blessed Abraham and offered him bread and wine after the victorious military campaign the patriarch led to rescue his nephew Lot from the hands of enemies who had captured him (see Gn 14).

Royal and priestly power converge in the figure of Melchizedek. They are then proclaimed by the Lord in a declaration that promises eternity: The king celebrated in the psalm will be a priest forever, the mediator of the Lord’s presence among his people, the intermediary of the blessing that comes from God who, in liturgical action, responds to it with the human answer of blessing.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes an explicit reference to this verse (see Heb 5:5–6, 10; 6:19–20) focusing on it the whole of chapter seven and developing its reflection on Christ’s priesthood. Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us in the light of Psalm 110, is the true and definitive priest who brings to fulfillment and perfects the features of Melchizedek’s priesthood.

Melchizedek was “without father or mother or genealogy” (Heb 7:3a); hence, he was not a priest according to the dynastic rules of Levitical priesthood. Consequently, he “continues a priest forever” (Heb 7:3c)—a prefigure of Christ, the perfect High Priest who “has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16).

In the Risen Lord Jesus who ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father, the prophecy of Psalm 110 is fulfilled, and the priesthood of Melchizedek is brought to completion. This is because, rendered absolute and eternal, it became a reality that never fades (see Heb 7:24). The offering of bread and wine made by Melchizedek in Abraham's time is fulfilled in the Eucharistic action of Jesus, who offers himself in the bread and in the wine and, having conquered death, brings life to all believers. Since he is an eternal priest, "holy, blameless, unstained" (Heb 7:26), "he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25).

After this divine pronouncement in verse 4, with its solemn oath, the scene of Psalm 110 changes. The poet, addressing the king directly, proclaims: "The Lord is at your right hand" (Ps 110:5a). If in the first verse it was the king who was seated at God's right hand as a sign of supreme prestige and honor, the Lord now takes his place at the right of the sovereign to protect him with a shield in battle and save him from every peril. The king was safe, God is his champion, and they fight together to defeat every evil.

The last verses of Psalm 110 begin with the vision of the triumphant sovereign. Supported by the Lord, having received both power and glory from him (see Ps 110:2), he opposes his foes, crushing his adversaries and judging the nations. The scene is painted in strong colors to signify the drama of the battle and the totality of the royal victory. The sovereign, protected by the Lord, demolishes every obstacle and moves ahead safely to victory. He tells us: "Yes, there is widespread evil in the world; there is an ongoing battle between good and evil, and it seems as though evil were stronger. No, the Lord is stronger; Christ, our true King and Priest, fights with all God's power, and in spite of all the things that make us doubt the positive outcome of history, Christ wins and good wins; love wins rather than hatred."

The evocative image that concludes Psalm 110 fits here—it is also an enigmatic word: "He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head" (v. 7).

The king's figure stands out in the middle of the description of the battle. At a moment of respite and rest, he quenches his thirst at a stream, finding in it refreshment and fresh strength to continue on his triumphant way, holding his head high as a sign of definitive victory. It is clear that these deeply enigmatic words were a challenge for the Fathers of the Church because of the different interpretations they could be given.

Thus, for example, St. Augustine said: “This brook is the onward flow of the human being, of humanity, and Christ did not disdain to drink of this brook, becoming man; and so it was that on entering the humanity of the human being he lifted up his head and is now the Head of the mystical Body, he is our head, he is the definitive winner.”[1]

Dear friends, following the lines of the New Testament translation, the Church’s tradition has held this psalm in high esteem as one of the most important messianic texts, and the Fathers continued eminently to refer to it as a Christological key. The king of whom the psalmist sang is definitively Christ, the Messiah who establishes the kingdom of God and overcomes the powers of evil. He is the Word, begotten by the Father before every creature, before the dawn, the Son incarnate who died and rose and is seated in heaven, the eternal priest who through the mystery of the bread and wine bestows forgiveness of sins and gives reconciliation with God, the king who lifts up his head, triumphing over death with his resurrection.

It would suffice to remember a passage, once again in St. Augustine’s commentary on this psalm, where he writes: “It was necessary to know the Only-Begotten Son of God who was about to come among men, to adopt man and to become a man by taking on his nature; he died, rose and ascended into Heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father and fulfilled among the people all that he had promised.… All this, therefore, had to be prophesied, it had to be foretold, to be pointed out as destined to come about, so that by coming unexpectedly it would not give rise to fear but by having been foretold, would then be accepted with faith, joy and expectation. This psalm fits into the context of these promises. It prophesies our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in such reliable and explicit terms that we cannot have the slightest doubt that it is really Christ who is proclaimed in it.”[2]

The paschal event of Christ thus becomes the reality to which the psalm invites us to look—to look at Christ in order to understand the meaning of true kingship and to live in service and in the gift of self in a journey of obedience and love “to the end” (see Jn 13:1; 19:30).

In praying with this psalm, let us therefore ask the Lord to enable us to proceed on his paths, in following Christ, the Messiah King, ready to climb with him the mount of the cross so as to attain glory with him, and to contemplate him seated at the right hand of the Father, a victorious king and a merciful priest who gives forgiveness and salvation to all men and women.

And we, too, by the grace of God made “a chosen race, a royal priesthood,

a holy nation" (see 1 Pt 2:9), will be able to draw joyfully from the wells of salvation (see Is 12:3) and proclaim to the whole world the marvels of the One who has called us "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (see 1 Pt 2:9).

Dear friends, in these recent catecheses I wanted to present to you certain psalms, precious prayers that we find in the Bible that reflect the various situations of life and the various states of mind that we may have with regard to God. I would like to renew my invitation to all of you to pray with the Psalms, even becoming accustomed to using the Liturgy of the Hours of the Church—Lauds in the morning, Vespers in the evening, and Compline before retiring.

Our relationship with God cannot but be enriched with greater joy and trust in the daily journey towards him.

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1. See St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Expositions of the Psalms) CIX, 20: PL 36, 1462.
2. See ibid. 109, 3: PL 36, 1447.

# JESUS, OUR TEACHER IN PRAYER

# The Prayer of Jesus

Paul VI Audience Hall, November 30, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In our previous catecheses, we have reflected on several examples of prayer in the Old Testament. Today I would like to begin to look at Jesus and at his prayer that flows through the whole of his life like a secret channel that waters his existence, relationships, and actions and guides them, with progressive firmness, to the total gift of self in accordance with the loving plan of God the Father. Jesus is also our Teacher in prayer; indeed, he is our active and fraternal support on every occasion that we address the Father. Truly, "prayer," as it is summed up in a heading in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "is fully revealed and realized in Jesus" (CCC, 541–547).

The prayer that followed Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan is an especially important moment on his journey. Luke the Evangelist noted that, after being baptized by John the Baptist together with all the people, he prayed a very personal, extended prayer. "When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (Lk 3:21–22). The fact that he "was praying," in conversation with the Father, illuminated the act he had carried out along with so many of the people who had flocked to the banks of the Jordan. By praying, he gave his action— baptism—an exclusively personal character.

John the Baptist had launched a forceful appeal to live truly as "children to Abraham," being converted to goodness and bearing fruit worthy of this change (see Lk 3:7–9). A large number of Israelites felt impelled to act, as St. Mark recalled, writing: "There went out to him [John] all the country of

Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mk 1:5).

The Baptist was introducing something really new: To undergo baptism marks a decisive turning point, leaving behind the forms of conduct linked to sin and starting a new life.

Jesus too accepted this invitation; he joined the gray multitude of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. However, a question also wells up in us, as it did in the early Christians: Why did Jesus voluntarily submit to this baptism of penance and conversion? He had no sins to confess—he had not sinned; hence he was in no need of conversion. So what accounts for his action?

Matthew records John the Baptist's amazement: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" and Jesus' response: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (Mt 3:14–15). The word "righteousness" in the biblical world means the acceptance of God's will without reserve. Jesus showed his closeness to that part of his people who, following John the Baptist, recognized that it was not enough merely to consider themselves children of Abraham; they wanted to do God's will, wanted to commit themselves to ensuring that their behavior was a faithful response to the covenant God had offered through Abraham.

Therefore, by entering the River Jordan, Jesus, without sin, showed his solidarity with those who recognize their sins, who choose to repent and change their lives; Jesus made it clear that being part of the people of God means entering into a newness of life, a life in accordance with God.

In this action, Jesus anticipated the cross. He began his ministry by taking his place among sinners, taking upon his shoulders the burden of the whole of humanity, and doing the Father's will. Recollected in prayer, Jesus showed his profound bond with the Father who is in heaven. He experienced God's fatherhood, understood the demanding beauty of his love, and—in conversation with the Father—received the confirmation of his mission.

The words that resounded from heaven (see Lk 3:22) anticipated the Paschal Mystery, the cross, and the Resurrection. The divine voice called him "my beloved Son," re-evoking Isaac, the beloved son whom Abraham his father was prepared to sacrifice, in accordance with God's command (see Gn 22:1–14). Jesus was not only *the Son of David*, of royal, messianic lineage, or *the Servant* with whom God was well pleased; he was also the *only begotten Son*, beloved, like Isaac, whom God the Father gave for the world's salvation.

At the moment when, through prayer, Jesus experienced the depth of his own sonship and God's fatherhood (see Lk 3:22b), the Holy Spirit—whom he was to pour out after being raised on the cross (see Jn 1:32–34; 7:37–39) — descended upon him (see Lk 3:22a) and guided him in his mission that he might illuminate the Church's action. In prayer, Jesus lived in uninterrupted contact with the Father in order to fulfill completely his plan of love for mankind.

Against the background of this extraordinary prayer, Jesus lived his entire life in a family deeply tied to the religious tradition of the people of Israel. This is demonstrated by the references we find in the Gospels: his circumcision (see Lk 2:21) and his presentation in the temple (see Lk 2:22–24), as well as his education and training at Nazareth, in the holy house (see Lk 2:39–40; 2:51–52).

This was "about thirty years" (Lk 3:23), a long period of hidden daily life, even though it included experiences of participation with the community in moments of religious expression, such as pilgrimages to Jerusalem (see Lk 2:41).

In recounting the episode of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers (see Lk 2:42–52), Luke makes us understand that Jesus, who was praying after his baptism in the Jordan, had a long-standing habit of intimate prayer to God the Father. This habit was rooted in the traditions, the style of his family, and his own crucial experiences within it.

The twelve-year-old's answer to Mary and Joseph already suggests the divine sonship that the heavenly voice expressed after his baptism: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house [to do his bidding]?" (Lk 2:49). Jesus did not begin to pray after emerging from the waters of the Jordan; he continued in his ongoing, customary relationship with the Father, and it was in this close union with the Father that he stepped out of the hidden life in Nazareth into his public ministry.

Jesus' teaching on prayer certainly derives from the approach to prayer that he acquired in his family, but its deep, essential origins are found in his being the Son of God and in his unique relationship with God the Father.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* answers the question: "From whom did Jesus learn how to pray?" in this way—"Jesus, with his human heart, learned how to pray from his Mother and from the Jewish tradition. But his prayer sprang from a more secret source because he is the eternal Son of God who in his holy humanity offers his perfect filial

prayer to his Father" (541).

In the Gospel narrative, the settings of Jesus' prayer are always placed halfway between insertion into his people's tradition and the newness of a unique personal relationship with God. The "lonely place" (see Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16), to which he often withdrew, "the hills" he climbs in order to pray (see Lk 6:12; 9:28), "the night" that affords him solitude (see Mk 1:35; 6:46–47; Lk 6:12) all recall moments in the process of God's revelation in the Old Testament, pointing out the continuity of his saving plan. Yet, at the same time, they mark moments of special importance for Jesus who fits consciously into this plan, completely faithful to the Father's will.

In our prayer, too, we must learn, increasingly, to enter this history of salvation of which Jesus is the summit, to renew before God our personal decision to open ourselves to his will, to ask him for the strength to conform our will to his will throughout our life, in obedience to his design of love for us.

Jesus' prayer penetrates all phases of his ministry and all his days. Difficulties do not obstruct it. The Gospels, on the contrary, allow us a glimpse of Jesus' habit of spending part of the night in prayer. St. Mark tells of one of these nights, after the tiring day of the multiplication of the loaves. He writes: "Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land" (Mk 6:45–47). When decisions became urgent and complicated his prayers grew longer and more intense. Just before he chose the Twelve Apostles, for example, Luke emphasizes the nocturnal duration of Jesus' preparatory prayer: "In those days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (Lk 6:12–13).

In looking at Jesus' prayers, a question must arise within each of us: How do I pray? How much time do I give to my relationship with God? Are people today given sufficient education and formation in prayer? And who can teach it? In the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum domini*, I spoke of the importance of the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture. In gathering what emerged at the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, I placed a special emphasis on the specific form of *lectio divina.* Listening, meditating, and being silent before the Lord who speaks is an art which is learned by practicing it with

perseverance.

Prayer is, of course, a gift that nevertheless asks to be accepted; it is a work of God, but it demands commitment and continuity on our part. Above all, continuity and constancy are important.

Jesus' exemplary experience itself shows that his prayer, enlivened by the fatherhood of God and by communion with the Spirit, was deepened and prolonged in faithful practice, right up to the Garden of Olives and the cross.

Today, Christians are called to be witnesses of prayer precisely because our world is often closed to the divine horizon and to the hope that brings the encounter with God. In deep friendship with Jesus, living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows to God's heaven. Indeed, by taking the way of prayer, attaching no importance to human things, we can help others to take it. For in Christian prayer, it is true that, in journeying on, new paths unfold.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us train ourselves in an intense relationship with God, with prayer that is not occasional but constant, full of faith, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus taught us. And let us ask him to enable us to communicate to those who are close to us, those whom we meet on our way, the joy of the encounter with the Lord, the Light of our existence.

# Jesus' Cry of Exultation

Paul VI Audience Hall, December 7, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

The evangelists Matthew and Luke (see Mt 11:25–30 and Lk 10:21–22) have handed down to us a "jewel" of Jesus' prayer that is often called the Cry of Exultation or the Cry of Messianic Exultation. It is a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, as we have heard. In the original Greek of the Gospels, the word with which this jubilation begins and which expresses Jesus' attitude in addressing the Father is *exomologoumai*, which is often translated as "I praise" (see Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21). However, in the New Testament writings this term actually indicates two things. The first is "to confess" fully—for example, John the Baptist asked those who went to him to be baptized *to recognize their every sin* (see Mt 3:6). The second is "*to be in agreement.*" Therefore, the words with which Jesus begins his prayer contain his *full recognition* of the Father's action and, at the same time, his being in *total, conscious, and joyful agreement* with this way of acting with the Father's plan. The Cry of Exultation is the apex of a journey of prayer in which Jesus' profound and close communion with the life of the Father in the Holy Spirit clearly emerges and his divine sonship is revealed.

Jesus addresses God by calling him "Father." This word expresses Jesus' awareness and certainty of being the "Son" in intimate and constant communion with him, and this is the central focus and source of every one of Jesus' prayers. We see it clearly in the last part of the hymn which illuminates the entire text. Jesus said, "All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Lk 10:22). Jesus was therefore affirming that only the "Son" truly knows the Father.

All the knowledge that people have of each other— everything we experience in our human relationships—entails involvement, a certain inner bond between the one who knows and the one who is known, at a more or less profound level: We cannot know anyone without a communion of being. In the Cry of Exultation—as in all his prayers—Jesus shows that true knowledge of God presupposes communion with him. Only by being in communion with another can I begin to know him; and so it is with God: only if I am in true contact, if I am in communion with him, can I also know him. True knowledge, therefore, is reserved for the Son, the Only Begotten One who has been in the bosom of the Father for all eternity (see Jn 1:18), in perfect unity with him. The Son alone truly knows God, since he is in an intimate communion of being; only the Son can truly reveal who God is.

The name "Father" is followed by a second title: "Lord of heaven and earth." With these words, Jesus sums up faith in creation and echoes the first words of sacred Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gn 1:1).

In praying, he recalls the great biblical narrative of the history of God's love for man that begins with the act of Creation. Jesus fits into this love story—he is its culmination and its fulfillment. Sacred Scripture is illumined through his experience of prayer and lives again in its fullest breadth: the proclamation of the mystery of God and the response of man transformed. Yet, through the expression "Lord of heaven and earth," we can also recognize that in Jesus, the Revealer of the Father, the possibility for man to reach God is reopened.

Let us now ask ourselves: To whom does the Son want to reveal God's mysteries? At the beginning of the hymn, Jesus expresses his joy because the Father's will is to keep these things hidden from the learned and the wise and to reveal them to little ones (see Lk 10:21). Thus, in his prayer, Jesus manifests his communion with the Father's decision to disclose his mysteries to the simple of heart; the Son's will is one with the Father's.

Divine revelation is not brought about in accordance with earthly logic, which holds that cultured and powerful people possess important knowledge and pass it on to simpler people, to little ones. God used a quite different approach: Those to whom his communication was addressed were precisely "babes." This is the Father's will, and the Son shares it with him joyfully. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "His exclamation, 'Yes, Father!' expresses the depth of his heart, his adherence to the Father's 'good

pleasure,' echoing his mother's 'Fiat' at the time of his conception and prefiguring what he will say to the Father in his agony. The whole prayer of Jesus is contained in this loving adherence of his human heart to the 'mystery of the will' of the Father (Eph 1:9)" (CCC, 2603).

The invocation that we address to God in the Our Father derives from this: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Together with Christ and in Christ, we too ask to enter into harmony with the Father's will, thereby also becoming his children. Thus, Jesus, in this Cry of Exultation, expresses his will to involve in his own filial knowledge of God all those whom the Father wishes to become sharers in it, and those who welcome this gift are the "little ones."

But what does "being little" and simple mean? What is the "littleness" that opens man to filial intimacy with God so as to receive his will? What must the fundamental attitude of our prayer be? Let us look at the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). It is purity of heart that permits us to recognize the face of God in Jesus Christ; it is having a simple heart like the heart of a child, free from the presumption of those who withdraw into themselves, thinking they have no need of anyone, not even God.

It is also interesting to notice the occasion on which Jesus breaks into this hymn to the Father. In Matthew's Gospel narrative, it is joyful because, in spite of opposition and rejection, there are "little ones" who accept his word and open themselves to the gift of faith in him. The Cry of Exultation is in fact preceded by the contrast between the praise of John the Baptist—one of the "little ones" who recognized God's action in Jesus Christ (see Mt 11:2–19)—and the reprimand for the disbelief of those in the lake cities "where most of his mighty works had been performed" (see Mt 11:20–24).

Hence Matthew saw the Exultation in relation to the words with which Jesus noted the effectiveness of his word and action: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news of the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Mt 11:4–6).

St. Luke also presented the Cry of Exultation in connection with a moment of development in the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus sent out the "seventy-two" others (Lk 10:1) and they departed, fearful of the possible failure of their mission. Luke also emphasized the rejection encountered in

the cities where the Lord had preached and had worked miracles. Nonetheless, the disciples returned full of joy because their mission had met with success; they realized that human infirmities are overcome with the power of Jesus' word. Jesus shared their pleasure: "In that same hour," at that very moment, he rejoiced.

There are two more elements that I would like to underline. St. Luke introduces the prayer with the annotation: Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (Lk 10:21). Jesus rejoiced from the depths of his being in what counted most: his unique communion of knowledge and love with the Father, the fullness of the Holy Spirit. By involving us in his sonship, Jesus invites us too to open ourselves to the light of the Holy Spirit, since—as the apostle Paul affirms —"we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words … according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26–27), and reveals the Father's love to us.

In Matthew's Gospel, following the Cry of Exultation, we find one of Jesus' most heartfelt appeals: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Jesus asks us to go to him, for he is true Wisdom and "gentle and lowly in heart." He offers us "his yoke," the way of the wisdom of the Gospel which is neither a doctrine to be learned nor an ethical system but rather a person to follow: Jesus himself, the only begotten Son in perfect communion with the Father.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have experienced for a moment the wealth of this prayer of Jesus. With the gift of his Spirit, we too can turn to God in prayer with the confidence of children, calling him by the name Father ("Abba"). However, we must have the heart of little ones, of the "poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3) in order to recognize that we are not self-sufficient, that we are unable to build our lives on our own but instead need God, recognizing that we need to encounter him, listen to him, and speak to him. Prayer opens us to receive the gift of God—his wisdom, which is Jesus himself—in order to do the Father's will in our lives and thus find rest in the hardships of our journey.

# The Healing Prayer of Jesus

Paul VI Audience Hall, December 14, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to reflect with you on the prayer of Jesus linked to his miraculous healing action. Various situations are presented in the Gospels in which Jesus prays while he contemplates the beneficial and healing work of God the Father who acts through him. This is a form of prayer that once again demonstrates his unique relationship of knowledge and communion with the Father, while Jesus lets himself be involved with deep human participation in the hardships of his friends—for example, those of Lazarus and his family or the many poor and sick people he seeks to help.

A significant case is the healing of the deaf mute (see Mk 7:32–37). St. Mark's account shows that Jesus' healing action is connected with the intense relationship he had both with his neighbor—the sick man—and with the Father. The scene of the miracle is described carefully in these words: "Taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened'" (Mk 7:33–34).

Jesus wanted the healing to take place "aside from the multitude." This does not seem to be due solely to the fact that the miracle must be kept hidden from people to prevent them from making any restrictive or distorted interpretation of the Person of Jesus. The decision to take the sick man aside ensures that, at the moment of his healing, Jesus and the deaf mute are on their own, brought together in a unique relationship. With a single gesture, the Lord touches the sick man's ears and tongue—that is, the specific sites of his infirmity. The intensity of Jesus' attention is also demonstrated in the unusual treatment that was part of the healing. He uses his fingers and even

his saliva. And the fact that Mark records the original word spoken by the Lord (*Ephphatha*—in other words, "be opened") highlights the unusual character of the scene.

The central point of this episode, however, is that when Jesus was about to work the healing, he directly sought his relationship with the Father. Indeed, the account relates that, "looking up to heaven, he sighed" (Mk 7:34). Jesus' attention and treatment of the sick man are linked by a profound attitude of prayer addressed to God. Moreover, his sighing is described with a verb that, in the New Testament, indicates the aspiration to something good that is still lacking (see Rom 8:23).

Thus, as a whole, the narrative shows that it was his human involvement with the sick man that prompted Jesus to pray. His unique relationship with the Father and his identity as the only begotten Son surface once again. God's healing and beneficial action become present in him through his Person. It is not by chance that the people's last remark after the miracle has been performed is reminiscent of the evaluation of the Creation at the beginning of the Book of Genesis: "He has done all things well" (Mk 7:37). Prayer clearly entered the healing action of Jesus as he looked up to heaven. The power that healed the deaf mute was certainly elicited by compassion for him, but it came from recourse to the Father. These two relationships interact: the human relationship of compassion with the man enters into the relationship with God and thus becomes healing.

In John's narrative of the raising of Lazarus, this same dynamic is testified by an even greater proof (see Jn 11:1–44) Here, too, are interwoven on the one hand Jesus' bond with a friend and his suffering and, on the other, his filial relationship with the Father. Jesus' human participation in Lazarus' case has some special features. His friendship with Lazarus is repeatedly mentioned throughout the account, as well as his relationship with Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters. Jesus himself says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep" (Jn 11:11).

Jesus' sincere affection for his friend is also highlighted by Lazarus' sisters, as well as by the Jews (see Jn 11:3; 11:36). It is expressed in Jesus' deep distress at seeing the grief of Martha and Mary and all Lazarus' friends, and he finds relief by bursting into tears—so profoundly human—on approaching the tomb: "When Jesus saw her [Martha] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and

see.' Jesus wept" (Jn 11:33–35).

This bond of friendship and Jesus' participation and distress at the sorrow of Lazarus' relatives and acquaintances is connected throughout the narrative to a continuous, intense relationship with the Father. The event, from the outset, is interpreted by Jesus in relation to his own identity and mission and to the glorification that awaits him. In fact, on hearing of Lazarus' illness he commented: "The illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (Jn 11:4).

Jesus hears the news of his friend's death with deep human sadness but always with a clear reference to his relationship with God and with the mission that God has entrusted to him; he says, "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe" (Jn 11:14–15). The moment of Jesus' explicit prayer to the Father at the tomb was the natural outlet for all that had happened, which took place in the double key of his friendship with Lazarus and his filial relationship with God.

Here too, the two relationships go hand in hand. "And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me'" (Jn 11:41)—it was a *eucharist*. The sentence shows that Jesus did not cease, even for an instant, his prayer of petition for Lazarus' life. This prayer continued; indeed, it reinforced his ties with his friend and, at the same time, strengthened Jesus' decision to remain in communion with the Father's will, with his plan of love in which Lazarus' illness and death were to be considered as a place for the manifestation of God's glory.

Dear brothers and sisters, in reading this account, each one of us is called to understand that in our prayers of petition to the Lord we must not expect an immediate fulfillment of what we ask of our own will. Rather, we must entrust ourselves to the Father's will, interpreting every event in the perspective of his glory, his plan of love, which to our eyes is often mysterious.

This is why—in our prayer—petition, praise, and thanksgiving should be united even when it seems to us that God is not responding to our concrete expectations. Abandoning ourselves to God's love, which always precedes and accompanies us, is one of the basic attitudes for our dialogue with him. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments on Jesus' prayer in the account of the raising of Lazarus: "Jesus' prayer, characterized by thanksgiving, reveals to us how to ask: before the gift is given, Jesus commits himself to the One who in giving gives himself. The Giver is more precious

than the gift; he is the 'treasure'; in him abides his Son's heart; the gift is given 'as well' (cf. Mt 6:21, 33)" (CCC, 2604). To me this seems very important: before the gift is given, we commit ourselves to the One who gives. The Giver is more precious than the gift. For us too, therefore, over and above what God bestows on us when we call on him, the greatest gift that he can give us is his friendship, his presence, and his love. He is the precious treasure to ask for and to preserve forever.

The prayer that Jesus prays as the rock was rolled away from the entrance to Lazarus' tomb has a special and unexpected development. After thanking God the Father, he adds: "I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn 11:42). With his prayer, Jesus wanted to lead people back to faith, to total trust in God and in his will, and he wanted to show that this God so loved man and the world that he gave his only begotten Son (see Jn 3:16). He is the God of Life, the God who brings hope and can reverse humanly impossible situations. Therefore, a believer's trusting prayer is a living testimony of God's presence in the world, of his concern for humankind, and of his action with a view to bringing about his plan of salvation.

Jesus' two prayers that accompany the healing of the deaf mute and the raising of Lazarus reveal to us the deep connection between the love of God and love of one's neighbor that must also be a part of our own prayer.

In Jesus, true God and true man, attention to others (especially if they are needy and suffering) and compassion at the sight of the sorrow of a family who were his friends led him to address the Father in that fundamental relationship that directed his entire life. However, the opposite is also true: communion with the Father, constant dialogue with him, spurred Jesus to be uniquely attentive to practical human situations so as to bring God's comfort and love to them. Human relationships lead us toward the relationship with God, and the relationship with God leads us back to our neighbor.

Dear brothers and sisters, our prayer opens the door to God, who teaches us to come out of ourselves constantly, in order to make us capable of being close to others so that we may bring them comfort, hope, and light, especially at moments of trial. May the Lord grant us the capability of increasingly more intense prayer, in order to strengthen our personal relationship with God the Father, open our heart to the needs of those beside us, and feel the beauty of being "sons in the Son," together with a great many brothers and sisters.

# Jesus' Prayer at the Last Supper

Paul VI Audience Hall, January 11, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

During our journey of reflection on Jesus' prayer as it is presented in the Gospels, I would like us to meditate on the particularly solemn moment of his prayer at the Last Supper.

The temporal and emotional background of the festive meal at which Jesus takes leave of his friends is the imminence of his death, which he feels is now at hand. For some time Jesus had been talking about his Passion and had been seeking to involve his disciples increasingly in this prospect. The Gospel according to Mark tells us that from the time when he set out for Jerusalem, Jesus had begun "to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk 8:31).

In addition, in the very days when he was preparing to say good-bye to the disciples, the life of the people was marked by the imminence of the Passover —that is, the commemoration of Israel's liberation from Egypt. This liberation, lived in the past and expected in the present as well as the future, is experienced again in family celebrations of the Passover. The Last Supper fits into this context, but with a basic innovation.

Jesus looked at his passion, death, and resurrection with full awareness. He wished to spend this supper, one that has a quite special character and is different from other meals, with his disciples; it is his Last Supper, in which he would give something entirely new: himself. In this way, Jesus celebrated his Pasch, anticipating his cross and resurrection.

This new element is highlighted for us in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John. John does not describe it as the Passover meal for the

very reason that Jesus was intending to inaugurate something new, to celebrate his Pasch, which is of course linked to the events of the Exodus. Moreover, according to John, Jesus died on the cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

What then is the key to this supper? It is in the gestures of breaking bread and distributing it to his followers, and in sharing the cup of wine, with the words that accompany them. It is also in the context of prayer in which they belong—it is the institution of the Eucharist; it is the great prayer of Jesus and of the Church. However, let us now take a closer look.

First of all, the New Testament traditions of the institution of the Eucharist (see 1 Cor 11:23–25; Lk 22:14–20; Mk 14:22–25; Mt 26:26–29) point to the prayer that introduces Jesus' acts and words over the bread and wine by using two parallel and complementary verbs. Paul and Luke speak of *eucaristia* (thanksgiving): "And he took bread, and when *he had given thanks* he broke it and gave it to them" (Lk 22:19).

Mark and Matthew, however, emphasize instead the aspect of *eulogia*/blessing: "He took bread, and *blessed*, and broke it, and gave it to them" (Mk 14:22). Both these Greek terms, *eucaristeìn* and *eulogeìn*, refer to the Hebrew *berakha*— that is, the great prayer of thanksgiving and blessing of Israel's tradition that inaugurated the important feasts.

The two different Greek words indicate the two intrinsic and complementary orientations of this prayer. *Berakha*, in fact, means primarily thanksgiving and praise for the gift received that rise to God: At the Last Supper, it is a matter of bread—made from the wheat that God causes to sprout and grow in the earth—and wine, produced from the fruit that ripens on the vine.

This prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is raised to God returns as a blessing that comes down from God upon the gift and enriches it. Thanking and praising God thus become a blessing, and the offering given to God returns to man blessed by the Almighty. The words of the institution of the Eucharist fit into this context of prayer; in them the praise and blessing of the *berakha* become the blessing and transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Before the words come the actions: the breaking of the bread and the offering of the wine. The one who breaks the bread and passes the cup is first of all the head of the family who welcomes his relatives at table, but these gestures are also those of hospitality, of the welcome in convivial

communion of the stranger who does not belong to the house.

These very gestures, in the supper with which Jesus takes leave of his followers, acquire a completely new depth. He gives a visible sign of the welcome to the banquet in which God gives himself. Jesus offers and communicates himself in the bread and in the wine.

But how can all this happen? How can Jesus give himself at that moment? Jesus knows that his life is about to be taken from him in the torture of the cross—the capital punishment of slaves, which Cicero described as *mors turpissima crucis* (a most cruel and disgraceful death).

With the gift of bread and wine that he offers at the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates his death and his resurrection, bringing about what he had said in his Good Shepherd discourse: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:17–18).

He therefore offers these gifts in anticipation of the life that will be taken from him, and in this way he transforms his violent death into a free act of giving himself for others and to others. The violence he will suffer is transformed into an active, free, and redemptive sacrifice.

Once again, in prayer—begun in accordance with the ritual forms of the biblical tradition—Jesus shows his identity and his determination to fulfill his mission of total love to the very end, and he shows his offering in obedience to the Father's will. The profound originality of the gift of himself to his followers, through the Eucharistic memorial, is the culmination of the prayer that distinguishes his farewell supper with his own.

In contemplating Jesus' actions and words on that night, we see clearly that it is in this close and constant relationship with the Father that he carries out his act of bequeathing to his followers and to each one of us the sacrament of love, the "*sacramentum caritatis."*

The words, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24–25), ring out twice in the Upper Room. With the gift of himself, he celebrates his Pasch, becoming the true Lamb that brings the whole of the ancient worship to fulfillment. For this reason St. Paul, speaking to the Christians of Corinth, says: "Christ [our Pasch], our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival … with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:7–8).

Luke has retained a further precious element of the events of the Last Supper that enables us to see the moving depth of Jesus' prayer for his own on that night: his attention to each one. Starting with the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, Jesus arrives at the Eucharistic gift, the gift of himself, and, while he is giving the crucial sacramental reality, he addresses Peter.

At the end of the meal, he says: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:31–32).

Jesus' prayer, when his disciples were about to be put to the test, helps them to overcome their weakness in their effort to understand that the way of God passes through the Paschal Mystery of death and resurrection, anticipated in the offering of the bread and the wine. The Eucharist is the food of pilgrims that also becomes strength for those who are weary, worn out, and bewildered. Jesus' prayer was especially for Peter so that, once he had turned again, he might strengthen his brethren in the faith.

Luke recalls that it was Jesus' very gaze in seeking Peter's face at the moment when he had just denied him three times which gave him the strength to continue following in his footsteps: "And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord" (Lk 22:60–61).

Dear brothers and sisters, by participating in the Eucharist, we experience in an extraordinary manner the prayer that Jesus prayed and prays ceaselessly for every person so that the evil which we all encounter in life may not get the upper hand and that the transforming power of Christ's death and resurrection may act within us.

In the Eucharist, the Church responds to Jesus' commandment: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19; see 1 Cor 11:24–26); she repeats the prayer of thanksgiving and praise and, with it, the words of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Our Eucharists are being attracted at this moment of prayer and being united ever anew to Jesus' prayer. From the outset, the Church has understood the words of consecration as part of the *prayer prayed together to Jesus*—as a central part of the praise filled with gratitude, through which the fruits of the earth and the work of man come to us anew, given by God as the Body and Blood of Jesus, as the self-giving of God himself in his Son's self-emptying love.[1] Participating in

the Eucharist, nourishing ourselves with the Flesh and Blood of the Son of God, we join our prayers to that of the Paschal Lamb on his supreme night, so that our life may not be lost despite our weakness and our unfaithfulness, but instead be transformed.

Dear friends, let us ask the Lord that, after being duly prepared with the sacrament of penance, our participation in his Eucharist, indispensable to Christian life, may always be the highest point in all our prayer. Let us ask that we, too, profoundly united in his offering to the Father, may transform our own crosses into a free and responsible sacrifice of love for God and for our brethren.

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1. See Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), p. 128.

# The Priestly Prayer of Jesus

Paul VI Audience Hall, January 25, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In this catechesis let us focus our attention on the prayer that Jesus raises to the Father in the "hour" of his exaltation and glorification (see Jn 17:1–26). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "Christian Tradition rightly calls this prayer the 'priestly' prayer of Jesus. It is the prayer of our High Priest, inseparable from his sacrifice, from his "passing over" (Passover) to the Father to whom he is wholly 'consecrated'" (CCC, 2747).

The extreme richness of Jesus' prayer can be understood especially if we set it against the backdrop of the Jewish feast of expiation, *Yom Kippur*. On that day the High Priest makes expiation first for himself, then for the category of priests, and lastly for the whole community of the people. The purpose is to restore to the People of Israel, after a year's transgressions, the awareness of their reconciliation with God, the awareness that they are the Chosen People, a "holy people" among all other peoples. The prayer of Jesus, presented in chapter 17 of the Gospel according to John, returns to the structure of this feast. On that night Jesus addresses the Father at the moment when he is offering himself. He, priest and victim, prays for himself, for the apostles, and for all those who will believe in him and for the Church throughout time (see Jn 17:20).

The prayer that Jesus prays for himself is the request for his glorification, for his "exaltation" in his "Hour." In fact, it is more than a prayer of petition, more than the declaration of his full willingness to enter, freely and generously, into the plan of God the Father—which is fulfilled in his being consigned and in his death and resurrection. This "hour" began with Judas' betrayal (see Jn 13:31) and would end in the ascension of the risen Jesus to

the Father (see Jn 20:17).

Jesus comments on Judas' departure from the Upper Room with these words: "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified" (Jn 13:31). It is not by chance that he begins his priestly prayer by saying: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (Jn 17:1).

The glorification that Jesus asks for himself as High Priest is the entry into full obedience to the Father, an obedience that leads to his fullest filial condition: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made" (Jn 17:5). This readiness and this request are the first acts of the new priesthood of Jesus, which is the total gift of himself on the cross—and on the cross itself, the supreme act of love, he is glorified because love is the true glory, the divine glory.

The second part of this prayer is the intercession that Jesus makes for the disciples who have been with him. They are those of whom Jesus can say to the Father: "I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word" (Jn 17:6). This "manifesting God's name to men" is the fulfillment of a new presence of the Father among the people, for humanity. This "manifesting" is not only a *word* but is *reality* in Jesus. God is with us, and so his name—his presence with us, his being one of us—is "fulfilled." This manifestation is thus realized in the Incarnation of the Word. In Jesus, God enters human flesh; he becomes close in a new and unique way. And this presence culminates in the sacrifice that Jesus makes in his Pasch of death and resurrection.

At the center of this prayer of intercession and expiation in favor of the disciples is the request for *consecration*. Jesus says to the Father: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17:16–19).

What does "consecrate" mean in this case? First of all, it must be said that really only God is "consecrated" or "holy." "To consecrate," therefore, means "to transfer" a reality—a person or a thing—to become the property of God. And two complementary aspects are present in this: on the one hand, removing them from ordinary things, segregating them, "setting them apart" from the context of personal human life so that they may be totally given to

God; and on the other, this segregation, this transferral into God's sphere, has the very meaning of "sending," of mission. Precisely because he or she is given to God, the consecrated person exists "for" others; he or she is given to others. Giving to God means no longer existing for oneself but for everyone. Whoever, like Jesus, is segregated from the world and set apart for God with a view to a task is, for this very reason, fully available to all. For the disciples, the task will be to continue Jesus' mission, to be given to God, and thereby to be on mission for all. The risen One, appearing to his disciples on Easter evening, would say to them: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20:21).

The third part of this priestly prayer extends to the end of time. In it, Jesus turns to the Father in order to intercede for all those who will be brought to the faith through the mission inaugurated by the apostles and continued in history: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word" (Jn 17:20). Jesus prays for the Church of all time, and he also prays for us.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments: "Jesus fulfilled the work of the Father completely; his prayer, like his sacrifice, extends until the end of time. The prayer of this hour fills the end-times and carries them toward their consummation" (CCC, 2749).

The central request of the priestly prayer of Jesus, dedicated to his disciples of all epochs, is that of the future unity of those who will believe in him. This unity is not a worldly product. It comes exclusively from the divine unity and reaches us from the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. Jesus invokes a gift that comes from heaven and has its effect—real and perceptible—on earth. He prays "that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

Christian unity, on the one hand, is a secret reality that is in the heart of believers. But, at the same time, it must appear with full clarity in history; it must appear so that the world may believe. It has a very practical and concrete purpose: It must appear so that all may really be one. The unity of all future disciples, in being united with Jesus—whom the Father sent into the world—is also the original source of the efficacy of the Christian mission in the world.

"We can say that the founding of the Church takes place" in the priestly prayer of Jesus. In this very place, in the act of the Last Supper, Jesus creates

the Church. “For what else is the Church, if not the community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ as the one sent by the Father,” receives his unity and is involved in Jesus’ mission to save the world, leading it to knowledge of God? Here we really find a true definition of the Church. “The Church is born from Jesus’ prayer. But this prayer is more than words; it is the act by which he ‘sanctifies’ himself, that is to say, he ‘sacrifices’ himself for the life of the world.”[1]

Jesus prays that his disciples may be one. By virtue of this unity, received and preserved, the Church can walk “in the world” without being “of the world” (see Jn 17:16) and can live the mission entrusted to her so that the world may believe in the Son and in the Father who sent him. Therefore, the Church becomes the place in which the mission of Christ itself continues: to lead the “world” out of man’s alienation from God and out of himself, out of sin, so that it may return to being the world of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have grasped a few elements of the great richness of the priestly prayer of Jesus, which I invite you to read and meditate on so that it may guide you in dialogue with the Lord and teach you to pray. Let us, therefore, in our prayers ask God to help us to enter more fully into the design he has for each one of us. Let us ask to be “consecrated” to him, to belong to him more and more, and to be able to love others more and more— those who are near and far. Let us ask him for the grace to be able always to open our prayer to the dimensions of the world, requesting help with our own problems, but also remembering our neighbor before the Lord, learning the beauty of interceding for others; let us ask him for the gift of visible unity among all believers in Christ. Let us pray to be ever ready to answer anyone who asks us to account for the hope that is in us (see 1 Pt 3:15).

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1. See *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, p. 101.

# The Prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane

Paul VI Audience Hall, February 1, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to talk about Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Olives at Gethsemane. The scenario of the Gospel narrative of this prayer is particularly significant. Jesus sets out for the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper while he is praying together with his disciples. Mark says: "when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mk 14:26).

This is probably an allusion to singing one of the *Hallel* psalms, with which thanks are given to God for the liberation of the people from slavery and his help is sought for the new difficulties and threats of the present. The walk to Gethsemane is punctuated by Jesus' remarks, which convey a sense of his impending death and proclaim the imminent dispersion of the disciples.

Having reached the grove on the Mount of Olives, that night too Jesus prepares for personal prayer. However, this time something new happens: It seems that he does not want to be left alone. Jesus would often withdraw from the crowd and from the disciples themselves "to a lonely place" (Mk 1:35), or he would go up "into the hills," St. Mark says (see Mk 6:46). Instead, at Gethsemane he invites Peter, James, and John to stay closer to him. They are the disciples he called upon to be with him on the Mount of the Transfiguration (see Mk 9:2–13). This closeness of the three during his prayer in Gethsemane is important. That night Jesus was going to pray to the Father "apart," for his relationship with the Father is quite unique: It is the relationship of the only begotten Son. Indeed, one might say that *especially* on that night no one could really have come close to the Son, who presented himself to the Father with his absolutely unique and exclusive identity.

Yet, although Jesus arrives "alone" at the place where he was to stop and

pray, he wants at least three disciples to be near him, to be in a closer relationship with him. This is a spatial closeness, a plea for solidarity at the moment when he feels death approaching, but above all it is closeness in prayer—a certain way to express harmony with him at the moment when he is preparing to do the Father's will to the very end. It is also an invitation to every disciple to follow him on the Way of the Cross.

Mark recounts: "He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them '*My soul is very sorrowful*, even to death; remain here, and watch'" (Mk 14:33–34).

In the words addressed to the three, Jesus once again expresses himself in the language of the psalms: "*My soul is very sorrowful* " is an expression borrowed from Psalm 43:5. The firm determination "unto death" thus calls to mind a situation lived by many of those sent by God in the Old Testament, which is expressed in their prayers. Indeed, following the mission entrusted to them frequently means encountering hostility, rejection, and persecution.

Moses is dramatically aware of the trial he is undergoing while guiding the people through the desert. He says to God: "I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. If you will deal thus with me, rather kill me at once, kill me if I have found favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness" (see Nm 11:14–15).

Elijah, too, finds doing his duty to God and to his people difficult. The First Book of Kings recounts: "He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers'" (1 Kgs 19:4).

What Jesus says to his three disciples whom he wants near him during his prayer at Gethsemane shows that he feels fear and anguish in that "hour," experiencing his last profound loneliness precisely while God's plan is being brought about. Moreover, Jesus' fear and anguish sums up the full horror of man in the face of his own death, the certainty that it is inescapable, and a perception of the burden of evil that touches our lives.

After the invitation to stay with him to watch and pray, Jesus speaks to the Father "alone." Mark tells us that "going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him" (Mk 14:35). Jesus fell prostrate on the ground—a position of prayer that expresses obedience to the Father and abandonment to him with complete trust. This gesture is repeated at the beginning of the celebration of the Passion, on

Good Friday, as well as in monastic profession and in the ordination of deacons, priests, and bishops in order to express—in prayer and corporally too—complete entrustment to God. Jesus then asks the Father, if it were possible, that this hour pass from him. It is not only man's fear and anguish in the face of death, but the devastation of the Son of God who perceives the terrible mass of evil that he must take upon himself to overcome it, to deprive it of power.

Dear friends, in prayer we too should be able to lay before God our labors, the suffering of certain situations, of certain days, the daily commitment to following him, to being Christian, and also the weight of the evil that we see within ourselves and around us, so that he may give us hope and make us feel his closeness and give us a little light on the path of life.

Jesus continues his prayer: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mk 14:36). In this invocation there are three revealing passages. At the beginning we have the double use of the word with which Jesus addresses God: "Abba! Father!" (Mk 14:36a). We know that the Aramaic word *Abbà* is the term that children use to address their father and hence that it expresses Jesus' relationship with God, a relationship of tenderness, affection, trust, and abandonment.

The second element is found in the central part of the invocation: an awareness of the Father's omnipotence: Jesus says, "All things are possible to you," a request that, once again, introduces the drama of Jesus' human will as he faces death and evil: "Remove this cup from me!"

However, there is a third expression in Jesus' prayer; it is the crucial one in which the human will adheres to the divine will without reserve. Jesus ends by saying forcefully: "Yet not what I will but what you will" (Mk 14:36c). In the unity of the divine person of the Son, the human will finds its complete fulfillment in the total abandonment of the I to the You of the Father, called Abba.

St. Maximus the Confessor said that ever since the moment of the creation of man and woman, the human will has been oriented to the divine will, and that it is precisely in the "yes" to God that the human will is fully free and finds its fulfillment. Unfortunately, because of sin, this "yes" to God is transformed into opposition—Adam and Eve thought that the "no" to God was the crowning point of freedom, of being fully themselves.

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus brings the human will back to the

unreserved “yes” to God; in him the natural will is fully integrated in the orientation that the Divine Person gives it. Jesus lived his life in accordance with the center of his Person: his being the Son of God. His human will was drawn into the “I” of the Son who abandons himself totally to the Father. Thus, Jesus tells us that it is only by conforming our own will to the divine one that human beings attain their true height, that they become “divine”; only by coming out of ourselves, only in the “yes” to God, is Adam’s desire —and the desire of us all—to be completely free. It is what Jesus brings about at Gethsemane: in transferring the human will into the divine will the true man is born and we are redeemed.

The *Compendium of the Catholic Church* teaches concisely: “The prayer of Jesus during his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and his last words on the cross reveal the depth of his filial prayer. Jesus brings to completion the loving plan of the Father and takes upon himself all the anguish of humanity and all the petitions and intercessions of the history of salvation. He presents them to the Father who accepts them and answers them beyond all hope by raising his Son from the dead” (543). Truly, “nowhere else in Sacred Scripture do we gain so deep an insight into the inner mystery of Jesus as in the prayer on the Mount of Olives.[1]

Dear brothers and sisters, every day in the prayer of the Our Father we ask the Lord: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). In other words, we recognize that there is a will of God with us and for us, a will of God for our life that must become every day, increasingly, the reference of our willing and of our being; we recognize, moreover, that “heaven” is where God’s will is done and where the “earth” becomes “heaven”—a place where love, goodness, truth, and divine beauty are present, but only if on earth God’s will is done.

In Jesus’ prayer to the Father on that terrible and marvelous night in Gethsemane, the “earth” became “heaven”; the “earth” of his human will, shaken by fear and anguish, was taken up by his divine will in such a way that God’s will was done on earth. And this is also important in our own prayers: we must learn to entrust ourselves more to divine Providence, to ask God for the strength to come out of ourselves to renew our “yes” to him, to say to him, “Thy will be done” so as to conform our will to his. It is a prayer we must pray every day because it is not always easy to entrust ourselves to God’s will, repeating the “yes” of Jesus, the “yes” of Mary.

The Gospel accounts of Gethsemane regretfully show that the three

disciples, chosen by Jesus to be close to him, were unable to watch with him, sharing in his prayer, in his adherence to the Father; they were overcome by sleep. Dear friends, let us ask the Lord to enable us to keep watch with him in prayer, to follow the will of God every day even if he speaks to us of the Cross, to live in ever greater intimacy with the Lord, in order to bring a little bit of God's "heaven" to this "earth."

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1. *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, p. 157.

# The Prayer of Jesus Dying on the Cross

Paul VI Audience Hall, February 8, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

I would like to reflect with you in this catechesis on the prayer of Jesus when death was imminent, pausing to think about everything Sts. Mark and Matthew tell us. The two evangelists record the prayer of the dying Jesus not only in Greek (in which their accounts are written) but, because of the importance of these words, also in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. In this way they have passed down not only the content but also the sound that this prayer had on Jesus' lips. Let us really listen to Jesus' words as they were. At the same time, Mark and Matthew describe to us the attitude of those present at the crucifixion who did not understand—or did not want to understand—this prayer.

St. Mark wrote: "When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mk 15:33–34). In the structure of the account, the prayer, Jesus' cry, is raised at the end of the three hours of darkness that shrouded all the earth from midday until three o'clock in the afternoon. These three hours of darkness are in turn the continuation of a previous span of time, also of three hours, that began with the crucifixion of Jesus.

Mark, in fact, tells us that "it was the third hour, when they crucified him" (Mk 15:25). With all the times given in the narrative, Jesus' six hours on the cross were divided into two parts of equal length.

The mockery of various groups, which display their skepticism and confirms their disbelief, fits into the first three hours—from nine o'clock in the morning until midday. St. Mark writes: "Those who passed by derided

him" (Mk 15:29); "So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes" (Mk 15:31); "Those who were crucified with him also reviled him" (15:32). In the following three hours, from midday until "the ninth hour" [three o'clock in the afternoon], the Evangelist spoke only of the darkness that had come down over the entire earth; only darkness fills the whole scene without any references to people's movements or words. While Jesus was drawing ever closer to death, there was nothing but darkness that covers "the whole land."

The cosmos also took part in this event: the darkness envelops people and things, but even at this moment of darkness God was present; he did not abandon them. In the biblical tradition darkness has an ambivalent meaning: It is a sign of the presence and action of evil, but also of the mysterious presence and action of God who can triumph over every shadow.

In the Book of Exodus, for example, we read, "The Lord said to Moses: "Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud" (Ex 19:9); and, further: "The people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Ex 20:21). In his discourses in Deuteronomy, Moses recounted: "And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom" (Dt 4:11); "[You] heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire" (Dt 5:23). During the crucifixion of Jesus, darkness engulfs the earth and the Son of God immerses himself in the shadows of death in order to bring life with his act of love.

Returning to St. Mark's narrative, in the face of the insults that came from various categories of people, in the face of the pall of darkness that shrouds everything, at the moment when he faces death, Jesus, with the cry of his prayer, shows that with the burden of suffering and death in which there seems to be abandonment (the absence of God), he was utterly certain of the closeness of the Father who approves this supreme act of love, this total gift of himself— even though the voice from on high was not heard, as it was on other occasions.

In reading the Gospels we realize that, in other important passages on his earthly existence, Jesus had also seen the explanatory voice of God associated with the signs of the Father's presence and approval of his journey of love.

Thus, in the event that followed his baptism in the Jordan, at the opening of the heavens, the words of the Father had been heard: "Thou art my beloved

Son, with thee I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). Then, in the Transfiguration, the sign of the cloud was accompanied with these words: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mk 9:7). Yet at the approach of the death of the Crucified One, silence fell—no voice was heard, but the Father's loving gaze was fixed on his Son's gift of love.

However, what is the meaning of Jesus' prayer, the cry he addressed to the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Is it doubt about his mission or about the Father's presence? Might there not be in this prayer the knowledge that he had been forsaken? The words that Jesus addressed to the Father were from the beginning of Psalm 22, in which the psalmist expressed being torn between feeling forsaken by God and the certain knowledge of God's presence in his people's midst. The psalmist, prayed: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Ps 22:3–4). The psalmist spoke of this "cry" in order to express the full suffering of his prayer to God, who was seemingly absent; in the moment of anguish, his prayer became a cry.

This also happens in our relationship with the Lord. When we face the most difficult and painful situations, when it seems that God does not hear, we must not be afraid to entrust the whole weight of our overburdened hearts to him; we must not fear to cry out to him in our suffering; we must be convinced that God is close, even if he seems silent.

Repeating from the cross the first words of Psalm 22, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*?"—"My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46), Jesus prays at the moment of his ultimate rejection by men, the moment of abandonment; yet he prays, with the psalm, in the awareness of God's presence, even in that hour when he was feeling the human drama of death.

However, another question arises within us: How is it possible that such a powerful God does not intervene to save his Son from this terrible trial? It is important to understand that Jesus' prayer was not the cry of one who meets death with despair, nor was it the cry of one who knows he has been forsaken. At this moment, Jesus makes his own the whole of Psalm 22, the psalm of the suffering people of Israel. In this way, he took upon himself not only the sin of his people, but also that of all men and women who are suffering from the oppression of evil. At the same time, he placed all this before God's own heart, in the certainty that his cry would be heard in the resurrection: "The cry of extreme anguish is at the same time the certainty of an answer from God, the certainty of salvation—not only for Jesus himself,

but for ‘many.’”[1]

This prayer of Jesus contains his extreme trust and his abandonment into God’s hands, even when God seems absent, even when he seems to be silent, complying with a plan incomprehensible to us. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “In the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (CCC, 603). His is a suffering in communion with us and for us, which derives from love and already bears within it redemption, the victory of love.

The bystanders at the foot of the cross failed to understand, thinking that his cry was a supplication addressed to Elijah. In the scene they sought to assuage his thirst in order to prolong his life and find out whether Elijah would truly come to his aid, but with a loud cry Jesus’ earthly life came to an end, as well as their wish.

At the supreme moment, Jesus gave vent to his heart’s grief, but at the same time made clear the meaning of the Father’s presence and his consent to the Father’s plan of salvation of humanity.

We, too, have to face ever anew the “today” of suffering God’s silence—we express it so often in our prayers—but we also find ourselves facing the “today” of the Resurrection, the response of God who took upon himself our sufferings in order to carry them together with us and give us the firm hope that they will be overcome.[2]

Dear friends, let us lay our daily crosses before God in our prayers, with the certainty that he is present and hears us. Jesus’ cry reminds us that in prayer we must surmount the barriers of our “ego” and our problems and open ourselves to the needs and suffering of others.

May the prayer of Jesus dying on the cross teach us to pray lovingly for our many brothers and sisters who are oppressed by the weight of daily life, who are living through difficult moments, who are in pain, or who have no word of comfort. Let us place all this before God’s heart, so that they too may feel the love of God who never abandons us.

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1. *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, pp. 213–214.
2. See Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi*, 35–40.

# The Three Last Prayers of Jesus

Paul VI Audience Hall, February 15, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

At our last school of prayer I spoke of Jesus' prayer on the cross, taken from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I would now like to continue to meditate on the prayer of Jesus on the cross in the imminence of death. Today, I would like to reflect on the account we find in St. Luke's Gospel. The Evangelist has passed down to us three words spoken by Jesus on the cross, two of which—the first and the third—are prayers explicitly addressed to the Father. The second, instead, consists of the promise made to the so-called "good thief," crucified with him; indeed, in response to the thief 's entreaty, Jesus reassures him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

Thus, in Luke's narrative the two prayers that the dying Jesus addresses to the Father and his openness to the supplication addressed to him by the repentant sinner are evocatively interwoven. Jesus calls on the Father and at the same time listens to the prayer of this man who is often called *latro poenitens*, "the repentant thief."

Let us reflect on these three prayers of Jesus. He prays the first one immediately after being nailed to the cross, while the soldiers are dividing his garments between them as a wretched reward for their service. In a certain sense, the process of the crucifixion ended with this action. St. Luke writes: "When they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' And they cast lots to divide his garments" (Lk 23:33–34).

The first prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father is a prayer of

intercession; he asks for forgiveness for his executioners. By so doing, Jesus did in person what he had taught in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: "I say to you that hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:27) and also promised to those who are able to forgive: "Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High" (Lk 6:35). Now, from the cross, he not only pardoned his executioners, but he addressed the Father directly, interceding for them.

Jesus' attitude finds a moving "imitation" in the account of the stoning of St. Stephen, the first martyr. Stephen, when nearing his end, "knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). These were his last words. The comparison between Jesus' prayer for forgiveness and that of the protomartyr is significant. St. Stephen turned to the risen Lord and requested that his killing—an action described clearly by the words "this sin"—not be held against those who stoned him.

Jesus on the cross addressed the Father and not only asked forgiveness for those who were crucifying him but also offered an interpretation of what was happening. According to what he said, in fact, the men who were crucifying him "know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). He therefore postulates ignorance —"not knowing"—as a reason for his request for the Father's forgiveness, because it leaves the door open to conversion, as then happens in the words the centurion spoke at Jesus' death: "Certainly this man was innocent" (Lk 23:47), he was the Son of God. "It remains a source of comfort for all times and for all people that both in the case of those who genuinely did not know (his executioners) and in the case of those who did know (the people who condemned him), the Lord makes ignorance the motive for his plea for forgiveness: he sees it as a door that can open us to conversion."[1]

The second word spoken by Jesus on the cross recorded by St. Luke was a word of hope. It was his answer to the prayer of one of the two men crucified with him. The good thief came to his senses before Jesus and repents; he realized that he was facing the Son of God who makes the very Face of God visible, and he begged him, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power" (Lk 23:42). The Lord's answer to this prayer goes far beyond the request; in fact, he said: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). Jesus knew that he would be entering into direct communion with the Father and reopening to man the way to God's paradise. Thus, with this response, he gives the firm hope that God's goodness can also

touch us, even at the very last moment of life—the firm hope that sincere prayer, even after a wrong life, encounters the open arms of the good Father who awaits the return of his son.

However, let us consider the last words of Jesus as he was dying. Luke tells us: "It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this, he breathed his last" (Lk 23:44–46).

Certain aspects of this narrative differ from the scene as described in Mark and Matthew. The three hours of darkness in Mark are not described, whereas in Matthew they are linked with a series of different apocalyptic events: the quaking of the earth, the opening of the tombs, the dead who are raised (see Mt 27:51–53). In Luke, the hours of darkness were caused by the eclipse of the sun, but the veil of the temple was torn at that moment. In this way, Luke's account presents two signs—in a certain way parallel—in the heavens and in the temple. The heavens lose their light, and the earth sinks, while in the temple (a place of God's presence), the curtain that protects the sanctuary is rent in two. Jesus' death was characterized explicitly as both a cosmic and a liturgical event; in particular, it marked the beginning of a new form of worship—in a temple not built by men because it was the very Body of Jesus who died and rose, which gathers all peoples together and unites them in the sacrament of his Body and his Blood.

At this moment of suffering, Jesus' prayer, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," was a loud cry of supreme and total entrustment to God. This prayer expressed the full awareness that he had not been abandoned. The initial invocation—"Father"—recalled his first declaration as a twelve-year-old boy. At that time, he had stayed for three days in the Temple of Jerusalem, whose veil was now torn in two. And when his parents had told him of their anxiety, he had answered: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49).

From the beginning to the end, what fully determined Jesus' feelings, words, and actions was his unique relationship with the Father. On the cross he lived to the full, in love, this filial relationship with God that gives life to his prayer.

The words spoken by Jesus after his invocation borrow a sentence from Psalm 31: "Into your hand I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:6). These words were

not a mere citation but rather expressed a firm decision: Jesus "delivered" himself to the Father in an act of total abandonment. These words were a prayer of "entrustment"—total trust in God's love. Jesus' prayer as he faced death was as dramatic as it is for every human being but, at the same time, it was imbued with that deep calmness that is born from trust in the Father and the desire to commend oneself totally to him.

In Gethsemane, when he had begun his final struggle and most intense prayer and was about to be "delivered into the hands of men" (Lk 9:44), his sweat had become "like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Lk 22:44). Nevertheless, his heart was fully obedient to the Father's will, and because of this "an angel from heaven" came to strengthen him (see Lk 22:42–43). Now, in his last moments, Jesus turned to the Father, telling him into whose hands he really commits his whole life.

Before starting out on his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus had insisted to his disciples: "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men" (Lk 9:44). Now that life is about to depart from him, he seals his last decision in prayer: Jesus let himself be delivered "into the hands of men," but it was into the hands of the Father that he placed his spirit. Thus, as John affirms, all was finished; the supreme act of love was carried to the end—to the limit and beyond the limit.

Dear brothers and sisters, the words of Jesus on the cross during the last moments of his earthly life offer us demanding instructions for our own prayers, but they also open us to serene trust and firm hope. Jesus, who asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying him, invites us also to take the difficult step of praying for those who wrong us or who have injured us, ever able to forgive so that God's light may illuminate their hearts. He invites us to live in our prayers the same attitude of mercy and love with which God treats us: "Forgive us our trespasses and forgive those who trespass against us," as we say every day in the Lord's Prayer.

At the same time, Jesus, who at the supreme moment of death entrusted himself totally to the hands of God the Father, communicates to us the certainty that, however harsh the trial, however difficult the problems, however acute the suffering may be, we shall never fall from God's hands—those hands that created us, sustain us, and accompany us on our way through life, because they are guided by an infinite and faithful love.

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1. *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, p. 208.

# The Silence of Jesus

St. Peter's Square, March 7, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In the preceding series of catecheses, I have spoken of Jesus' prayer, and I would not want to conclude this reflection without briefly considering the topic of Jesus' silence, so important in his relationship with God.

In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum domini*, I spoke of the role that silence plays in Jesus' life, especially on Golgotha: "Here we find ourselves before 'the word of the cross' (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). The word is muted; it becomes mortal silence, for it has 'spoken' exhaustively, holding back nothing of what it had to tell us" (n. 12). Before this silence of the cross, St. Maximus the Confessor puts this phrase on the lips of the Mother of God: "Wordless is the Word of the Father, who made every creature which speaks, lifeless are the eyes of the one at whose word and whose nod all living things move!"[1]

The Cross of Christ does not only demonstrate Jesus' silence as his last word to the Father but reveals that God also *speaks* through *silence*: "The silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the Incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father. He commended himself to him at the moment of passage, through death, to eternal life: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'" (Lk 23:46).[2]

Jesus' experience on the cross profoundly reveals the situation of the person praying and the culmination of his prayer: Having heard and

recognized the word of God, we must also come to terms with the silence of God, an important expression of the same divine Word.

The dynamic of words and silence that marked Jesus' prayer throughout his earthly existence, especially on the cross, also touches our own prayer life in two directions.

The first is the one that concerns the acceptance of the Word of God. Both inward and outward silence are necessary if we are to be able to hear this Word. And in our time this point is particularly difficult for us. In fact, ours is an era that does not encourage recollection; indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that people are frightened of being cut off, even for an instant, from the torrent of words and images that mark and fill the day.

It was for this reason that, in the above mentioned Exhortation *Verbum domini*, I recalled our need to learn the value of silence: "Rediscovering the centrality of God's word in the life of the Church also means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence."[3] This principle—that without silence one does not hear, does not listen, does not receive a word—applies especially to personal prayer as well as to our liturgies. To facilitate authentic listening, they must also be rich in moments of silence and of nonverbal reception.

St. Augustine's observation is still valid: *Verbo crescente, verba deficient* —"When the word of God increases, the words of men fail."[4] The Gospels often present Jesus, especially at times of crucial decisions, withdrawing to lonely places, away from the crowds and even from the disciples in order to pray in silence and to live his filial relationship with God. Silence can carve out an inner space in our very depths in order to enable God to dwell there, so that his Word will remain within us and love for him take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life. Hence the first direction: relearning silence, openness to listening, which opens us to the other, to the Word of God.

However, there is also a second important connection between silence and prayer. Indeed, it is not only our silence that disposes us to listen to the Word of God; in our prayers we often find we are confronted by God's silence; we feel, as it were, let down—it seems to us that God neither listens nor responds. Yet God's silence, as happened to Jesus, does not indicate his absence. Christians know well that the Lord is present and listens, even in the darkness of pain, rejection, and loneliness.

Jesus reassures his disciples (and each one of us) that God is well acquainted with our needs at every moment of our life. He teaches the disciples: “In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:7–8). An attentive, silent, and open heart is more important than many words. God knows us in our inmost depths, better than we ourselves, and he loves us—and knowing this must suffice.

In the Bible, Job’s experience is particularly significant in this regard. In a short time this man lost everything: relatives, possessions, friends, and health. It truly seems that God’s attitude to him was one of abandonment, of total silence. Yet in his relationship with God, Job spoke to God; he cried out to God. In his prayers, in spite of all, he kept his faith intact and, in the end, discovered the value of his experience and God’s silence. And thus he can finally conclude, addressing the Creator: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Jb 42:5). Almost all of us know God only through hearsay, and the more open we are to his silence and our own, the more we truly begin to know him.

This total trust that leads to the profound encounter with God develops in silence. St. Francis Xavier prayed to the Lord, saying, “I do not love you because you can give me paradise or condemn me to hell, but because you are my God. I love you because You are You.”

As we reach the end of the reflections on Jesus’ prayer, certain teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Churc*h spring to mind: “The drama of prayer is fully revealed to us in the Word who became flesh and dwells among us. To seek to understand his prayer through what his witnesses proclaim to us in the Gospel is to approach the holy Lord Jesus as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray, in order to know how he hears our prayer” (CCC, 2598).

So, how does Jesus teach us to pray? We find a clear answer in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Jesus teaches us to pray not only with the *Our Father”*—certainly the high point of his instruction on how to pray—“but also when he prays. In this way he teaches us, in addition to the content, the dispositions necessary for every true prayer: purity of heart that seeks the Kingdom and forgives enemies, bold and filial faith that goes beyond what we feel and understand, and watchfulness that

protects the disciple from temptation" (n. 544).

In going through the Gospels, we have seen that, concerning our prayers, the Lord is our conversation partner, friend, witness, and teacher. The newness of our dialogue with God is revealed in Jesus; it is the filial prayer that the Father expects of his children. And we learn from Jesus that constant prayer helps us to interpret our life, make our decisions, recognize and accept our vocation, discover the talents that God has given us, and do his will daily —the only way to fulfillment.

Jesus' prayer points out to us, all too often concerned with operational efficacy and the practical results we achieve, that we need to pause, to experience moments of intimacy with God—"detaching ourselves" from the everyday commotion in order to listen, going to the "root" that sustains and nourishes life.

One of the most beautiful moments of Jesus' prayer is precisely when—in order to deal with the illnesses, hardships, and limitations of those who are conversing with him—he turns to the Father in prayer and thereby teaches those around him where to seek the source of hope and salvation.

I have already recalled the moving example of Jesus' prayer at the tomb of Lazarus. The evangelist John recounts: "So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out'" (Jn 11:41–43).

However, Jesus reaches the most profound depths in prayer to the Father at the moment of his passion and death when he says the extreme "yes" to God's plan and shows how the human will finds its fulfillment precisely in full adherence to the divine will rather than in opposition to it.

In Jesus' prayer, his cry to the Father on the cross, are summed up "all the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history.… Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion the drama of prayer in the economy of creation and salvation" (CCC, 2606).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us trustingly ask the Lord to grant that we live the journey of our filial prayer, learning daily from the only begotten Son who became man for our sake how we should address God.

St. Paul's words on the Christian life in general also apply to our prayers: "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39).

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1. *Life of Mary*, *Testi mariani del primo millennio* (Rome, 1989) n. 89, 2, p. 253.
2. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum domini*, n. 21.
3. *Verbum domini*, n. 66.
4. See St. Augustine, *Sermons* 288, 5: PL 38, 1307; *Sermons* 120, 2: PL 38, 677.

# PRAYER IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

# The Praying Presence of Mary

St. Peter's Square, March 14, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

With today's catechesis, I would like to begin to speak about prayer in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Letters of St. Paul. St. Luke, as we know, has given us one of the four Gospels, dedicated to the earthly life of Jesus, but he has also left us what has been called the first book on the history of the Church: i.e., the Acts of the Apostles. In both of these books, one of the recurring elements is prayer—from that of Jesus to that of Mary, the disciples, the women, and the Christian community.

The beginning of the Church's journey is rhythmically marked by the action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the apostles into witnesses of the Risen One to the shedding of their blood, and also by the rapid spread of the Word of God to the East and West. However, before the proclamation of the Gospel is spread abroad, Luke recounts the Ascension of the Risen One (see Acts 1:6–9). The Lord delivers to the disciples the program of their lives, which are now devoted to evangelization. He says: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). In Jerusalem, the apostles who were now eleven due to the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, were gathered together at home in prayer, and it is precisely in prayer that they await the gift promised by the Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Within this context of expectancy—between the Ascension and Pentecost—St. Luke mentions for the last time Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and his brethren (Acts 1:14). He had dedicated the beginning of his Gospel to Mary, from the announcement of the angel to the birth and infancy of the Son of God made man. With Mary the earthly life of Jesus begins, and with Mary

the Church's first steps are also taken; in both instances, the atmosphere is one of listening to God and of recollection. Today, therefore, I would like to consider this praying presence of the Virgin in the midst of the disciples who would become the first nascent Church.

Mary quietly followed her Son's entire journey during his public life, even to the foot of the cross; and now she continued in silent prayer to follow along the Church's path. At the Annunciation in the home of Nazareth, Mary welcomed the angel of God; she was attentive to his words; she welcomed them and responded to the divine plan, thereby revealing her complete availability: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Because of her inner attitude of listening, Mary was able to interpret her own history and humbly acknowledge that it was the Lord who was acting.

When she visited her relative Elizabeth, Mary broke forth into a prayer of praise, joy, and celebration of the divine grace that filled her heart and her life, making her the Mother of the Lord (Lk 1:46–55). Praise, thanksgiving, joy: in the canticle of the Magnificat, Mary looked not only to what God has wrought in her, but also to what he has accomplished and continually accomplishes throughout history. In a famous commentary on the Magnificat, St. Ambrose summons us to have the same spirit of prayer. He writes: "May the soul of Mary be in us to magnify the Lord; may the spirit of Mary be in us to exult in God."[1]

In the Cenacle in Jerusalem, the "upper room where [the disciples of Jesus] were staying" (cf. Acts 1:13), in an atmosphere of listening and prayer, Mary was also present, even before the doors were thrown open and they began to announce the Risen Lord to all peoples, teaching them to observe all that Lord had commanded (Mt 28:19–20). The stages in Mary's journey—from the home in Nazareth to that in Jerusalem, through the cross where her Son entrusts to her the apostle John—are marked by her ability to maintain a persevering atmosphere of recollection, so that she might ponder each event in the silence of her heart before God (see Lk 2:19–51) and, in meditation before God, also see the will of God therein and be able to accept it interiorly.

The presence of the Mother of God with the eleven following the Ascension was not, then, a simple historical annotation regarding a thing of the past; rather, it assumes a meaning of great value, for she shared with them what is most precious: the living memory of Jesus, in prayer; and she shares this mission of Jesus: to preserve the memory of Jesus and thereby to

preserve his presence.

The final mention of Mary in the two writings of St. Luke was made on the Sabbath: the day of God's rest after Creation, the day of silence after the death of Jesus and the expectation of his resurrection. The tradition of remembering Holy Mary on Saturday is rooted in this event. Between the Ascension of the Risen One and the first Christian Pentecost, the apostles and the Church gathered together with Mary to await the gift of the Holy Spirit, without whom one cannot become a witness. She who already received him in order that she might give birth to the incarnate Word awaits with the whole Church the same gift, so that "Christ may be formed" (Gal 4:19) in the heart of every believer.

If the Church does not exist without Pentecost, neither does Pentecost exist without the Mother of Jesus, since she lived in a wholly unique way what the Church experiences each day under the action of the Holy Spirit. St. Chromatius of Aquilea comments on the annotation found in the Acts of the Apostles in this way: "The Church was united in the upper room with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and with His brethren. One, therefore, cannot speak of the Church unless Mary, the Mother of the Lord, is present … The Church of Christ is there where the Incarnation of Christ from the Virgin is preached, and where the Apostles who are the brothers of the Lord preach, there one hears the Gospel."[2]

The Second Vatican Council wished to emphasize in a particular way the bond that is visibly manifest in Mary and the apostles praying together, in the same place, in expectation of the Holy Spirit. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* affirms: "Since it has pleased God not to manifest solemnly the mystery of the salvation of the human race before he would pour forth the Spirit promised by Christ, we see the apostles before the day of Pentecost 'persevering with one mind in prayer with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren' (Acts 1:14) and Mary by her prayers imploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation."[3] The privileged place of Mary is the Church, where "she is hailed as a pre-eminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity."[4]

Venerating the Mother of Jesus in the Church therefore means learning from her to become a community that prays; this is one of the essential marks in the first description of the Christian community as delineated in the Acts of the Apostles (see Acts 2:42). Often, prayer is dictated by difficult situations,

by personal problems that lead us to turn to the Lord for light, comfort, and help. Mary invites us to expand the dimensions of prayer, to turn to God not only in times of need and not only for ourselves, but also in an undivided, persevering, faithful way, with "one heart and soul" (see Acts 4:32).

Dear friends, human life passes through various phases of transition, which are often difficult and demanding and require binding choices, renunciation, and sacrifice. The Mother of Jesus was placed by the Lord in the decisive moments of salvation history, and she always knew how to respond with complete availability—the fruit of a profound bond with God that had matured through assiduous and intense prayer. Between the Friday of the Passion and the Sunday of the Resurrection, the beloved disciple, and with him the entire community of disciples, was entrusted to her (see Jn 19:26). Between Ascension and Pentecost, she is found with and in the Church in prayer (see Acts 1:14). As Mother of God and Mother of the Church, Mary exercises her maternity until the end of history. Let us entrust every phase of our personal and ecclesial lives to her—not the least of which is our final passing. Mary teaches us the necessity of prayer, and she shows us that it is only through a constant, intimate, loving bond with her Son that we may courageously leave "our home" (ourselves) in order to reach the ends of the earth and everywhere announce the Lord Jesus, the Savior of the world.

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1. St. Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam* 2, 26: PL 15, 1561.
2. St. Chromatius of Aquilea, Sermon 30, 1: SC 164, 135.
3. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n.59.
4. Ibid, n. 53.

# The Apostles' Prayer in the Face of Persecution

St. Peter's Square, April 18, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

After the great celebrations of Easter, let us now return to the catecheses on prayer. At the Audience before Holy Week we reflected on the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her prayerful presence among the apostles while they were waiting for the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Church took her first steps in an atmosphere of prayer. Pentecost is not an isolated episode because the Holy Spirit's presence and action never cease to guide and encourage the Christian community as it journeys on.

Indeed, in addition to recounting the great outpouring in the Upper Room, which occurred fifty days after Easter (see Acts 2:1–13), St. Luke mentions in the Acts of the Apostles other extraordinary occasions of the Holy Spirit bursting in which recur in the Church's history. Today I would like to reflect on what has been defined as the "little Pentecost," which took place at the height of a difficult phase in the life of the nascent Church.

The Acts of the Apostles tell us that, after the healing of a paralytic at the Temple of Jerusalem (see Acts 3:1–10), Peter and John were arrested (see Acts 4:1) for proclaiming Jesus' resurrection to the people (see Acts 3:11–26). They were released after a hasty trial, joined their brethren, and told them what they had been obliged to undergo on account of the witness they had borne to Jesus, the Risen One. At that moment, Luke says, "they lifted their voices together to God" (Acts 4:24). Here St. Luke records the Church's most extensive prayer in the New Testament—and at the end, "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31).

Before reflecting on this beautiful prayer, let us take note of an important basic attitude: when the first Christian community is confronted by dangers, difficulties, and threats, it does not attempt to work out how to react, find strategies, defend itself, or decide what measures to adopt; rather, when it is put to the test, the community starts to pray and makes contact with God.

And what are the features of this prayer? It is a unanimous, concordant prayer of the entire community that reacts to persecution because of Jesus. In the original Greek, St. Luke uses the word *homothumadon* ("all these with one accord," "in agreement"), a term that appears in other parts of the Acts of the Apostles to emphasize this persevering, harmonious prayer (see Acts 1:14; 2:46).

This harmony was the fundamental element of the first community and must always be fundamental to the Church. Thus, it was not only the prayer prayed by Peter and John, who were in danger, but the prayer of the entire community, since what the two apostles were experiencing did not concern them alone but the whole Church.

In facing the persecution it suffered for the cause of Jesus, the community was neither frightened nor divided; it was also deeply united in prayer, as one person, to invoke the Lord. I would say that this is the first miracle that is worked when, because of their faith, believers are put to the test. Their unity, rather than being jeopardized, is strengthened because it is sustained by steadfast prayer. The Church must not fear the persecutions that she has been subjected to throughout her history but must always trust, like Jesus at Gethsemane, in the presence, help, and power of God, invoked in prayer.

Let us take a further step: What does the Christian community ask God at this moment of trial? It does not ask for the safety of life in the face of persecution, nor that the Lord get even with those who imprisoned Peter and John; it asks only that it be granted "to speak [his] word with all boldness" (Acts 4:29). In other words, it prays that it may not lose the courage of faith, the courage to proclaim faith. First, however, it seeks to understand in depth what has occurred, to interpret events in the light of faith, and it does so precisely through the Word of God that enables us to decipher the reality of the world.

In the prayer it raises to the Lord, the community begins by recording and invoking God's omnipotence and immensity: "Sovereign Lord, who did make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 4:24). It is the invocation to the Creator: we know that all things come from

him, that all things are in his hands. It is knowledge of this that gives us certainty and courage: everything comes from him; everything is in his hands.

The prayer then goes on to recognize how God acted in the past—it begins with the creation and continues through history—how he was close to his people, showing himself to be a God concerned with man who did not withdraw, who did not abandon man, his creature. Here Psalm 2 is explicitly cited. It is in this light that the difficult situation the Church was going through at the time should be read.

Psalm 2 celebrates the enthronement of the king of Judaea, but refers prophetically to the coming of the Messiah, against whom human rebellion, persecution, and abuse can do nothing: "Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" (Ps 2:1–2; see Acts 4:25).

The psalm about the Messiah already stated this prophetically, and this uprising of the powerful against God's power is characteristic throughout history. It is precisely by reading sacred Scripture, which is the Word of God, that the community can say to God in prayer: "Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, … to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27).

What happened is interpreted in the light of Christ— which is also the key to understanding persecution—and the Cross, which is always the key to the Resurrection. The opposition to Jesus and his Passion and death are reinterpreted through Psalm 2 as the actuation of God the Father's project for the world's salvation. And here we also find the meaning of the experience of persecution that the first Christian community was living through. This first community is not a mere association but a community that lives in Christ, so what happens to it is part of God's plan. Just as it happened to Jesus, his disciples also meet with opposition, misunderstanding, and persecution. In prayer, meditation on sacred Scripture in the light of Christ's mystery helps us to interpret the reality present within the history of salvation that God works in the world, always in his own way.

This is precisely why the request to God that the first Christian community of Jerusalem formulated in a prayer does not ask to be protected or spared trials and hardship. It is not a prayer for success but asks only to be

able to proclaim the word of God with "*parresia,"*—that is, with boldness, freedom, and courage (see Acts 4:29).

There is the additional request that this proclamation may be guided by God's hand so that healing, signs, and wonders may be performed (see Acts 4:30); in other words, that God's goodness may be visible as a power that transforms reality, that changes peoples' hearts, minds, and lives, and brings the radical newness of the Gospel.

At the end of the prayer, St. Luke notes, "The place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). The place shook—that is, faith has the power to transform the earth and the world. The same Spirit who spoke through Psalm 2 in the prayer of the Church bursts into the house and fills the hearts of all those who have invoked the Lord. This is the fruit of the unanimous prayer that the Christian community raises to God: the outpouring of the Spirit, a gift of the Risen One that sustains and guides the free and courageous proclamation of God's Word, which impels the disciples of the Lord to go out fearlessly to take the Good News to the ends of the world.

We, too, dear brothers and sisters, must be able to ponder the events of our daily life in prayer in order to seek their deep meaning. And like the first Christian community, let us allow ourselves to be illuminated by the word of God through meditation on sacred Scripture, so that we can learn to see that God is present in our life, present also and especially in difficult moments, and that all things—even those that are incomprehensible—are part of a superior plan of love in which the final victory over evil, sin, and death is truly that of goodness, grace, life, and God.

Just as prayer helped the first Christian community, prayer also helps us to interpret our personal and collective history in the most just and faithful perspective—that of God. And let us, too, renew our request for the gift of the Holy Spirit that warms hearts and enlightens minds, in order to recognize how the Lord hears our prayers in accordance with his will of love and not with our own ideas.

Guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we will be able to live with serenity, courage, and joy in every situation in life. With St. Paul, we will be able to boast: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,"—hope that "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been

poured" into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:3–5).

# Prayer and Action

St. Peter's Square, April 25, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In our last catechesis, I explained that from the outset the Church has had to face unexpected situations on her journey, new issues and emergencies to which she has sought to respond in the light of faith, letting herself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Today I would like to pause to reflect on another of these situations: a serious problem that the first Christian community of Jerusalem was obliged to face and to solve, as St. Luke tells us in the sixth chapter of the Acts, concerning pastoral charity to lonely people and those in need of assistance and help.

This is not a secondary matter for the Church, and at that time, it risked creating divisions in the Church. The number of disciples continued to increase, but the Greek-speaking believers began to complain about those who spoke Hebrew because their widows were left out of the daily distribution (see Acts 6:1). To face this urgent matter, which concerned a fundamental aspect of community life—namely, charity to the weak, the poor, and the defenseless—and justice, the apostles summoned the entire group of disciples. In that moment of pastoral emergency, the apostles' discernment stands out. They were facing the primary need to proclaim God's word in accordance with the Lord's mandate but— even if this was a priority of the Church—they considered with equal gravity the duty of charity and justice: that is, the duty to help widows and poor people and, in response to the commandment of Jesus to love one another as he loved us (see Jn 15:12, 17), to provide lovingly for their brothers and sisters in need.

So it was that difficulties arose in the two activities that must coexist in the Church—the proclamation of the Word (the primacy of God) and

concrete charity (justice)—and it was necessary to find a solution so that there would be room for both. The apostles' reflection is very clear: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2–4).

Two points stand out: First, since that moment a ministry of charity has existed in the Church. The Church must not only proclaim the Word but must also put the Word—which is charity and truth—into practice. And the second point: These men must not only enjoy a good reputation, but they also must be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom. In other words, they cannot merely be organizers who know what "to do," but they must "act" in a spirit of faith with God's enlightenment, with wisdom of heart. Hence their role—although it is above all a practical one—has nonetheless also a spiritual function. Charity and justice are not only social but also spiritual actions, accomplished in the light of the Holy Spirit.

We can thus say that the apostles confronted this situation with great responsibility. They made the following decision: Seven men were chosen; the apostles prayed that the Holy Spirit would grant them strength and then laid their hands on the seven so that they might dedicate themselves in a special way to this ministry of charity. Thus, in the life of the Church, the first steps she took, in a certain way, reflected what had happened in Jesus' public life at Martha and Mary's house in Bethany. Martha was completely taken up with offering the service of hospitality to Jesus and his disciples; Mary, on the contrary, devoted herself to listening to the Lord's word (see Lk 10:38–42). In neither case were the moments of prayer and listening to God and daily activity the exercise of charity in opposition. Jesus' reminder, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41–42) and, likewise, the apostles' reflection: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4) show the priority we must give to God.

I do not wish here to enter into the interpretation of this Martha-Mary passage. In any case, activity undertaken to help one's neighbor ("the other") is not to be condemned, but it is essential to stress the need for it to be imbued also with the spirit of contemplation. Moreover, St. Augustine says that this reality of Mary is a vision of our situation in heaven. Even though on

earth we can never possess it completely, a little anticipation must be present in all our activities. Contemplation of God must also be present. We must not lose ourselves in pure activism but always let ourselves also be penetrated in our activities by the light of the Word of God and thereby learn true charity, true service to others, which does not need many things. It certainly needs the necessary things, but it needs above all our heartfelt affection and the light of God.

In commenting on the episode of Martha and Mary, St. Ambrose urges his faithful (and us too): "Let us too seek to have what cannot be taken from us, dedicating diligent, not distracted attention to the Lord's word. The seeds of the heavenly word are blown away, if they are sown along the roadside. May the wish to know be an incentive to you too, as it was to Mary, this is the greatest and most perfect act." He added that "attention to the ministry must not distract from knowledge of the heavenly word" through prayer.[1]

Saints have, therefore, experienced a profound unity of life between prayer and action, between total love for God and love for their brethren. St. Bernard, who is a model of harmony between contemplation and hard work, in his book *De consideratione*, addressed Pope Innocent II, offering him some reflections on his ministry. Here he insists precisely on the importance of inner recollection, of prayer to defend oneself from the dangers of being hyperactive, whatever our condition and whatever the task to be carried out. St. Bernard says that all too often too much work and a frenetic lifestyle end by hardening the heart and causing the spirit to suffer.[2]

His words are a precious reminder to us today, so used to evaluating everything with the criterion of productivity and efficiency. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us of the importance—without a doubt how a true and proper ministry is created—of devotion to daily activities that should be carried out with responsibility and dedication and also with an awareness of our need for God, for his guidance, and for his light which gives us strength and hope. Without daily prayer lived with fidelity, our acts are empty; they lose their profound soul and are reduced to being mere activism, which in the end leaves us dissatisfied. There is a beautiful invocation of the Christian tradition to be recited before any other activity which says: "*Actiones nostras, quæsumus, Domine, aspirando præveni et adiuvando prosequere, ut cuncta nostra oratio et operatio a te semper incipiat, et per te coepta finiatur"*—that is, "Inspire our actions, Lord, and accompany them with your help, so that our every word and action may always begin and end

in you." Every step in our life, every action—of the Church too—must be taken before God, in the light of his word.

In last Wednesday's catechesis, I emphasized the unanimous prayer of the first Christian community in times of trial. I explained how, in prayer itself and meditation on sacred Scripture, it was able to understand the events that were happening. When prayer is nourished by the Word of God, we can see reality with new eyes, the eyes of faith. The Lord, who speaks to the mind and the heart, gives new light to the journey at every moment and in every situation. We believe in the power of the Word of God and of prayer. Even the difficulties that the Church was encountering as she faced the problem of service to the poor, the issue of charity, was overcome in prayer, in the light of God, of the Holy Spirit. The apostles did not limit themselves to ratifying the choice of Stephen and the other men, but "they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6:6). The Evangelist once again recalled these gestures on the occasion of the election of Paul and Barnabas, where we read: "After fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:3). He confirms again that the practical service of charity is a spiritual service. Both these realities must go hand in hand.

With the act of the laying on of hands, the apostles conferred a special ministry on seven men so that they might be granted the corresponding grace. The emphasis on prayer ("after praying") is important because it highlights the gesture's spiritual dimension; it is not merely a question of conferring an office as happens in a public organization, it is an ecclesial event in which the Holy Spirit appropriates seven men chosen by the Church, consecrating them in the Truth that is Jesus Christ. He is the silent protagonist, present during the imposition of hands so that the chosen ones may be transformed by his power and sanctified in order to face the practical and pastoral challenges. The emphasis on prayer also reminds us that the response to the Lord's choice and the allocation of every ministry in the Church stems solely from a close relationship with God, nurtured daily.

Dear brothers and sisters, the pastoral problem that induced the apostles to choose and to lay their hands on seven men charged with the service of charity so that they themselves might be able to devote themselves to prayer and to preaching the word also indicates to us the primacy of prayer and the Word of God—which, however, then result in pastoral action. For pastors, this is the first and most valuable form of service for the flock entrusted to them. If the lungs of prayer and the Word of God do not nourish the breath of

our spiritual life, we risk being overwhelmed by countless everyday things; prayer is the breath of the soul and of life. And there is another precious reminder that I would like to underscore: in the relationship with God, in listening to his Word, in dialogue with him—whether we are in the silence of a church or alone in our room—we are united in the Lord to a great many brothers and sisters in faith, like an ensemble of musical instruments which, in spite of their individuality, raise to God one great symphony of intercession, of thanksgiving and praise.

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1. St. Ambrose, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, VII, 85 *PL* 15, 1720.
2. St. Bernard, *On Consideration*, II, 3.

# The Prayer of St. Stephen

St. Peter's Square, May 2, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In our recent catecheses we have seen how, through personal and community prayer, the interpretation of and meditation on sacred Scripture open us to listen to God who speaks to us and instills light in us so that we may understand the present.

Today, I would like to talk about the testimony and prayer of the Church's first martyr, St. Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to carry out the service of charity for the needy. At the moment of his martyrdom, recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, the fruitful relationship between the Word of God and prayer is once again demonstrated.

Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, where he was accused of declaring that "this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, [the Temple] and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:14). During his public life Jesus had effectively foretold the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem: "[You will] destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). But, as St. John remarked, "he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:21–22).

Stephen's speech to the council, the longest in the Acts of the Apostles, developed this very prophecy of Jesus who is the new Temple, has inaugurated the new worship and, with his immolation on the cross, replaced the ancient sacrifices. Stephen wished to demonstrate that the accusation leveled against him of subverting the Mosaic law was unfounded. He described his view of salvation history and the covenant between God and

man. In this way he reinterpreted the whole of the biblical narrative in order to show that it leads to the "place" of the definitive presence of God that is Jesus Christ, and in particular his passion, death, and resurrection. From this perspective Stephen also interprets his being a disciple of Jesus, following him even to martyrdom. Meditation on sacred Scripture thus enabled him to understand his mission, his life, and his present. Stephen was guided in this by the light of the Holy Spirit and his close relationship with the Lord—so much so that the members of the Sanhedrin saw that his face was "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). This sign of divine assistance is reminiscent of Moses' face that shone after his encounter with God when he came down from Mount Sinai (see Ex 34:29–35; 2 Cor 3:7–8).

In his discourse Stephen started with the call of Abraham, a pilgrim bound for the land pointed out to him by God, which he possessed only at the level of a promise. He then spoke of Joseph, sold by his brothers but helped and liberated by God, and continues with Moses, who becomes an instrument of God in order to set his people free but also several times comes up against his own people's rejection. Stephen demonstrated that he listens religiously to these events narrated in sacred Scripture, and he shared that God always emerges; he never tires of reaching out to man in spite of frequently meeting with obstinate opposition. This happens in the past, present, and future. So it is that throughout the Old Testament Stephen saw the prefiguration of the life of Jesus himself, the Son of God made flesh, who—like the ancient Fathers—encountered obstacles, rejection, and death. Stephen then refers to Joshua, David, and Solomon, whom he mentions in relation to the building of the Temple of Jerusalem, and ends with the word of the prophet Isaiah: "Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" (Acts 7:49–50). In his meditation on God's action in salvation history, by highlighting the perennial temptation to reject God and his action, he affirmed that Jesus is the Righteous One foretold by the prophets. God himself has made himself uniquely and definitively present in him: Jesus is the "place" of true worship. Stephen did not deny the importance of the Temple for a certain period, but he stressed that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48).

The new, true temple in which God dwells is his Son, who has taken on human flesh; it is the humanity of Christ, the Risen One, who gathers the peoples together and unites them in the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood.

The description of the temple as "not made by human hands" is also found in the theology of St. Paul and in the Letter to the Hebrews. The Body of Jesus, which he assumed in order to offer himself as a sacrificial victim for the expiation of sins, is the new temple of God, the place of the presence of the living God; in him, God and man, God and the world are truly in touch. Jesus takes upon himself all the sins of humanity in order to bring it into the love of God and to "consummate" it in this love. Drawing close to the Cross, entering into communion with Christ, means entering this transformation. And this means coming into contact with God—entering the true temple.

Stephen's life and words were suddenly cut short by the stoning, but his martyrdom itself was the fulfillment of his life and message—he became one with Christ. Thus his meditation on God's action in history, on the divine Word that in Jesus found complete fulfillment, became participation in the very prayer on the cross. Indeed, before dying, Stephen cried out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), making his own the words of Psalm 31:6 and repeating Jesus' last words on Calvary: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Lastly, like Jesus, he cried out with a loud voice, facing those who were stoning him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Let us note that if, on the one hand, Stephen's prayer echoed Jesus', on the other it is addressed to someone else, for the entreaty was to the Lord himself—namely, to Jesus whom he contemplated in glory at the right hand of the Father: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (Lk 23:55).

Dear brothers and sisters, St. Stephen's witness gives us several instructions for our prayers and for our lives. Let us ask ourselves: Where did this first Christian martyr find the strength to face his persecutors and go so far as to give himself? The answer is simple: from his relationship with God, from his communion with Christ, from meditation on the history of salvation, from perceiving God's action that reached its crowning point in Jesus Christ. Our prayers, too, must be nourished by listening to the word of God, in communion with Jesus and his Church.

A second element: St. Stephen saw the figure and mission of Jesus foretold in the history of the loving relationship between God and man. The Son of God is the temple that is not "made with hands," in which the presence of God the Father became so close as to enter our human flesh to bring us to God and open the gates of heaven. Our prayer, therefore, must be the contemplation of Jesus at the right hand of God, of Jesus as the Lord of

our daily lives. In him, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we too can address God and be truly in touch with him, with the faith and abandonment of children who turn to a Father who loves them infinitely.

# Prayer and St. Peter's Miraculous Release

St. Peter's Square, May 9, 2012

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today I would like to touch upon the last episode in the life of St. Peter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: his imprisonment by order of Herod Agrippa and his release through the marvelous intervention of the angel of the Lord on the eve of his trial in Jerusalem (see Acts 12:1–17).

The narrative was once again marked by the prayer of the Church. St. Luke writes: "So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (Acts 12:5). And, after having miraculously left the prison, on the occasion of his visit to Mary's house (the mother of John also called Mark), it tells us "many were gathered together and were praying" (Acts 12:12). Between these two important observations that illustrate the attitude of the Christian community in the face of danger and persecution is recounted the detainment and release of Peter during the night. The strength of the unceasing prayer of the Church rises to God; the Lord listens and performs an unheard of and unexpected deliverance, sending his angel.

The account reminds us of the great elements during Israel's deliverance from captivity in Egypt, the Hebrew Passover. As happened in that major event, here also the angel of the Lord performed the primary action that frees Peter. And the actions of the apostle—who was asked to rise quickly, put on his belt, and gird his loins—replicate those of the Chosen People on the night of their deliverance through God's intervention, when they were invited to eat the lamb quickly with their belts fastened, sandals on their feet, and their staffs in their hands, ready to leave the country (see Ex 12:11). Thus, Peter could exclaim: "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued

me from the hand of Herod" (Acts 12:11). The angel not only recalls the deliverance of Israel from Egypt but also the resurrection of Christ. "And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him" (Acts 12:7). The light that fills the prison cell, the same action taken to awaken the apostle, refers to the liberating light of the Passover of the Lord that triumphs over the darkness of night and evil. Finally, the invitation, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me" (Acts 12:8), echoes the words of the initial call of Jesus in our hearts (see Mk 1:17), repeated after his resurrection on Lake Tiberias, where on two occasions the Lord says to Peter, "Follow me" (Jn 21:19, 22). It is a pressing call to follow him. Only by coming out of ourselves to walk with the Lord and by doing his will can we live in true freedom.

I would also like to highlight another aspect of Peter's attitude in prison. We note that while the Christian community is praying earnestly for him, Peter "was sleeping" (Acts 12:6). In a critical situation of serious danger, it is an attitude that might seem strange but instead denotes tranquility and faith. He trusted God. He knew he was surrounded by the solidarity and prayers of his own people, and he completely abandoned himself into the hands of the Lord. So it must be with our prayer—assiduous, in solidarity with others, and fully trusting that God knows us in our depths and takes care of us to the point that Jesus says, "Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore" (Mt 10:30–31). Peter lived through that night of imprisonment and subsequent release as a moment of his discipleship with the Lord who overcame the darkness of night and freed him from the chains of slavery and the threat of death. His was a miraculous release, marked by various accurately described steps, guided by the angel, despite the monitoring of the guards, through the first and second guard posts, up to the iron doors to exit to the city, with the door opening by itself in front of them (see Acts 12:10). Peter and the angel of the Lord made their way together down a stretch of the street until, coming back to himself, the apostle realized that the Lord really freed him and, after having reflected on the matter, went to the house of Mary the mother of Mark where many disciples were gathered in prayer. Once again the community's response to difficulty and danger was to trust in God, strengthening their relationship with him.

Here it seems useful to recall another difficult situation that the early Christian community experienced. St. James speaks of it in his letter. It is a community in crisis, in difficulty, not so much because of persecution, but

because of the jealousies and contentions within it (see Jas 3:14–16). James wonders about the reason for this situation. He finds two primary motives. The first is that the believers have allowed themselves to be carried away by their emotions, the dictates of their own interests, and selfishness (see Jas 4:1–2a). The second is the lack of prayer—"You do not ask.…" (Jas 4:2b)—or else a kind of a prayer that cannot qualify as such—"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas 4:3). This situation would change, according to St. James, if the community all spoke together with God, truly praying assiduously and unanimously. In fact, even talking about God runs the risk of losing inner strength; their testimony dries up if they are not animated, sustained, and accompanied by prayer, by the continuity of a living dialogue with the Lord. This is an important reminder for us and for our communities—both small ones like the family and bigger ones like the parish, the diocese, and the entire Church. It makes me think that they prayed in this community of St. James, but they prayed wrongly, solely for their own passions. We must always learn again how to pray properly—to truly pray, moving toward God and not merely toward our own good.

Instead, the community that was concerned about Peter's imprisonment was a community that truly prayed the entire night, deeply united. And it was overwhelming joy that filled the hearts of all when the apostle unexpectedly knocks at the door. It was joy and amazement in light of the actions of the God who listens. Thus, from the Church arose the prayer for Peter, and to the Church he returned to tell "how the Lord had brought him out of the prison" (Acts 12:17). In that Church where he has been set as a rock (see Mt 16:18), Peter recounted his "Passover" of liberation. He experienced true freedom in following Jesus. He was enveloped in the radiant light of the Resurrection and could therefore testify to the point of martyrdom that the Lord was risen and "sent his Angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod" (Acts 12:11). The martyrdom he was to suffer in Rome would definitively unite him with Christ, who had told him: "When you are old, another will take you where you do not want to go, to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God" (Jn 21:18–19).

Dear brothers and sisters, Peter's liberation as recounted by Luke tells us that the Church (i.e., each of us) goes through the night of trial, but it is unceasing vigilance in prayer that sustains us. I too, from the first moment of my election as the successor of St. Peter, have always felt supported by your

prayers, by the prayers of the Church, especially in moments of great difficulty. My heartfelt thanks! With constant and faithful prayer, the Lord releases us from our chains; he guides us through every night of imprisonment that can gnaw at our hearts. He gives us the peace of heart to face the difficulties of life, persecution, opposition, and even rejection. Peter's experience shows us the power of prayer. The apostle, though in chains, felt calm in the certainty of never being alone. The community was praying for him. The Lord was near him. He indeed knew that Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Constant and unanimous prayer is a precious tool to overcome any trial that may arise on life's journey, because it is being deeply united to God that allows us also to be united to others.

# OTHER THEMES

# Free Time and Reading the Bible

Castel Gandolfo, August 3, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

I am very glad to see you here in the square at Castel Gandolfo and to resume the audiences after the interval in July. I would like to continue with our "school of prayer" today, but in a slightly different way. Without straying from this theme, I would like to mention certain other spiritual and concrete aspects that seem to me to be useful to us all, whether on holiday or immersed in daily work.

When we have a break from our activities, especially during the holidays, we often take up a book we want to read. It is on this very aspect that I would first like to reflect today.

Each one of us needs time and space for recollection, meditation, and calmness—thanks be to God that this is so! In fact, this need tells us that we are not made for work alone, but also to think, to reflect, or even simply to follow with our minds and our hearts a tale, a story in which to immerse ourselves—in a certain sense, "to lose ourselves" in order to find ourselves subsequently enriched.

Of course, many books we take in our hands during our vacation are at best merely an escape, and this is normal. Yet various people, particularly if they have more time in which to take a break and to relax, devote themselves to something more demanding.

I would therefore like to make a suggestion: Why not discover some of the books of the Bible that are not commonly well known, or those from which we have heard certain passages in the liturgy but never read in their entirety? Indeed, many Christians never read the Bible and have a very limited and superficial knowledge of it. The Bible, as the name says, is a collection of

books—a small “library” that came into being during the course of a millennium. Some of these “small books” are almost unknown to the majority, even to those who are good Christians.

Some are very short, such as the Book of Tobit, a tale that contains a lofty sense of family and marriage, or the Book of Esther, in which the Jewish queen saves her people from extermination with her faith and prayer, or the Book of Ruth, a stranger who meets God and experiences his providence, which is even shorter. These little books can be read in an hour. More demanding and true masterpieces are the Book of Job, which faces the great problem of innocent suffering, or Ecclesiastes, which is striking because of the disconcerting modernity with which it calls into question the meaning of life and of the world, or the Song of Songs, a wonderful symbolic poem of human love. As you see, these are all books of the Old Testament. The New Testament is, of course, better known, and its literary genres are less diversified. Yet the beauty of reading a Gospel at one sitting must be discovered, and I also recommend the Acts of the Apostles, or one of the letters.

To conclude, dear friends, today I would like to suggest that you keep the Holy Bible within reach during the summer period or on your breaks, in order to enjoy it in a new way by reading some of its books straight through—those that are less known and also the most famous, such as the Gospels.

By so doing, moments of relaxation can become in addition to a cultural enrichment also an enrichment of the spirit that is capable of fostering the knowledge of God and dialogue with him in prayer. It’s a splendid holiday occupation: reading a book of the Bible in order to have a little relaxation and at the same time to enter the great realm of the Word of God and deepen our contact with the Eternal One as the very purpose of the free time that the Lord gives us.

# “Oases” of the Spirit

Castel Gandolfo, August 10, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In every age, men and women who have consecrated their lives to God in prayer—for instance, monks and nuns—have founded their communities in particularly beautiful places: in the countryside, on hilltops, in mountain valleys, on the shores of lakes or the sea, and even on small islands. These places combine two very important elements for contemplative life: the beauty of creation, which evokes the beauty of the Creator, and silence, which is guaranteed by living far from cities and the great thoroughfares of the media.

Silence is the environmental condition most conducive to contemplation, listening to God, and meditation. The very fact of enjoying silence and letting ourselves be “filled,” so to speak, with silence, disposes us to prayer.

The great prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb—that is, Sinai—experienced a strong squall, then an earthquake, and finally flashes of fire, but he did not recognize God’s voice in them; instead, he recognized it in a light breeze (see 1 Kgs 19:11–13).

God speaks in silence, but we must know how to listen. This is why monasteries are oases in which God speaks to humanity; in them we find the cloister, a symbolic place because it is an enclosed space, yet open to heaven.

Tomorrow, dear friends, we shall commemorate St. Clare of Assisi. Therefore, I would like to recall one such “oasis” of the spirit that is particularly dear to the Franciscan family and to all Christians: the little convent of St. Damian, situated just beneath the city of Assisi, among the olive groves that slope down towards Santa Maria degli Angeli (St. Mary of the Angels). It was beside this little church, which Francis restored after his

conversion, that Clare and her first companions established their community, living on prayer and humble tasks. They were called the "Poor Sisters" and their "form of life" was the same as that of the Friars Minor: "To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,"[1] preserving the union of reciprocal charity,[2] and observing in particular the poverty and humility of Jesus and of his Most Holy Mother.[3]

The silence and beauty of the place in which the monastic community dwells—a simple and austere beauty—are like a reflection of the spiritual harmony that the community itself seeks to create. The world, particularly Europe, is spangled with these oases of the spirit, some very ancient, others recent; yet others have been restored by new communities. Looking at things from a spiritual perspective, these places of the spirit are the backbone of the world! It is no accident that many people, especially during their vacations, visit these places and spend several days there. The soul too, thanks be to God, has its needs!

Let us therefore remember St. Clare. But let us also remember other saints who remind us of the importance of turning our gaze to the "things of heaven," as did St. Edith Stein, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Carmelite and co-patroness of Europe, whom we celebrated yesterday. And today we cannot forget St. Lawrence, deacon and martyr, with special congratulations to the Romans who have always venerated him as one of their patrons. Lastly, let us turn our gaze to the Virgin Mary, that she may teach us to love silence and prayer.

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1. *Rule of St Clare*, 1, 2.
2. See ibid, X, 7.
3. See ibid., XII, 13.

# The Prayer of Meditation

Castel Gandolfo, August 17, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

We are still in the light of the Feast of the Assumption, which is a feast of hope. Mary has arrived in heaven, and this is our destination, too. We can all reach heaven—the question is: How? Mary has arrived there. It is she, the Gospel says, "who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45).

Thus Mary believed; she entrusted herself to God, bent her will to the will of the Lord, and so was truly on the most direct road, the road to heaven. Believing, entrusting oneself to the Lord, and complying with his will: This is the essential approach.

Today I do not want to talk about the whole journey of faith. Instead, I want to speak of only one small aspect of the life of prayer (which is life in contact with God)—namely, meditation. And what is meditation? Meditation means "remembering" all that God has done and not forgetting his many great benefits (see Ps 103:2b).

We often see only the negative things, but we must also keep in mind all that is positive, the gifts that God has given us; we must be attentive to the positive signs that come from God, and we must remember them. Let us therefore speak of a type of prayer that in the Christian tradition is known as "mental prayer," as opposed to the vocal prayer that most of us are familiar with.

The heart and the mind must of course take part in this prayer. However, we are speaking today of a meditation that does not consist of words but rather is a way of making contact with the heart of God in our mind. And here Mary is a very real model. Luke repeated several times that Mary "kept

all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19; see Lk 2:51b). As a good custodian, she does not forget; she was attentive to all that the Lord told her and did for her, and she meditated—in other words, she considered various things, pondering them in her heart.

Therefore, she who "believed" in the announcement of the angel and made herself the means of enabling the eternal Word of the Most High to become incarnate also welcomed in her heart the wonderful miracle of that human-divine birth; she meditated on it and paused to reflect on what God was working within her, in order to welcome the divine will in her life and respond to it. The mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God and Mary's motherhood is of such magnitude that it requires interiorization. It is not only something physical that God brought about within her, but something that demanded interiorization on the part of Mary, who endeavored to deepen her understanding of it, interpret its meaning, and comprehend its consequences and implications.

Thus, day after day, in the silence of ordinary life, Mary continued to treasure in her heart the sequence of marvelous events that she witnessed until the supreme test of the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection. Mary lived her life to the full, in her daily duties and in her role as a mother, but she knew how to reserve an inner space to reflect on the Word and will of God, on what was occurring within her and on the mysteries of the life of her Son.

In our time we are taken up with so many activities and duties, worries and problems; we often tend to fill all the spaces of the day without leaving a moment to pause, reflect, and nourish our spiritual life, our contact with God.

Mary teaches us how necessary it is to find in our busy day moments for silent recollection, to meditate on what the Lord wants to teach us, on how he is present and active in the world and in our life, to be able to stop for a moment and meditate. St. Augustine compares meditating on the mysteries of God to assimilating food. He uses a verb that recurs throughout the Christian tradition, "to ruminate"—that is, the mysteries of God should continually resonate within us so that they become familiar to us, guide our lives, and nourish us, as the food we need sustains us.

St. Bonaventure, moreover, with reference to the words of sacred Scripture, says that they "should always be ruminated upon so as to be able to gaze on them with ardent application of the soul."[1] To meditate, therefore, means to create within us an experience of recollection, of inner silence, in

order to reflect upon and assimilate the mysteries of our faith and what God is working within us, not merely on the things that come and go.

We may undertake this "rumination" in various ways. For example, we might choose a brief passage of sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of the Apostles, or a passage from a spiritual author that makes the reality of God more present in our day. We can also ask our confessor or spiritual director to recommend something.

By reading and reflecting on what we have read, dwelling on it, trying to understand what it is saying to us today, we open our spirit to what the Lord wants to tell us and teach us. The Holy Rosary is also a prayer of meditation: In repeating the Hail Mary, we are asked to think about and reflect on the mystery that we have just proclaimed. We can also reflect on some intense spiritual experience, or on words that have stayed with us when we were taking part in the Sunday Eucharist. So, you see, there are many ways to meditate and thereby to make contact with God and approach him and, in this way, to be journeying on towards heaven.

Dear friends, making time for God regularly is a fundamental element for spiritual growth. It will be the Lord himself who gives us the taste for his mysteries, his words, his presence and action; for feeling how beautiful it is when God speaks with us, he will enable us to understand more deeply what he expects of us. This, ultimately, is the very aim of meditation: to entrust ourselves increasingly to the hands of God, with trust and love, certain that, in the end, it is only by doing his will that we are truly happy.

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1. St. Bonaventure, *Coll. In Hex*, ed. Quaracchi, 1934, p. 218.

# Art and Prayer

Castel Gandolfo, August 31, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

In this period I have recalled several times the need for every Christian, in the midst of the many occupations that fill our days, to find time for God and for prayer. The Lord himself gives us many opportunities to remember him. Today I would like to reflect briefly on one of these channels that can lead to God and can also be of help in the encounter with him. It is the way of artistic expression, part of that "*via pulchritudinis*"—the "way of beauty"—of which I have spoken several times and whose deepest meaning must be recovered by men and women today.

It may have happened on some occasion that you paused before a sculpture, a painting, a few verses of a poem, or a piece of music that you found deeply moving and that gave you a sense of joy—a clear perception, that is—that what you beheld was not only matter, a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, a collection of letters, or an accumulation of sounds, but something greater, something that "speaks," that can touch the heart, communicate a message, and uplift the mind.

A work of art is a product of the creative capacity of the human being who, in questioning visible reality, seeks to discover its deep meaning and communicate it through the language of forms, color, and sound. Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible; it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite.

Indeed, art resembles a door opening to the infinite, to a beauty and a truth that go beyond the daily routine. A work of art can open the eyes of the mind and the heart, impelling us upward.

However, some artistic expressions in particular are real highways to God,

the supreme Beauty; indeed, they help us to grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith. We can see an example of this when we visit a Gothic cathedral—we are enraptured by the vertical lines that soar skywards and uplift our gaze and our spirit; we feel small yet at the same time long for fullness.…

Or upon entering a Romanesque church, we are spontaneously prompted to meditate and to pray. We perceive that these splendid buildings contain, as it were, the faith of generations. When we listen to a piece of sacred music that plucks at our heartstrings, our mind expands and turns naturally to God.

I remember a concert of music by Johann Sebastian Bach in Munich, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. At the end of the last passage, one of the *Cantatas*, I felt—not by reasoning but in the depths of my heart—that what I had heard had communicated truth to me, the truth of the supreme composer, and impelled me to thank God. The Lutheran bishop of Munich was next to me, and I said to him spontaneously: "In hearing this one understands: it is true; such strong faith is true, as well as the beauty that irresistibly expresses the presence of God's truth."

How many pictures or frescos, the fruits of an artist's faith, in their form, in their color, in their light, urge us to think of God and foster within us the desire to draw from the source of all beauty? What Marc Chagall, a great artist, wrote, remains profoundly true: that for centuries painters have dipped their paintbrush in that colored alphabet which is the Bible. Thus, how often artistic expression can bring us to remember God, to help us to pray, or even to convert our hearts!

Paul Claudel, a famous French poet, playwright, and diplomat, while he was listening in the Cathedral of Notre Dame to the singing of the Magnificat during Christmas Mass in 1886, he had a tangible experience of God's presence. He had not entered the church for reasons of faith but rather in order to seek arguments against Christians, but instead God's grace worked actively in his heart.

Dear friends, I ask you to rediscover the importance of this path also for prayer, for our living relationship with God. Towns and villages throughout the world contain treasures of art that express faith and beckon to us to return to our relationship with God. May our visits to places filled with art, then, not only be opportunities for cultural enrichment, but may they become above all moments of grace and incentives to strengthen our bond and our dialogue with the Lord so that—in switching from simple external reality to the more

profound reality it expresses—we may pause to contemplate the ray of beauty that strikes us to the quick, almost "wounds" us, and invites us to rise toward God.

I end with a prayer from Psalm 27: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and contemplate his temple" (v. 4).

Let us hope that the Lord will help us to contemplate his beauty, both in nature and in works of art, so that we, moved by the light that shines from his face, may be a light for our neighbor.

# Prayer and the Holy Family

Paul VI Audience Hall, December 28, 2011

**DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS,**

Today's meeting is taking place in the atmosphere of Christmas, imbued with deep joy at the birth of the Savior. We have just celebrated this mystery, the echo of which ripples through the liturgy of all these days. It is a mystery of light that all people in every era can relive with faith and prayer. It is through prayer itself that we become capable of drawing close to God with intimacy and depth.

Therefore, bearing in mind the theme of prayer that we have developed in these catecheses, I would therefore like to invite you to reflect today on the way that prayer was part of the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Indeed, the house of Nazareth is a school of prayer where one learns to listen, meditate on, and penetrate the profound meaning of the manifestation of the Son of God, following the example of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

The discourse of the Servant of God Paul VI during his visit to Nazareth is memorable. The Pope said that at the school of the Holy Family we come "to grasp how necessary it is to be spiritually disciplined, if one wishes to follow the teachings of the Gospel and to become a follower of Christ." He added: "The lesson of silence: may there return to us an appreciation of this stupendous and indispensable spiritual condition, deafened as we are by so much tumult, so much noise, so many voices of our chaotic and frenzied modern life. O silence of Nazareth, teach us recollection, reflection, and eagerness to heed the good inspirations and words of true teachers."[1]

We can draw various ideas for prayer and for our relationship with God and the Holy Family from the Gospel narratives of the infancy of Jesus. We can begin with the episode of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. St.

Luke tells us how, “when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses,” Mary and Joseph “brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22). Like every Jewish family that observed the law, Jesus’ parents went to the Temple to consecrate their firstborn son to God and make the sacrificial offering. Motivated by their fidelity to the precepts of the Law, they set out from Bethlehem and went to Jerusalem with Jesus who was only forty days old. Instead of a year-old lamb, they presented the offering of simple families—namely, two turtledoves. The Holy Family’s pilgrimage was one of faith, of the offering of gifts—a symbol of prayer—and of the encounter with the Lord whom Mary and Joseph already perceived in their Son Jesus.

Mary was a peerless model of contemplation of Christ. The face of the Son belonged to her in a special way because he had been knit together in her womb and had taken a human likeness from her. No one has contemplated Jesus as diligently as Mary. The gaze of her heart was already focused on him at the moment of the Annunciation, when she conceived him through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the following months she gradually became aware of his presence, until, on the day of his birth, her eyes could look with motherly tenderness upon the face of her son as she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger.

Memories of Jesus, imprinted on her mind and heart, marked every instant of Mary’s existence. She lived with her eyes fixed on Christ and cherished his every word. St. Luke says: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19); he thus describes Mary’s approach to the mystery of the Incarnation which was to extend throughout her life: keeping these things and pondering them in her heart. Luke is the evangelist who acquaints us with Mary’s heart, with her faith (see Lk 1:45), her hope, and her obedience (see Lk 1:38) and, especially, with her interiority and prayer (see Lk 1:46–56) and her free adherence to Christ (see Lk 1:55).

And all this proceeded from the gift of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her (see Lk 1:35), as he was to come down on the apostles in accordance with Christ’s promise (see Acts 1:8). This image of Mary that St. Luke gives us presents Our Lady as a model for every believer who cherishes and compares Jesus’ words with his actions—a comparison which always progresses in the knowledge of Jesus. After Bl. Pope John Paul II’s example,[2] we can say that the Rosary is modeled precisely on Mary, because it consists in contemplating the mysteries of Christ in spiritual union with the Mother of

the Lord.

Mary's ability to live by God's gaze is, so to speak, contagious. The first to experience this was St. Joseph. His humble and sincere love for his betrothed and his decision to join his life to Mary's attracted and introduced him, "a just man" (Mt 1:19), to a special intimacy with God. Indeed, with Mary and later, especially with Jesus, he began a new way of relating to God, accepting him in his life, entering his project of salvation, and doing his will. After trustfully complying with the angel's instructions—"Do not fear to take Mary your wife" (Mt 1:20)—he took Mary and shared his life with her; he truly gave the whole of himself to Mary and to Jesus, and this led him to perfect his response to the vocation he had received.

As we know, the Gospels have not recorded any of Joseph's words: his is a silent, faithful, patient, and hardworking presence. We may imagine that he, too, like his wife and in close harmony with her, lived the years of Jesus' childhood and adolescence savoring, as it were, his presence in their family.

Joseph fulfilled every aspect of his paternal role. He, together with Mary, must certainly have taught Jesus to pray. In particular, Joseph himself must have taken Jesus to the synagogue for the rites of the Sabbath, as well as to Jerusalem for the great feasts of the people of Israel. Joseph, in accordance with the Jewish tradition, would have led the prayers at home both every day —in the morning, in the evening, at meals—and on the principal religious feasts. In the rhythm of the days he spent at Nazareth, in the simple home and in Joseph's workshop, Jesus learned to alternate prayer and work, as well as to offer God his labor in earning the bread the family needed.

Lastly, there is another episode that sees the Holy Family of Nazareth gathered together in an event of prayer. When Jesus was twelve years old, he went with his parents to the Temple of Jerusalem. This episode fits into the context of pilgrimage, as St. Luke stresses: "His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom" (Lk 2:41–42).

Pilgrimage is an expression of religious devotion that is nourished by and, at the same time, nourishes prayer. Here, it is the Passover pilgrimage, and the Evangelist points out to us that the family of Jesus made this pilgrimage every year in order to take part in the rites in the Holy City. Jewish families, like Christian families, pray in the intimacy of the home, but they also pray together with the community, recognizing that they belong to the People of God, journeying on together. The pilgrimage expresses exactly this state of

the people of God on the move. Easter is the center and culmination of all this, and it involves both the family dimension and liturgical and public worship.

In the episode of the twelve-year-old Jesus, the first words of Jesus are also recorded: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49). After three days spent looking for him, his parents found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions (see Lk 2:46). His answer to the question of why he had done this to his father and mother was that he had only done what the Son should do, that is, to be with his Father.

Thus he showed who is the true Father, what is the true home; he had done nothing unusual or disobedient. He had stayed where the Son ought to be—that is, with the Father— and he stressed who his Father was.

The term "Father" therefore dominates the tone of this answer, and the Christological mystery appears in its entirety. Hence, this word unlocks the mystery; it is the key to the mystery of Christ, who is the Son, and also the key to our mystery as Christians who are sons and daughters in the Son. At the same time, Jesus teaches us to be children by being with the Father in prayer. The Christological mystery, the mystery of Christian existence, is closely linked to and founded on prayer. Jesus was one day to teach his disciples to pray, telling them: "When you pray, say 'Father.'" And, naturally, do not just say the word—say it with your life; learn to say it meaningfully with your life. Say "Father," and in this way you will be true sons in the Son, true Christians.

It is important at this point, when Jesus was still fully integrated in the life of the family of Nazareth, to note the resonance that hearing this word "Father" on Jesus' lips must have had in the hearts of Mary and Joseph. It is also important to reveal—to emphasize—who the Father is, and, with his awareness, to hear this word on the lips of the only begotten Son who, for this very reason, chose to stay on for three days in the Temple, which is the "Father's house."

We may imagine that, from this time on, the life of the Holy Family must have been even more filled with prayer, since from the heart of Jesus the boy —then an adolescent and a young man—this deep meaning of the relationship with God the Father would not cease to spread and to be echoed in the hearts of Mary and Joseph.

This episode shows us the real situation: the atmosphere of being with the

Father. So it was that the family of Nazareth became the first model of the Church—in the Church, around the presence of Jesus and through his mediation, everyone experiences the filial relationship with God the Father which also transforms interpersonal, human relationships.

Dear friends, because of these different aspects that I have outlined briefly in the light of the Gospel, the Holy Family is the icon of the domestic Church, called to pray together. The family is the domestic Church and must be the first school of prayer. It is in the family that children, from the earliest age, can learn to perceive the meaning of God; thanks to the teaching and example of their parents, they can live in an atmosphere marked by God's presence. An authentically Christian education cannot dispense with the experience of prayer. If one does not learn how to pray in the family, it will be difficult later to bridge this gap. And so I would like to address to you the invitation to pray together as a family at the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth and thereby really become one heart and soul—a true family.

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1. *Reflections at Nazareth*, January 5, 1964.
2. See Apostolic Letter *Rosarium virginis mariae.*