PRAYER AT THE HEART OF THE MISSION

POPE FRANCIS

CATECHESIS ON PRAYER



Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network

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Guidelines for Deepening Prayer with This Material

We recommend starting with a slow, general reading of the entire text to familiarize yourself with the material. Then, you can also use it as "prayer material," letting the words of the Holy Father guide you toward a personal or communal encounter with the Lord.

To help with this, we suggest the following steps:

1. Preparing for Prayer

Prayer requires preparation time to gradually enter the right mindset and atmosphere. We invite you to first pay attention to your initial disposition, which sets the stage for the encounter. Your body, sensory perceptions, thoughts, feelings, breathing, and so on can either help or hinder depending on how you position yourself for prayer.

Prepare Yourself Both Externally and Internally

We suggest adopting a comfortable posture that helps you focus on what you seek. Take deep breaths, relax, quiet your thoughts, and don't fight distractions; instead, let them pass by, saying, "I'll deal with you later." Become present to yourself so that you can be more present to the Lord. Breathe slowly and deeply, allowing the air to fill your lungs. Take note of how you're feeling... Ask yourself: How am I coming to this encounter? What am I feeling?

Don't rush; take your time to prepare. This is important. If it helps, you can play music, close your eyes, focus on an image, or light a candle. Pay attention to whatever helps you create the right atmosphere, preparing both your space and yourself for prayer.

Slowly Read the Material

Part of this preparation involves becoming familiar with the material you'll pray with. This means understanding the topic and reading it at least once. Once you've prepared your space and yourself, you can read the text slowly to get to know it. You might underline or highlight anything that stands out to you. This first reading is just a preparatory step to help you go deeper later.

Ask for the Grace You Wish to Receive

The moment of prayer will be shaped by your intention. Jesus himself tells us: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Mt 7:7-8). We suggest starting with a prayer like this, which you can adapt or change according to the desires of your heart: "Lord, grant me the grace to feel the importance of prayer in my life. Teach me how to pray." You can repeat this request as often as you feel it in your heart. The intention helps guide us, so you can return to it and repeat it whenever you get distracted during prayer.

2. Engaging in Prayer

Meditate and Draw Inner Meaning
Take the text you'll pray with and read it slowly and attentively. Go back to the phrases you underlined or highlighted and let them resonate in your heart. In the silence, the words will echo... Repeat the reading or say it aloud as many times as needed until you find meaning and delight in them. Discover the word that is good news for you at this moment, the one that stirs an image, a memory, or a desire that moves you. Don't move on to something else until you feel connected to the text you're praying with. If you're in a group, you can share aloud the word or phrase that touches your heart. If you're praying alone, it can help to write down what you're experiencing in your journal.

Freely Converse with the Lord
Before finishing, take a quiet moment to talk with the Lord about what has impacted and moved your heart. Share your desires openly; give thanks, ask, and reflect... Place your life in His hands, speaking to Him as a friend would to another friend. You can close this moment with the Prayer of Offering or another prayer, such as the Our Father or Hail Mary.

3. Reflecting on the Prayer

It's important to reflect on how the prayer went. This means reviewing or examining it to identify its fruits. Reflecting on prayer is not about "judging" whether it went well or poorly but about discovering what happened during it. Were you able to pray? Were you distracted? Did you discover any new insights? Did you feel nothing, or did time simply pass?

Learning from the Experience
All inner movements during prayer "tell us something"; they carry a message we can learn from. That's why it's so important to recognize what happened during prayer and discover what the Lord is telling us through what we experienced. Reflecting on prayer is itself a form of prayer—a moment of encounter with the Lord. Therefore, it's not just an act of reason but a moment of the heart illuminated by reason.

Questions to Guide This Reflection
Were you able to pray with focus? Observe your level of concentration, distractions, or moments of dispersion. Without judgment, simply note how the prayer went. Write down anything you want to remember.

What overall feeling does the prayer leave you with? Joy, sadness, surprise, hope. Try to identify at least one or two.

Where does this feeling lead you? Desires, resolutions, fears, or paralysis.

What thoughts, ideas, or reflections arose within you?

What grace did you receive in the prayer? Insights, understandings, new revelations, etc.

How does what you discovered in this prayer relate to your daily life? Write down what you want to remember and the meaning it holds for you.

When you begin your next prayer session with the texts, you can revisit this reflection and start from it, recalling what you experienced with the Lord in your last encounter and gradually discovering how He is guiding you in prayer. If you have the opportunity, share the fruits you recognize with someone who can accompany you spiritually.

Catechesis on prayer - 1. The mystery of prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we begin a new series of catecheses on the theme of prayer. Prayer is the breath of faith; it is its most proper expression. Like a cry that issues from the heart of those who believe and entrust themselves to God. Let us think about the story of Bartimaeus, a character in the Gospel (cf. Mk 10:46-52), and I confess that for me he is the most likeable of all. He was blind and sat begging for alms by the roadside on the periphery of his city, Jericho. He is not an anonymous character. He has a face and a name: Bartimaeus, that is, "son of Timaeus". One day he heard that Jesus would be passing through there. In fact, Jericho was a crossroads of people, continually criss-crossed by pilgrims and tradesmen. Thus, Bartimaeus positioned himself: he would have done anything possible to meet Jesus. So many people did the same. Let us recall Zacchaeus who climbed up the tree. Many wanted to see Jesus; he did too. In this way the man enters the Gospels as a voice that loudly cries out. He cannot see. He does not know whether Jesus is near or far away but he hears him. He understands this from the crowd which, at a certain point, grows and comes closer.... But he is completely alone and no one is concerned about him. And what does Bartimaeus do? He cries out. And he cries out and continues to cry out. He uses the only weapon he possesses: his voice. He begins to shout: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 47). And he continues to cry out in this manner. His repeated cries are a nuisance. They do not seem polite and many people scold him, telling him to be quiet: "But be polite; do not do this". However, Bartimaeus does not keep silent but rather cries out even more loudly: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 47): That beautiful stubbornness of those who seek a grace and knock and knock on the door of God's heart. He cries out; he knocks. That expression: "Son of David", is very important. It means "the Messiah" — he professes the Messiah. It is a profession of faith that emerges from the mouth of that man who was despised by all. And Jesus listens to his cry. Bartimaeus' prayer touches his heart, God's heart, and the doors of salvation open up for him. Jesus calls for him. He jumps to his feet and those who had first told him to be quiet, now lead him to the Master. Jesus speaks to him. He asks him to express his desire — this is important — and then the cry becomes a request: "that I may see again, Lord!" (cf. v. 51).

Jesus says to him: "Go your way; your faith has made you well" (v. 52). He recognises in that poor, defenceless and despised man, all the power of his faith, which attracts the mercy and the power of God. Faith is having two hands raised up, a voice that cries out to implore the gift of salvation. The Catechism states that "humility is the foundation of prayer" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2559). Prayer is born of the earth, of the humus from which "humble", "humility" derive. It comes from our precarious state, from our continuous thirst for God (cf. ibid., 2560-2561). Faith, as we have seen with Bartimaeus, is a cry. Lack of faith is the suppression of that cry. That attitude that the people had, in making him keep quiet: they were not people of faith, whereas he was. To suppress that cry is a type of omertà (code of silence). Faith is a protest against a pitiful condition the cause of which we do not understand. Lack of faith is to limit ourselves to endure a

situation to which we have become accustomed. Faith is the hope of being saved. Lack of faith is becoming accustomed to the evil that oppresses us and continuing in that way.

Dear brothers and sisters, we begin this series of catecheses with Bartimaeus' cry because perhaps everything is already written in someone like him. Bartimaeus is a persevering man. He was surrounded by people who explained that imploring was useless, that it was clamouring without receiving a reply, that it was noise that was only bothersome, and thus please stop crying out. But he did not remain in silence. And in the end he obtained what he wanted.

Greater than any discussion to the contrary, there is a voice in mankind's heart that invokes. We all have this voice within. A voice that comes forth spontaneously without anyone commanding it, a voice that asks itself about the meaning of our journey on earth, especially when we find ourselves in darkness: "Jesus, have mercy on me! Jesus have mercy on me!". This is a beautiful prayer.

But are these words perhaps not chiselled in all of creation? Everything invokes and implores so that the mystery of mercy may be definitively fulfilled. Not only Christians pray; they share their cry of prayer with all men and women. But the horizon can be further widened: Paul states that all of creation "has been groaning in travail together until now" (Rom 8:22). Artists are often the interpreters of this silent cry of creation that is found in every creature and emerges above all in the heart of men and women, because they are "beggars before God" (ccc, 2559). It is a beautiful definition of mankind: "beggars before God". Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer - 2. The prayer of a Christian

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we take our second step in the journey of catecheses on prayer that we began last week.

Prayer belongs to everyone: to men and women of every religion, and probably also to those who profess none. Prayer arises in our innermost self, in that interior place that spiritual authors call "heart" (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2562-2563). Therefore, it is not something peripheral that prays within us, it is not some secondary and marginal ability that we have, but rather it is our most intimate mystery. It is this mystery that prays. Feelings pray, but one cannot say that prayer is only feeling. Intelligence prays, but praying is not simply an intellectual act. The body prays, but one can speak with God even having the most serious disability. Thus the entire man prays if he prays with his "heart".

Prayer is an impulse; it is an invocation that goes beyond ourselves: something that is born in the intimacy of our person and extends, because it senses the nostalgia of an encounter. That nostalgia which is more than a need, more than a necessity: it is a path. Prayer is the voice of an "I" that fumbles, that proceeds unsteadily in search of a "You". The encounter between the "I" and the "You" cannot occur via calculators: it is a human encounter and we often proceed unsteadily in order to find the "You" that my "I" is seeking.

Instead, the prayer of a Christian arises from a revelation: the "You" did not remain shrouded in mystery, but rather entered into a relationship with us. Christianity is the religion that continually celebrates God's "manifestation", that is, his epiphany. The first feasts of the liturgical year are the celebration of this God who does not remain hidden, but rather offers his friendship to mankind. God reveals his glory in the poverty of Bethlehem, in the contemplation of the Magi, in the baptism in the River Jordan, in the miracle of the wedding at Cana. The Gospel of John concludes the great hymn of the Prologue with a concise affirmation,: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:18). It was Jesus who revealed God to us.

The prayer of a Christian enters into a relationship with the God of the most tender face, who does not wish to instill any fear in men and women. This is the first characteristic of Christian prayer. While men and women had always been accustomed to drawing near to God somewhat intimidated, somewhat fearful of this fascinating and tremendous mystery, while they had been accustomed to worshiping him with a servile attitude, similar to that of a vassal who does not wish to disrespect his lord, Christians instead address him by daring to call him intimately with the name, "Father". Indeed, Jesus uses the other word: "Dad".

Christianity has banned all "feudal" relationships from the bond with God. In the heritage of our faith there are no expressions such as "subjection", "slavery" or "servitude"; but rather, words like "covenant", "friendship", "promise", "communion", "closeness". In his long farewell discourse to his disciples, Jesus says this: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what

his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (Jn 15:15-16). But this is a blank cheque: "whatever you ask the Father in my name, I will give to you"!

God is a friend, an ally, a spouse. In prayer one can establish an intimate relationship with him, so much so that in the "Our Father" Jesus taught us to address to him a series of questions. We can ask God everything, everything; explain everything, recount everything. It does not matter if we feel flawed in our relationship with God: we are not good friends, we are not grateful children, we are not faithful spouses. He continues to love us. It is what Jesus shows definitively at the Last Supper when he says: "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20).

With that gesture in the Upper Room, Jesus foreshadows the mystery of the Cross. God is a faithful ally: if men and women cease to love him, he nevertheless continues to love, even if love leads him to Calvary. God is always close to our heart's door and he waits for us to open it to him. And sometimes he knocks on the heart, but he is not intrusive: he waits. God's patience with us is the patience of a father, of one who loves us dearly. I would say it is the combined patience of a father and a mother. Always close to our heart, and when he knocks he does so with tenderness and with much love.

Let us all try to pray this way, by entering the mystery of the Covenant. To place ourselves through prayer into the merciful arms of God, to feel enveloped by that mystery of happiness which is Trinitarian life, to feel like guests who were not worthy of so much honour. And to repeat to God in the wonder of prayer: how can you know only love? He does not know hatred. He is hated but he does not know hatred. He knows only love. This is the God to whom we pray. This is the incandescent core of all Christian prayer. The God of love, our Father who waits for us and accompanies us.

Catechesis on prayer - 3. The mystery of Creation

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on prayer, by meditating on the mystery of Creation. Life, the simple fact that we exist, opens mankind's heart to prayer.

The first page of the Bible resembles a great hymn of thanksgiving. The narrative of Creation has a rhythm with refrains, where the goodness and beauty of every living thing is continually emphasized. With his word, God calls to life, and every thing comes into existence. With his word, he separates life from darkness, alternates day and night, interchanges the seasons, opens a palette of colours with the variety of plants and animals. In this overflowing forest that quickly vanquishes the chaos, the last one to appear is man. And this appearance inspires an extreme exultation that amplifies his satisfaction and joy: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen 1:31). Very good, but also beautiful: the beauty of all creation can be seen!

The beauty and mystery of Creation create in the human heart the first impulse that evokes prayer (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2566). The eighth Psalm which we heard earlier states: “When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?” (vv. 3-4). The one praying contemplates the mystery of the life around him; he sees the starry sky that lies above him — and that astrophysics shows us today in all its immensity — and asks himself what loving plan must there be behind such ponderous work!.... And, in this boundless expanse, what is man? ‘Almost nothing’, another Psalm states (cf. 89:48): a being that is born, a being that dies, an extremely fragile creature. Yet, in all the universe, the human being is the only creature aware of the great profusion of beauty. A small being who is born, who dies; he is here today and gone tomorrow. He is the only one who is aware of this beauty. We are aware of this beauty!

Mankind’s prayer is closely linked to the sentiment of wonder. The greatness of man is infinitesimal when compared to the dimensions of the universe. His greatest conquests seem quite small... However man is not nothing. In prayer a sentiment of mercy is powerfully confirmed. Nothing exists by chance: the secret of the universe lies in a benevolent gaze that someone meets in our eyes. The Psalm states that we are made little less than God; we are crowned with glory and honour (cf. 8:6). The relationship with God is man's greatness, his enthronement. By nature we are almost nothing, small, but by vocation, by calling, we are the children of the great King!

It is an experience that many of us have had. If life's events, with all their bitterness, sometimes risk choking the gift of prayer that is within us, it is enough to contemplate a starry sky, a sunset, a flower..., in order to rekindle a spark of thanksgiving. This experience is perhaps the basis of the first page of the Bible.

The people of Israel were not experiencing happy days when the great biblical narrative of Creation was written. An enemy power had occupied their land; many had been deported, and they now found themselves slaves in Mesopotamia. There was no more homeland, nor temple, nor social and religious life, nothing.

Yet, precisely in starting from the great narrative of Creation, someone began to find reasons for thanksgiving, to praise God for his or her existence. Prayer is the first strength of hope. You pray and hope grows, it moves forward. I would say that prayer opens the door to hope. There is hope but I open the door with my prayer. Because people of prayer safeguard basic truths; they are the ones who repeat, first and foremost to themselves and then to all the others, that this life, despite all its toils and trials, despite its difficult days, is full of a grace that is awe inspiring. And as such it must always be defended and protected.

Men and women who pray know that hope is stronger than discouragement. They believe that love is more powerful than death, and that surely one day it will triumph, even if in times and ways that we do not understand. Men and women of prayer bear gleaming reflections of light on their faces: because, the sun does not stop illuminating them, even in the darkest of days. Prayer illuminates you: it illuminates the souls, it illuminates the heart and it illuminates the face. Even in the darkest times, even in times of greatest suffering.

We are all bearers of joy. Have you considered this? That you are bearers of joy? Or do you prefer to bring bad news, things that sadden? We are capable of bearing joy. This life is the gift that God gave us: and it is too short to consume it in sadness, in bitterness. Let us praise God, happy to simply exist. Let us look at the universe, let us look at beauty and let us also look at our crosses and say: 'You exist, you made us like this, for you'. It is necessary to feel that unrest of the heart that leads to thanking and praising God. We are children of the great King, of the Creator, capable of reading his signature in all of Creation. We are not safeguarding that creation today, but that creation holds the signature of God who made it out of love. May the Lord make us understand this ever more deeply and lead us to say "thank you"; and that "thank you" is a beautiful prayer.

Catechesis on prayer - 4. The prayer of the righteous

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We are dedicating today's catechesis to the prayer of the righteous.

God's plan for humanity is good, but in our daily affairs we experience the presence of evil. It is a daily experience. The first chapters of the Book of Genesis describe the progressive expansion of sin in human affairs. Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 3:1-7) doubt God's good intentions; they think they are dealing with an envious God who impedes their happiness. This is where their rebellion comes from: they no longer believe in a generous Creator who desires their happiness. Yielding to the temptation of evil, their hearts are overcome by a delirium of omnipotence: 'if we eat the fruit from the tree we will become like God' (cf. v. 5). And this is temptation: this is ambition that enters hearts. But their experience goes in the opposite direction: their eyes are opened and they discover they are naked (cf. v. 7), with nothing. Do not forget this: the tempter is a bad payer, he does not pay well.

Evil becomes even more disruptive with the second human generation, it is stronger: it is the story of Cain and Abel (cf. Gen 4:1-16). Cain is envious of his brother; there is the seed of envy; even though he is the first born, he sees Abel as a rival, one who undermines his primacy. Evil appears in his heart and Cain is unable to control it. Evil begins to enter his heart: his thoughts are always turned to looking badly upon the other, with suspicion. And this occurs with his thoughts too: “This one is evil, he will hurt me”. And this thought enters his heart ….And thus the story of the first brotherhood ends in murder. I think of human fraternity today... war everywhere.

In Cain's descendants, arts and crafts develop, but violence develops too, expressed by the sinister canticle of Lamech, which sounds like a hymn of revenge: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me, if Cain is avenged seven times, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold” (4:23-24). Vengeance: “You did this, you will pay”. But the judge does not say this, I do. And I make myself the judge of the situation. And in this way evil spreads like wildfire, until it occupies the entire picture: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5). The great frescos of the universal flood (ch. 6-7) and of the tower of Babel (ch. 11) reveal that there is need of a new beginning, like a new creation, which will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Yet, in these first pages of the Bible, another, less striking, much more humble and pious story is also written, which represents the release of hope. While almost everyone behaves in a wicked manner, making hatred and conquest the great engine of human affairs, there are people who are capable of praying to God with sincerity, capable of writing mankind's destiny in a different way. Abel offers God the firstling sacrifice. After his death, Adam and Eve had a third son, Seth, to whom Enosh (which means 'mortal') was born, and it is stated: “At that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord”. (4:26). Then Enoch appears, a person who “walked with God” and was taken to heaven (cf. 5:22, 24). And lastly there is the story of Noah, a righteous man who “walked with God” (6:9), before whom God withheld his intention to blot out mankind (cf. 6:7-8).

While reading these narratives, one has the impression that prayer is a bulwark; it is man's refuge before the flood wave of evil that grows in the world. On closer inspection, we also pray to be saved from ourselves. It is important to pray: “Lord, please, save me from myself, from my ambitions, from my passions”. The prayerful of the first pages of the Bible are peace workers: indeed, when prayer is authentic, it frees one from the instincts of violence and it is a gaze directed to God, that he may return to take care of the heart of mankind. We read in the Catechism: “This kind of prayer is lived by many righteous people in all religions” (ccc, 2569). Prayer cultivates flowerbeds of rebirth in places where man's hatred has only been able to expand the desert. And prayer is powerful because it attracts the power of God and the power of God always gives life: always. He is the God of life and he causes rebirth.

This is why God's lordship passes through this chain of men and women, often misunderstood or marginalized in the world. But the world lives and grows thanks to the power of God whom these servants attract with their prayer. It is not at all a boisterous chain, and rarely makes headlines, yet it is so important to restoring trust to the world!

I remember the story of one man: an important government leader not from these days, but from the past. An atheist who had no religious feeling in his heart, but as a child he heard his grandmother pray, and this remained in his heart. And at a very difficult time in his life, that memory returned to his heart and said: “But my grandmother used to pray...”. He thus began to pray with his grandmother’s formulas, and there he found Jesus. Prayer is always a chain of life: many men and women who pray sow life.

Prayer sows life, small prayers: this is why it is so important to teach children to pray. I suffer when I encounter children who do not know how to make the sign of the Cross. They have to be taught to make the sign of the Cross properly, because it is the first prayer. Then perhaps they may forget, take another path, but the first prayers learned as a child remain in the heart, because they are a seed of life, the seed of dialogue with God.

The journey of God in the history of God is conveyed through them: it has passed through a “remainder” of humanity that has not conformed to the law of the fittest, but has asked God to perform his miracles, and above all to transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (cf. Ez 36:26). And this helps prayer: because prayer opens the door to God, turning our often stony hearts into a human heart. And this demands a lot of humanity, and with humanity one can pray well.

Catechesis on prayer - 5. The prayer of Abraham

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

There is a voice that suddenly resonates in Abraham's life. A voice that invites him to undertake a journey that he knows is absurd: a voice that spurs him to uproot himself from his homeland, from his family roots, in order to move toward a new, different future. And it is all based on a promise, in which he needs only to have trust. And to have trust in a promise is not easy. It takes courage. And Abraham had trust.

The Bible is silent on the steps of the first patriarch. The logic of things leaves us to presume that he had worshipped other divinities; perhaps he was a wise man, accustomed to observing the heavens and the stars. The Lord, in fact, promised him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars that speckle the sky.

And Abraham sets out. He listens to the voice of God and trusts in His word. This is important: he trusts the Word of God. And with this departure of his, a new way of understanding the relationship with God arose. It is for this reason that the patriarch Abraham is present in the great Jewish, Christian and Islamic spiritual traditions as the perfect man of God, capable of being submissive to Him, even when His will proves arduous, if not completely incomprehensible.

Abraham is thus the man of the Word. When God speaks, man becomes the receptor of that Word and his life the place in which it seeks to become flesh. This is a great novelty in man's religious journey: the life of a believer begins to be understood as a vocation, thus as a calling, as the place where a promise is fulfilled; and he moves in the world not so much under the weight of an enigma, but with the power of that promise, which one day will be fulfilled. And Abraham believed God's promise. He believed and he set out without knowing where he was going — thus says the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. 11:8). But he had trust.

In reading the Book of Genesis, we discover that Abraham experienced prayer in constant faithfulness to that Word, which periodically appeared along his path. In short, we could say that in Abraham's life faith becomes history. Faith becomes history. Indeed Abraham, with his life, with his example teaches us this path, this path in which faith becomes history. God is no longer seen only in cosmic phenomena, as a distant God, who can instill fear. The God of Abraham becomes "my God", the God of my personal history, who guides my steps, who does not abandon me; the God of my days, companion in my adventures; the God Providence. I ask myself and I ask you: do we have this experience with God? "My God", the God who accompanies me, the God of my personal history, the God who guides my steps, who does not abandon me, the God of my days? Do we have this experience? Let us think about this a bit.

Abraham's experience is also attested to in one of the most original texts of the history of spirituality: the Memorial of Blaise Pascal. It begins like this: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants. Certitude, certitude; feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ". This memorial, written on a small parchment and found after his death, sewn inside the

philosopher's clothing, expresses not an intellectual reflection that a wise man like him can conceive of God, but the living, experienced sense of His presence. Pascal even noted the precise instant in which he felt that reality, having finally encountered it: the evening of 23 November 1654. It is not the abstract God or the cosmic God, no. He is the God of a person, of a calling, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God who is certainty, who is feeling, who is joy.

"Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds: a man of silence, he constructs an altar to the Lord at each stage of his journey" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2570). Abraham does not build a temple, but scatters the path of stones that recall God's passage. A surprising God, as when He pays a visit in the form of three guests, whom Abraham and Sarah welcomed with care, and the three announce the birth of their son Isaac (cf. Gen 18:1-15). Abraham was 100 years old and his wife was more or less 90. And they believed, they trusted God. And Sarah, his wife, conceived. At that age! This is the God of Abraham, our God who accompanies us.

Thus, Abraham becomes familiar with God, even able to argue with Him, but ever faithful. He speaks with God and argues. Up to the supreme test, when God asks him to sacrifice his very son Isaac, the son of his elder years, his sole heir. Here Abraham lives faith as a tragedy, as a groping walk in the night, under a sky that, this time, is starless. And many times this also happens to us, to walk in the dark but with faith. God himself will halt Abraham's hand, already prepared to strike, because He saw his willingness truly complete (cf. Gen 22:1-19).

Brothers and sisters, let us learn from Abraham; let us learn how to pray with faith: to listen to the Lord, to walk, to dialogue, up to arguing. Let us not be afraid to argue with God! I will even say something that may seem like heresy. Many times I have heard people say to me: "You know, this happened to me and I became very angry with God" — "You had the courage to be angry at God?" — "Yes, I got angry" — "But this is a form of prayer". Because only a son or daughter is capable of being angry at their dad and then encounter him again. Let us learn from Abraham to pray with faith, to dialogue and to argue, but always willing to accept the Word of God and to put it into practice. With God, let us learn to speak like a child with his dad: to listen to him, to reply, to argue. But transparent like a child with his dad. This is how Abraham teaches us to pray. Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer - 6. The prayer of Jacob

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us continue with our catechesis on the subject of prayer. Through the occurrences of men and women from a far-off time, the Book of Genesis tells us stories in which we can reflect our lives. In the Patriarch cycle, we also find the story of a man who had turned shrewdness into his best talent: Jacob. The biblical account tells us about the difficult relationship Jacob had with his brother Esau. Ever since childhood, there was a rivalry between them, which was never overcome later on. Jacob is the second-born son — they were twins — but through deceit he manages to obtain the blessing and birthright of their father Isaac (cf. Gen 25:19-34). It is only the first in a long series of ploys of which this unscrupulous man is capable. Even the name "Jacob" means someone who is cunning in his movements.

Forced to flee far from his brother, he seems to succeed in every undertaking in his life. He is adept at business: he greatly enriches himself, becoming the owner of an enormous flock. With tenacity and patience he manages to marry Laban's most beautiful daughter, with whom he is truly in love. Jacob — as we would say in modern terms — is a "self-made" man; with his ingenuity, his cunning, he manages to obtain everything he wants. But he lacks something. He lacks a living relationship with his own roots.

And one day he hears the call of home, of his ancient homeland, where his brother Esau, with whom he has always had a terrible relationship, still lives. Jacob sets out, undertaking a long journey with a caravan of many people and animals, until he reaches the final leg, the Jabbok stream. Here the Book of Genesis offers us a memorable page (cf. 32:23-33). It recounts that after having all his people and all the livestock — which was numerous — cross the stream, the patriarch remains alone on the foreign river bank. And he ponders: What awaits him the following day? What attitude will his brother Esau, whose birthright he had stolen, assume? Jacob's mind is a whirlwind of thoughts.... And, as it is growing dark, a stranger suddenly grabs him and begins to wrestle with him. The Catechism explains: "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).

Jacob wrestles the entire night, never letting go of his adversary. In the end he is defeated, his sciatic nerve is struck by his opponent, and thereafter he will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. That mysterious wrestler asks the patriarch for his name and tells him: "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen 32:28). As if to say: you will never be the man who walks this way, but forthright. He changes his name, he changes his life, he changes his attitude. You will be called Israel. Then Jacob also asks the other: "Tell me, I pray, your name". The other does not reveal it to him, but blesses him instead. Then Jacob understands he has encountered God "face to face" (vv. 29-30).

Wrestling with God: a metaphor for prayer. At other times Jacob had revealed himself capable of dialoguing with God, of sensing him as a friendly and close presence. But that night, through a

lengthy struggle that nearly makes him succumb, the patriarch emerges changed. A change of name, a change in his way of life and a change in personality: he emerges changed. For once he is no longer master of the situation — his cunning is of no use to him — he is no longer a strategic and calculating man. God returns him to his truth as a mortal man who trembles and fears, because in the struggle, Jacob was afraid. For once Jacob has nothing but his frailty and powerlessness, and also his sins, to present to God. And it is this Jacob who receives God's blessing, with which he limps into the promised land: vulnerable and wounded, but with a new heart. Once I heard an elderly man — a good man, a good Christian, but a sinner who had great trust in God — who said: "God will help me; he will not leave me alone. I will enter Heaven; limping, but I will enter". At first, Jacob was a self-assured man; he trusted in his own shrewdness. He was a man who was impervious to grace, resistant to mercy; he did not know what mercy was. "Here I am, I am in command!". He did not think he needed mercy. But God saved what had been lost. He made him understand that he was limited, that he was a sinner who needed mercy, and He saved him.

We all have an appointment with God in the night, in the night of our life, in the many nights of our life: dark moments, moments of sin, moments of disorientation. There is an appointment there with God, always. He will surprise us at the moment we do not expect him, when we find ourselves truly alone. That same night, struggling against the unknown, we will realize that we are only poor men and women — "poor things", I dare say — but right then, in that moment in which we feel we are "poor things", we need not fear: because God will give us a new name, which contains the meaning of our entire life; he will change our heart and will offer us the blessing reserved to those who have allowed themselves to be changed by him. This is a beautiful invitation to allow ourselves to be changed by God. He knows how to do so, because he knows each one of us. Each of us can say, "Lord, you know me". "Lord, you know me. Change me".

Catechesis on prayer - 7. The prayer of Moses

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In our itinerary on the theme of prayer, we are realizing that God never liked to deal with those who prayed the 'easy' way'. And Moses was not a 'weak' conversationalist either, from the very first day of his vocation.

When God called him, Moses was, in human terms, 'a failure'. The Book of Exodus portrays him in the land of Midian as a fugitive. As a young man he had felt compassion for his people, and had aligned himself in defense of the oppressed. But he soon discovered that, despite his good intentions, it was not justice, but violence that flowed from his hands. Thus his dreams of glory were shattered: Moses was no longer a promising official, destined to rise rapidly in his career, but rather one who gambled away opportunities, and now grazed a flock that was not even his own. And it was precisely in the silence of the Midian desert that God summoned Moses to the revelation of the burning bush: "'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (Ex 3:6).

Moses resists God who speaks, who invites him to take care of the people of Israel once more, with his fears and his objections: he is not worthy of that mission, he does not know God's name, he will not be believed by the Israelites, he has a stammering tongue ... so many objections. The word that issues most frequently from Moses' lips, in every prayer he addresses to God, is the question: 'Why?' Why have you sent me? Why do you want to free this people? Why? In the Pentateuch, there is even a dramatic passage where God reproaches Moses for his lack of trust, a lack that will prevent him from entering the promised land (cf. Num 20:12).

With these fears, with this often wavering heart, how can Moses pray? Indeed, Moses appears human like us. And this happens to us too: when we have doubts, how can we pray? We do not feel like praying. And it is because of this, his weakness, as well as his strength, that we are impressed. Entrusted by God to transmit the Law to his people, founder of divine worship, mediator of the loftiest mysteries, he will not for this reason cease to maintain close bonds of solidarity with his people, especially in the hour of temptation and sin. He is always attached to his people. Moses never forgets his people. And this is a great characteristic of pastors: not forgetting the people, not forgetting one's roots. It is what Paul says to his beloved young Bishop Timothy: "Remember your mother and your grandmother, your roots, your people". Moses is so friendly with God that he can speak with Him face to face (cf. Ex 33:11); and he will remain so friendly with the people that he feels mercy for their sins, for their temptations, for the sudden nostalgia that the exiles feel for the past, recalling when they were in Egypt.

Moses does not reject God, but nor does he reject his people. He is faithful to his flesh and blood, he is faithful to God's voice. Moses is not therefore an authoritarian and despotic leader; the Book of Numbers defines him rather as "very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). Despite his privileged status, Moses never ceases to belong to the ranks of the

poor in spirit who live by trusting in God as the viaticum of their journey. He is a man of his people.

Thus, the manner of prayer most proper to Moses is through intercession (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2574). His faith in God is completely at one with the sense of fatherhood he feels toward his people. Scripture habitually portrays him with his hands outstretched toward God, as if to form with his own person a bridge between heaven and earth. Even in the most difficult moments, even on the day when the people repudiate God and Moses himself as leader and make themselves a golden calf, Moses does not feel inclined to set his people aside. They are my people. They are your people. They are my people. He does not reject God nor his people. And he says to God: "this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Ex 32:31-32). Moses does not barter his people. He is the bridge; he is the intercessor. Both of them, the people and God, and he is in the middle. He does not sell out his people to advance his career. He does not climb the ladder; he is an intercessor: for his people, for his flesh and blood, for his history, for his people and for the God who called him. He is the bridge. What a beautiful example for all pastors who must be 'bridges'. This is why they are called pontifex, bridges. Pastors are the bridges between the people they belong to, and God, to whom they belong by vocation. This is what Moses is: "Lord, forgive their sin, and if you do not forgive, blot me from the book you have written. I do not want to advance at the expense of my people".

And this is the prayer that true believers cultivate in their spiritual life. Even if they experience people's shortcomings and their distance from God, these prayerful people do not condemn them, they do not reject them. The intercessory attitude is proper to the saints who, in imitation of Jesus, are 'bridges' between God and his people. Moses, in this sense, was the first great prophet of Jesus, our advocate and intercessor (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2577). And today, too, Jesus is the pontifex; he is the bridge between us and the Father. And Jesus intercedes for us; he shows the Father the wounds that are the price of our salvation, and he intercedes. And Moses is the figure of Jesus who today prays for us, intercedes for us.

Moses urges us to pray with the same ardour of Jesus, to intercede for the world, to remember that despite all its frailties, it still belongs to God. Everyone belongs to God. The worst sinners, the most wicked people, the most corrupt leaders, are children of God, and Jesus feels this and intercedes for everyone. And the world lives and flourishes to the blessing of the righteous, to the prayer for mercy, this prayer for mercy that the holy, the righteous, the intercessor, the priest, the bishop, the Pope, the layperson, any baptized person unceasingly raises up for humanity, in every place and time in history. Let us think of Moses, the intercessor. And when we want to condemn someone and we become angry inside — getting angry can do good, but condemning does no good – let us intercede for him or her; this will help us a lot.

Today is the "Day of Conscience", inspired by the witness of the Portuguese diplomat Aristides de Sousa Mendes, who some 80 years ago decided to follow the voice of his conscience and saved the lives of thousands of Jews and other persecuted people. May freedom of conscience be

respected always and everywhere; and may every Christian give the example of consistency with an upright conscience enlightened by the Word of God.

Catechesis on prayer - 8. The prayer of David

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

On our itinerary of catecheses on prayer, today we meet King David. Favoured by God even from his youth, he is chosen for a unique mission that plays a central role in the history of the People of God and of our own faith. In the Gospels, Jesus is called “son of David” a number of times; in fact, like him, He was born in Bethlehem. According to the promises, the Messiah would come from the descendants of David: a King completely after God’s heart, in perfect obedience to the Father, whose action faithfully realizes His plan of salvation (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2579).

David’s story begins on the hills surrounding Bethlehem, where he grazes the flock of his father, Jesse. He is still a boy, the last of many brothers. So much so that when the prophet Samuel, by God’s order, goes in search of the new king, it seems almost as if his father has forgotten about his youngest son (cf. 1 Sam 16:1-13). He worked in the open air: we can think of him as a friend of the wind, of the sounds of nature, of the rays of the sun. He has only one companion to comfort his soul: his harp; and during those long days spent in solitude, he loves to play and to sing to his God. He also played with the slingshot.

Therefore David is, first and foremost, a shepherd: a man who takes care of animals, who defends them from oncoming danger, who provides for their sustenance. When, by God’s will, David will have to care for his people, the actions he will take will not be very different from these. This is why the image of the shepherd frequently occurs in the Bible. Even Jesus defines himself as “the good shepherd”, whose behaviour is different than that of the mercenary; he offers his life on behalf of the sheep; he guides them; he knows each of them by name (cf. Jn 10:11-18).

David learned a lot from his previous job. So, when the prophet Nathan reproaches him for his very serious sin (cf. 2 Sam 12:1-15), David understands right away that he has been a bad shepherd, that he has despoiled another man of his only sheep which he loved, that he is no longer a humble servant, but a man crazy for power, a poacher who loots and preys on others.

A second characteristic trait present in David’s vocation is his poet’s soul. From this small observation, we can deduce that David was not a vulgar man, as is often the case with individuals who are forced to live for long periods isolated from society. He is, instead, a sensitive person who loves music and song. His harp would accompany him always: sometimes to raise a hymn of joy to God (cf. 2 Sam 6:16), other times to express a lament, or to confess his own sin (cf. Ps 51:3).

The world that presents itself before his eyes is not a silent scene: as things unraveled before his gaze he observed a greater mystery. That is exactly where prayer arises: from the conviction that life is not something that takes us by surprise, but an astonishing mystery that inspires poetry, music, gratitude, praise, even lament and supplication in us. When a person lacks that poetic dimension, let’s say, when he lacks poetry, his or her soul limps. Thus, tradition casts David as the great artist behind the composition of the Psalms. Many of them, at the beginning, often bear an explicit reference to the king of Israel, and to some of the more or less noble events of his life.

David, therefore, has a dream: that of being a good shepherd. Sometimes he will live up to this task, other times less so; what is important, however, in the context of the history of salvation, is that he is a prophecy of another King, whom he merely announces and prefigures.

Let us look at David; let us think about David. Holy and sinful, persecuted and persecutor, victim and manslayer, which is a contradiction. David was all of this, together. And we too have recorded events in our lives that are often opposed to each other; in the drama of life, all people often sin by inconsistency. There is a single golden thread running through David's life, that gives unity to everything that happens: his prayer. That is the voice that is never extinguished. David the saint prays: David the sinner prays; David the persecuted prays; David the persecutor prays. Even David the manslayer prays. This is the golden thread that runs through his life. A man of prayer. That is the voice that is never silenced: whether it assumes tones of jubilation or those of lament, it is always the same prayer; only the melody changes. In so doing, David teaches us to let everything enter into dialogue with God: joy as well as guilt, love as well as suffering, friendship as much as sickness. Everything can become a word spoken to the "You" who always listens to us.

David, who knew solitude, was in reality never alone! In the end, this is the power of prayer in all those who make room for it in their lives. Prayer gives you nobility, and David is noble because he prays. But he is a manslayer who prays; he repents and his nobility returns thanks to prayer. Prayer gives us nobility. It is capable of securing our relationship with God who is the true Companion on the journey of every man and woman, amid life's thousand adversities, good or bad: but always prayer. Thank you, Lord. I am afraid, Lord. Help me, Lord. Forgive me, Lord. David's trust is so great that, when he was persecuted and had to flee, he did not let anyone defend him: "If my God humiliates me thus, he knows what he is doing", because the nobility of prayer leaves us in God's hands. Those hands wounded by love: the only sure hands we have.

Catechesis: 9. Elijah's prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today, we resume our catechesis on prayer, which we interrupted for the catechesis on the care of creation, and will now resume; and we meet one of the most compelling characters in all of Sacred Scripture: the prophet Elijah. He goes beyond the confines of his time, and we can also see his presence in some of the episodes in the Gospels. He appeared at Jesus' side, along with Moses, at the moment of the Transfiguration (cf. Mt 17:3). Jesus himself refers to him to give credit to the testimony of John the Baptist (cf. Mt 17:10-13).

In the Bible, Elijah appears suddenly, in a mysterious way, coming from a small village that is completely marginal (cf. 1 Kings 17:1); and in the end he leaves the scene, under the eyes of the disciple Elisha, on a chariot of fire that takes him to heaven (cf. 2 Kings 2:11-12). He is therefore a man without a precise origin, and above all without an end, carried off into heaven. For this reason his return was expected before the coming of the Messiah, as a precursor. Elijah's return was thus awaited.

Scripture presents Elijah as a man of crystalline faith: his very name, which may mean "Yahweh is God", encloses the secret of his mission. He will be like this for the rest of his life: a man of integrity, incapable of petty compromises. His symbol is fire, the image of God's purifying power. He will be the first to be put to the test, and he will remain faithful. He is the example of all people of faith who know temptation and suffering, but do not fail to live up to the ideal for which they were born.

Prayer is the lifeblood that constantly nourishes his existence. This is why he is one of those most dear to the monastic tradition, so much so that some have elected him as the spiritual father of a life consecrated to God. Elijah is the man of God, who stands as a defender of the primacy of the Most High. And yet, he too is forced to come to terms with his own frailties. It is difficult to say which experiences were most useful to him: the defeat of the false prophets on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18:20-40), or the bewilderment in which he finds that he is "no better than his ancestors" (cf. 1 Kings 19:4). In the soul of those who pray, the sense of their own weakness is more precious than moments of exaltation, when it seems that life is a series of victories and successes. This always happens in prayer: moments of prayer that we feel lift us up, even of enthusiasm, and moments of prayer of pain, aridity, trial. This is what prayer is: letting ourselves be carried by God, and also allowing ourselves to be struck by unpleasant situations and even temptations. This is a reality found in many other biblical vocations, even in the New Testament; think, for example, of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Their lives were like this too: moments of exultation and moments of low spirits, of suffering.

Elijah is the man of contemplative life and, at the same time, of active life, preoccupied with the events of his time, capable of clashing with the king and queen after they had Nabot killed to take possession of his vineyard (cf. 1 Kings 21:1-24). How much we need believers, zealous Christians who take action when facing those with managerial responsibility, with the courage of Elijah, to

say: “This must not be done! This is murder!”. We need Elijah’s spirit. He shows us that there should be no dichotomy in the life of those who pray: one stands before the Lord and goes towards the brothers and sisters to whom He sends us. Prayer is not about locking oneself up with the Lord to put “make-up” on one’s soul: no, this is not prayer, this is false prayer. Prayer is a confrontation with God, and allowing oneself to be sent to serve one’s brothers and sisters. The touchstone of prayer is concrete love towards our neighbour. And vice versa: believers act in the world after having first kept silent and prayed; otherwise, their action is impulsive, it is devoid of discernment, it is rushing without a destination. Believers behave this way, they do many injustices because they did not go to pray to the Lord first, to discern what they must do.

The pages of the Bible suggest that Elijah’s faith also made progress: he too grew in prayer, he refined it little by little. God’s face came into focus for him as he walked. He reached his peak in that extraordinary experience, when God manifested himself to Elijah on the mount (cf. 1 Kings 19:9-13). He manifested himself not in the fierce storm, not in the earthquake or the devouring fire, but in “a still small voice” (v. 12). Or better, a translation that reflects that experience well: in a thread of resounding silence. This is how God manifests himself to Elijah. It is with this humble sign that God communicates with Elijah, who at that moment was a fugitive prophet who had lost peace. God comes forward to meet a tired man, a man who thought he had failed on all fronts, and with that gentle breeze, with that thread of resounding silence, He brings calm and peace back into his heart.

This is the story of Elijah, but it seems written for all of us. Some evenings we may feel useless and alone. It is then that prayer will come and knock on the door of our hearts. We can all gather a corner of Elijah’s cloak, just as his disciple Elisha collected half his cloak. And even if we have done something wrong, or if we feel threatened and frightened, when we return before God with prayer, serenity and peace will return as if by miracle. This is what the example of Elijah teaches us.

Catechesis: 10. The prayer of the Psalms. 1

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,

As we read the Bible, we continually come across prayers of various types. But we also find a book made up solely of prayers, a book that has become the native land, gymnasium and home of countless men and women of prayer. It is the Book of Psalms. There are 150 Psalms to pray.

The Catechism affirms that every Psalm "possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by men of all times and conditions" (ccc, 2588). As we read and reread the Psalms, we learn the language of prayer. God the Father, indeed, with his Spirit, inspired them in the heart of King David and others who prayed, in order to teach every man and woman how to praise him, how to thank him and supplicate him; how to invoke him in joy and in suffering, and how to recount the wonders of his works and of his Law. In short, the Psalms are the Word of God that we human beings use to speak with him.

In this book we do not encounter ethereal people, abstract people, those who confuse prayer with an aesthetic or alienating experience. The Psalms are not texts created on paper; they are invocations, often dramatic, that spring from lived existence. To pray them it is enough for us to be what we are. We must not forget that to pray well we must pray as we are, without embellishment. One must not embellish the soul to pray. "Lord, I am like this", and go in front of the Lord as we are, with the good things and also with the bad things that no one knows about, but that we inwardly know. In the Psalms we hear the voices of men and women of prayer in flesh and blood, whose life, like that of us all, is fraught with problems, hardships and uncertainties. The Psalmist does not radically contest this suffering: he knows that it is part of living. In the Psalms, however, suffering is transformed into a question. From suffering to questioning.

And among the many questions, there is one that remains suspended, like an incessant cry that runs throughout the entire book from beginning to end. A question that we repeat many times: "Until when, Lord? Until when?" Every suffering calls for liberation, every tear calls for consolation, every wound awaits healing, every slander a sentence of absolution. "Until when, Lord, will I have to suffer this? Listen to me, Lord!" How many times we have prayed like this, with "Until when?", enough now, Lord!

By constantly asking such questions, the Psalms teach us not to get used to pain, and remind us that life is not saved unless it is healed. The existence of each human being is but a breath, his or her story is fleeting, but the prayerful know that they are precious in the eyes of God, and so it makes sense to cry out. And this is important. When we pray, we do so because we know we are precious in God's eyes. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit that, from within, inspires in us this awareness: of being precious in the eyes of God. And this is why we are moved to pray.

The prayer of the Psalms is the testimony of this cry: a multiple cry, because in life suffering takes a thousand forms, and takes the name of sickness, hatred, war, persecution, distrust... Until the supreme "scandal", that of death. Death appears in the Psalter as man's most unreasonable

enemy: what crime deserves such cruel punishment, which involves annihilation and the end? The prayer of the Psalms asks God to intervene where all human efforts are in vain. That is why prayer, in and of itself, is the way of salvation and the beginning of salvation.

Everyone suffers in this world: whether they believe in God or reject Him. But in the Psalter, pain becomes a relationship, rapport: a cry for help waiting to intercept a listening ear. It cannot remain meaningless, without purpose. Even the pains we suffer cannot be merely specific cases of a universal law: they are always “my” tears,. Think about this: tears are not universal, they are “my” tears. Everyone has their own. “My” tears and “my” pain drive me to go ahead in prayer. They are “my” tears, that no one has ever shed before me. Yes, many have wept, many. But “my” tears are mine, “My” pain is my own, “my” suffering is my own.

Before entering the Hall, I met the parents of that priest of the diocese of Como who was killed: he was killed precisely in his service of helping. The tears of those parents are “their” own tears, and each of them knows how much he or she has suffered in seeing this son who gave his life in service to the poor. When we want to console somebody, we cannot find the words. Why? Because we cannot arrive at his or her pain, because “their” suffering is “their” own, his tears are his own. The same is true of us: the tears, “my” suffering is mine, the tears are “mine” , the tears are mine, and with these tears, with this suffering I turn to the Lord.

All human suffering is sacred to God. So prays the prayer of Psalm 56: “Thou hast kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle! Are they not in thy book?” (v. 8). Before God we are not strangers, or numbers. We are faces and hearts, known one by one, by name.

In the Psalms, the believer finds an answer. He knows that even if all human doors were barred, God’s door is open. Even if the whole world had issued a verdict of condemnation, there is salvation in God.

“The Lord listens”: sometimes in prayer it is enough to know this. Problems are not always solved. Those who pray are not deluded: they know that many questions of life down here remain unresolved, with no way out; suffering will accompany us and, after one battle, others will await us. But if we are listened to, everything becomes more bearable.

I will tell you something: it is good for me, in difficult moments, to think of Jesus weeping; when He wept looking at Jerusalem, when He wept before Lazarus’ tomb. God has wept for me, God weeps, He weeps over our suffering. Because God wanted to make Himself man - a spiritual writer used to say - in order to be able to weep. To think that Jesus weeps with me in suffering is a consolation: it helps us to keep going. If we maintain our relationship with Him, life does not spare us suffering, but it open up to a great horizon of goodness and set out towards its fulfillment. Take courage, persevere in prayer. Jesus is always by our side.

Catechesis: 11. The prayer of the Psalms. 2

Dear brothers and sisters, Good morning!

Today, we need to slightly change the way the Audience is conducted because of the coronavirus. You are separated, with the protection of masks as well, and I am here, a bit distant and I cannot do what I always do, come near you, because every time I approach you, you come together and we lose the distance, and there is the danger of contagion for you. I apologize for this, but it is for your safety. Instead of coming near you and shaking your hands and greeting you, we have to greet each other from a distance, but know that I am near you with my heart. I hope that you understand why I am doing this. Also, while the readers were reading the biblical passage, my attention was caught by that baby boy or girl who was crying. And I was watching that mum who was cuddling and nursing the baby and I thought: "this is what God does with us, like that mum". With what tenderness she was trying to comfort and nurse the baby.

They are beautiful images. And when this happens in Church, when a baby cries, one knows there is the tenderness of a mother there, like today there is the tenderness of a mother who is the symbol of God's tenderness with us. Never silence a crying baby in Church, never, because it is the voice that attracts God's tenderness. Thank you for your witness.

Today we complete the catechesis on the prayer of the Psalms. First of all, we see that a negative figure often appears in the Psalms, that of the "wicked" person, he or she who lives as if God were not there. This is the person without any transcendent referent, whose arrogance has no limits, who fears no judgment regarding what he or she thinks or does.

For this reason, the Psalter presents prayer as the fundamental reality of life. The reference to the absolute and to the transcendent — which the spiritual masters call the "holy fear of God" — is what makes us completely human, it is the boundary that saves us from ourselves, preventing us from venturing into life in a predatory and voracious manner. Prayer is the salvation of the human being.

There certainly also exists a false prayer, prayer that is said only for the admiration of others. The person or persons who go to Mass only to show that they are Catholics or to show off the latest fashion they bought, or to make a good impression in society. They move toward false prayer. Jesus strongly admonished against such prayer (cf. Mt 6:5-6; Lk 9:14). But when the true spirit of prayer is sincerely received and enters the heart, it then lets us contemplate reality with God's very eyes.

When one prays, everything acquires "depth". This is interesting in prayer, perhaps something subtle begins but in prayer that thing acquires depth, it becomes weighty, as if God takes it in hand and transforms it. The worst service someone can give God and also mankind is to pray wearily, by rote. To pray like parrots. No, we pray with the heart. Prayer is the centre of life. If there is prayer, even a brother, a sister, even an enemy becomes important. An old saying from the first Christian monks reads: "Blessed the monk who regards every human being as God, after

God" (Evagrius Ponticus, Trattato sulla preghiera, n. 123). Those who adore God, love his children. Those who respect God, respect human beings.

And so, prayer is not a sedative to alleviate life's anxieties; or, in any case, this type of prayer is certainly not Christian. Rather, prayer makes each of us responsible. We see this clearly in the "Our Father" that Jesus taught his disciples.

To learn how to pray this way, the Psalter is a tremendous school. We saw how the Psalms do not always use refined and genteel language, and that they often bear the scars of existence. And yet, all these prayers were first used in the Temple of Jerusalem and then in the synagogues; even the most intimate and personal ones. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: "The Psalter's many forms of prayer take shape both in the liturgy of the Temple and in the human heart" (n. 2588). And thus, personal prayer draws from and is nourished first by the prayer of the people of Israel, then by the prayer of the Church.

Even the Psalms in the first person singular, which confide the most intimate thoughts and problems of an individual, are a collective heritage, to the point of being prayed by everyone and for everyone. The prayer of Christians has this "breath", this spiritual "tension" that holds the temple and the world together. Prayer can begin in the half light of a church's nave, but then come to an end on the city streets. And vice versa, it can blossom during the day's activities and reach its fulfillment in the liturgy. The church doors are not barriers, but permeable "membranes", willing to receive everyone's cry.

The world is always present in the Psalter's prayer. The Psalms, for example, voice the divine promise of salvation for the weakest: "Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan I will now arise," says the Lord; "I will place him in the safety for which he longs" (12:5). Or again, they warn about the danger of worldly riches because "man cannot abide in his pomp, he is like the beasts that perish" (49:20). Or still, they open the horizon to God's gaze over history: "The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nought; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (33:10-11).

In short, where there is God, the human person must be there too. Sacred Scripture is categorical: We love because he loved us first. He always goes before us. He always awaits us because he loves us first, he looks at us first, he understands us first. He always awaits us. If any one says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his own brother who he can see, cannot love God who he cannot see.

If you pray many rosaries each day but then gossip about others, and nourish grudges inside, if you hate others, this is pure artifice, it is not the truth. And this is the commandment we have from him: "that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 Jn 4:19-21). Scripture acknowledges the case of a person who, even while sincerely seeking God, never succeeds in encountering Him; but it also states that one can repudiate the tears of the poor only at the expense of encountering God. God cannot stand the "atheism" of those who repudiate the divine image that is imprinted in every human being. That everyday atheism: I believe in God but I keep

my distance from others and I allow myself to hate others. This is practical atheism. Not recognizing the human person as the image of God is a sacrilege, an abomination, the worst offense that can be directed toward the temple and the altar.

Dear brothers and sisters, the prayers of the Psalms help us not to fall into the temptation of the “wicked”, that is, of living, and perhaps also of praying, as if God does not exist, and as if the poor do not exist.

Catechesis on prayer - 12. Jesus, man of prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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

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

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

Jesus is not a distant God, and he cannot be so. Incarnation revealed him in a complete and humanly unthinkable way. Thus, inaugurating his mission, Jesus places himself at the forefront of a people of penitents, as if charging himself with opening a breach through which all of us, after him, must have the courage to pass. However, the road, the journey, is difficult; but he goes ahead, opening the way. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that this is the newness of the fullness of time. It says: "his filial prayer, which the Father awaits from his children, is finally going to be lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for men" (no. 2599). Jesus prays with us. Let us keep this clear in our mind and in our heart: Jesus prays with us.

On that day, on the bank of the River Jordan, there is therefore all of humanity, with its unexpressed yearning for prayer. There is, above all, the population of sinners: those who thought

they could not be loved by God, those who did not dare cross the threshold of the temple, those who did not pray because they did not consider themselves worthy. Jesus came for everyone, even for them, and he begins precisely by joining them. At the forefront.

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

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

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

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

Catechesis on prayer - 13. Jesus, Teacher of prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Unfortunately we have had to return to holding this audience in the library, to protect ourselves against contagion by Covid. This also teaches us that we must be very attentive to the prescriptions of the authorities, both the political authorities and health authorities, in order to protect ourselves against this pandemic. Let us offer to the Lord this distance between us, for the good of all, and let us think, let us think a lot about the sick, about those who are already marginalized when they enter the hospitals; let us think about the doctors, the nurses, the volunteers, the many people who work with the sick at this time: they risk their life but they do so out of love for their neighbour, as a vocation. Let us pray for them.

During his public life, Jesus constantly availed himself of the power of prayer. The Gospels show this to us when he retired to secluded places to pray. These are sober and discreet observations that allow us only to imagine those prayerful dialogues. They clearly demonstrate, however, that even at times of greater dedication to the poor and the sick, Jesus never neglected his intimate dialogue with the Father. The more he was immersed in the needs of the people, the more he felt the need to repose in the Trinitarian Communion, to return to the Father and the Spirit.

In Jesus' life there is therefore a secret, hidden from human eyes, which is the fulcrum of everything. Jesus' prayer is a mysterious reality, of which we grasp only something, but which allows us to interpret his entire mission from the right perspective. In those solitary hours — before dawn or at night — Jesus immerses himself in his intimacy with the Father, that is, in the Love that every soul thirsts for. This is what emerges from the very first days of his public ministry.

One Sabbath, for example, the town of Capernaum was transformed into a "field hospital": after sunset they brought all the sick to Jesus, and he healed them. Before dawn, however, Jesus disappeared: he withdrew to a solitary place and prayed. Simon and the others looked for him and when they found him they said: "Everyone is searching for you!" How does Jesus reply? "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out" (cf. Mk 1:35-38). Jesus always goes a bit further, further in prayer with the Father, and beyond, to other villages, other horizons, to go and preach, other peoples.

Prayer is the rudder that guides Jesus' course. The stages of his mission were not dictated by success, nor by consensus, or the seductive phrase "everyone is searching for you". Jesus' path was charted by the least comfortable one, which obeyed the Father's inspiration, which Jesus heard and welcomed in his solitary prayer.

The Catechism states that "when Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray" (no. 2607). Therefore, from Jesus' example we can derive some characteristics of Christian prayer.

First and foremost, it possesses primacy: it is the first desire of the day, something that is practised at dawn, before the world awakens. It restores a soul to what otherwise would be without breath. A day lived without prayer risks being transformed into a bothersome or tedious experience: everything that happens to us could turn into a badly endured and blind fate for us. Jesus instead teaches an obedience to reality and, therefore, to listening. Prayer is primarily listening and encountering God. The problems of everyday life, then, do not become obstacles, but appeals from God himself to listen to and encounter those who are in front of us. The trials of life thus change into opportunities to grow in faith and charity. The daily journey, including hardships, acquires the perspective of a "vocation". Prayer has the power to transform into good what in life would otherwise be a sentence; prayer has the power to open the mind to a great horizon and to broaden the heart.

Secondly, prayer is an art to be practised insistently. Jesus himself says to us: knock, knock, knock. We are all capable of sporadic prayers, which arise from a momentary emotion; but Jesus educates us in another type of prayer: the one that knows a discipline, an exercise, and is assumed within a rule of life. Consistent prayer produces progressive transformation, makes us strong in times of tribulation, gives us the grace to be supported by the One who loves us and always protects us.

Another characteristic of Jesus' prayer is solitude. Those who pray do not escape from the world, but prefer deserted places. There, in silence, many voices can emerge that we hide in our innermost selves: the most repressed desires, the truths that we insist on suffocating, and so on. And, above all, in silence God speaks. Every person needs a space for him or herself, somewhere to cultivate their interior life, where actions find meaning again. Without an interior life we become superficial, agitated, and anxious — how anxiety harms us! This is why we must turn to prayer; without an interior life we flee from reality, and we also flee from ourselves, we are men and women always on the run.

Lastly, Jesus' prayer is the place where we perceive that everything comes from God and returns to him. Sometimes we human beings believe that we are the masters of everything, or on the contrary, we lose all self-esteem, we go from one side to the other. Prayer helps us to find the right dimension in our relationship with God, our Father, and with all creation. And Jesus' prayer, in the end, means delivering oneself into the hands of the Father, like Jesus in the olive grove, in that anguish: "Father, if it is possible … but may your will be done". Delivering oneself into the hands of the Father. It is beautiful, when we are agitated, a bit worried, and the Holy Spirit transforms us from within and leads us to this surrendering into the hands of the Father: "Father, let your will be done".

Dear brothers and sisters, let us rediscover Jesus Christ as a teacher of prayer in the Gospel and place ourselves in his school. I assure you that we will find joy and peace.

Catechesis on prayer - 14. The persevering prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

We continue the catecheses on prayer. Someone said to me: "You talk too much about prayer. It is not necessary". Yes, it is necessary. Because if we do not pray, we will not have the strength to go forward in life. Prayer is like the oxygen of life. Prayer draws down upon us the presence of the Holy Spirit who always leads us forward. For this reason, I speak a lot about prayer.

Jesus gave us the example of continual prayer, practiced with perseverance. Constant dialogue with his Father, in silence and in recollection, was the fulcrum of his entire mission. The Gospels also report his exhortations to the disciples, that they pray insistently, without growing tired. The Catechism recalls three parables contained in the Gospel of Luke that underline this characteristic of Jesus' prayer (cf. CCC, 2613).

First of all, prayer must be tenacious: like the character in the parable who, having to welcome a guest who arrived unexpectedly in the middle of the night, goes to knock on the door of a friend and asks him for some bread. The friend responds, "No!", because he is already in bed — but he insists and insists until he forces his friend to get up and give him some bread (cf. Lk 11:5-8). A tenacious request. But God is more patient than we are, and those who knock with faith and perseverance on the door of his heart will not be disappointed. God always responds. Always. Our Father knows well what we need; insistence is necessary not to inform him or to convince him, but rather it is necessary to nurture the desire and expectation in us.

The second parable is that of the widow who goes to the judge so that he may help her obtain justice. This judge is corrupt; he is a man without scruples, but in the end, exasperated by the insistence of the widow, he decides to please her (cf. Lk 18:1-8)... He thought: "But, it is better to resolve this problem and get her off my back rather than she continuously come before me to complain". This parable makes us understand that faith is not a momentary leap, but a courageous disposition to call on God, even to "argue" with him, without resigning oneself to evil and injustice.

The third parable presents a pharisee and a publican who go to the Temple to pray. The first turns to God boasting of his merits; the other feels unworthy even to enter the sanctuary. God however does not listen to the prayer of the first, that is, of the proud ones, while he does grant the prayer of the humble (cf. Lk 18:9-14). There is no true prayer without a spirit of humility. It is precisely humility that leads us to ask in prayer.

The teaching of the Gospel is clear: we need to pray always, even when everything seems in vain, when God appears to be deaf and mute and it seems we are wasting time. Even if heaven is overshadowed, the Christian does not stop praying. A Christian's prayer keeps stride with his or her faith. And many days of our life, faith seems to be an illusion, a barren struggle. There are moments of darkness in our life, and in those moments, faith seems to be an illusion. But the practice of prayer means accepting this struggle too. "Father, I pray and do not feel anything... I

feel like my heart is dry, that my heart is arid". But we have to continue, with this struggle in the tough moments, the moments in which we feel nothing. Many saints experienced the night of faith and God's silence — when we knock and God does not respond — and these saints were persevering.

During these nights of faith, those who pray are never alone. Indeed, Jesus is not only a witness and teacher of prayer; he is more. He welcomes us in his prayer so that we might pray in him and through him. And this is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why the Gospel invites us to pray to the Father in Jesus' name. Saint John provides these words of the Lord: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (14:13). And the Catechism explains that "the certitude that our petitions will be heard is founded on the prayer of Jesus" (n. 2614). It gives the wings that the prayer of mankind has always desired to possess.

How can we fail to recall here the words of Psalm 91, laden with trust, springing from a heart that hopes for everything from God: "he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday" (vv. 4-6). It is in Christ that this stupendous prayer is fulfilled, it is in him that it finds its complete truth. Without Jesus, our prayer risks being reduced to human effort, destined most of the time to failure. But he has taken on himself every cry, every groan, every jubilation, every supplication … every human prayer. And let us not forget the Holy Spirit who prays in us; it is he who leads us to pray, he leads us to Jesus. He is the gift that the Father and the Son gave us to foster an encounter with God. And the Holy Spirit, when we pray, is the Holy Spirit who prays in our hearts.

Christ is everything for us, even in our prayer life. Saint Augustine used to say this with an enlightening expression that we also find in the Catechism: Jesus "prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore let us acknowledge our voice in him and his in us" (n. 2616). This is why the Christian who prays fears nothing, he or she trusts in the Holy Spirit who was given to us as a gift and who prays in us, eliciting prayer. May the Holy Spirit himself, Teacher of prayer, teach us the path of prayer.

Catechesis on prayer - 15. The Virgin Mary, prayerful woman

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In our course of catecheses on prayer, today we meet the Virgin Mary as the prayerful woman. Our Lady prayed. When the world still knew nothing of her, when she was a simple girl engaged to a man of the house of David, Mary prayed. We can imagine the young girl of Nazareth wrapped in silence, in continuous dialogue with God who would soon entrust her with a mission. She is already full of grace and immaculate from the moment she was conceived; but she knows nothing yet of her surprising and extraordinary vocation and the stormy sea she will have to cross. One thing is certain: Mary belongs to a great host of the humble of heart whom the official historians never include in their books, but with whom God prepared the coming of his son.

Mary did not autonomously conduct her life: she waited for God to take the reins of her path and guide her where he wanted. She was docile, and with her availability she prepared the grand events in which God takes part in the world. The Catechism recalls her constant and caring presence in the benevolent design of the Father throughout the course of Jesus' life (cf. CCC, 2617-2618).

Mary was praying when the Archangel Gabriel came to bring his message to her in Nazareth. Her small yet immense "Here I am", which made all of creation jump for joy in that moment, had been preceded throughout salvation history by many other "Here I ams", by many trusting obediences, by many who were open to God's will. There is no better way to pray than to place oneself like Mary in an attitude of openness, with a heart open to God: "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". That is, a heart open to God's will. And God always responds. How many believers live their prayer like this! Those who are more humble of heart pray like this: with essential humility, let's put it that way; with simple humility: "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". And they pray like this and do not get upset when problems fill their days, but rather they face reality, knowing that in humble love, in love offered in each situation, we become instruments of God's grace. "Lord, what you want, when you want, and how you want". A simple prayer, but one in which we place ourselves in the Lord's hands so that he may guide us. We can all pray like this, almost without words.

Prayer knows how to calm restlessness. But we are restless, we always want things before asking for them, and we want them right away. This restlessness harms us. And prayer knows how to calm restlessness, knows how to transform it into availability. When we are restless, I pray and prayer opens my heart and makes me open to God's will. In those few moments of the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary knew how to reject fear, even while sensing that her "yes" would bring her tremendously difficult trials. If in prayer we understand that each day given by God is a call, our hearts will then widen and we will accept everything. We will learn how to say: "What you want, Lord. Promise me only that you will be present every step of my way". This is what's important: to ask the Lord to be present in every step of our way: that he not leave us alone, that

he not abandon us in temptation, that he not abandon us in the bad moments. The end of the Our Father is like this: the grace that Jesus himself taught us to ask of the Lord.

Mary accompanied Jesus' entire life in prayer, right up to his death and resurrection; and in the end, she continued and she accompanied the first steps of the nascent Church (cf. Acts 1:14). Mary prayed with the disciples who had witnessed the scandal of the cross. She prayed with Peter who had succumbed to fear and cried in remorse. Mary was there, with the disciples, in the midst of the men and women whom her son had called to form his Community. Mary did not act like a priest among them, no! She is Jesus' Mother who prayed with them, in the community, as a member of the community. She prayed with them and prayed for them. And, once again, her prayer preceded the future that was about to be fulfilled: by the work of the Holy Spirit she became the Mother of God, and by the work of the Holy Spirit she became the Mother of the Church. Praying with the nascent Church, she became the Mother of the Church, accompanying the disciples in the first steps of the Church in prayer, awaiting the Holy Spirit. In silence, always silently. Mary's prayer was silent. The Gospels recount only one of Mary's prayers at Cana, when she asked her son for those poor people who were about to make a terrible impression during the banquet. So, let us imagine: having a wedding banquet and ending it up with milk because there is no wine! What a bad impression! And she prayed and asked her son to resolve that problem. In and of itself, Mary's presence was prayer, and her presence among the disciples in the Upper Room, awaiting the Holy Spirit, was prayer. Thus Mary gave birth to the Church, she is the Mother of the Church. The Catechism explains: "In the faith of his humble handmaid, the Gift of God", that is, the Holy Spirit, "found the acceptance he had awaited from the beginning of time" (CCC, 2617).

In the Virgin Mary, natural feminine intuition is exalted by her most singular union with God in prayer. This is why, reading the Gospel, we note that she seems to disappear at times, only to reappear in crucial moments: Mary was open to God's voice that guided her heart, that guided her steps where her presence was needed. Her silent presence as mother and as disciple. Mary was present because she was Mother, but she was also present because she was the first disciple, the one who best learned Jesus' ways. Mary never said: "Come, I will take care of things". Instead she said: "Do whatever he will tell you", always pointing her finger at Jesus. This behaviour was typical of the disciples, and she was the first disciple: she prayed as Mother and she prayed as a disciple.

"Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). This is how the evangelist Luke depicts the Mother of the Lord in the infancy Gospel. Everything that happened around her ended up being reflected on in the depths of her heart: the days filled with joy, as well as the darkest moments when she too struggled to understand by which roads Redemption must pass. Everything ended up in her heart so that it might pass through the sieve of prayer and be transfigured by it: whether it be the gifts of the Magi, or the flight into Egypt, until that terrible passion Friday. The Mother kept everything and brought it to her dialogue with God. Someone has compared Mary's heart to a pearl of incomparable splendour, formed and smoothed by patient acceptance of God's will through the mysteries of Jesus meditated in prayer. How beautiful it would be if we too could be a bit like our Mother! With a heart open to God's Word,

with a silent heart, with an obedient heart, with a heart that knows how to receive God's Word and allows it to grow with the seed of good for the Church.

Catechesis on prayer - 16. The prayer of the nascent Church

Dear Brothers and Sisters Good morning!

The Church's first steps in the world were interspersed with prayer. The apostolic writings and the great narration of the Acts of the Apostles give us the image of a Church on the move, an active Church which, however, finds the basis and impulse for missionary action while gathered in prayer. The image of the early Community of Jerusalem is the point of reference for every other Christian experience. Luke writes in the Book of Acts: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The community persevered in prayer.

We find here four essential characteristics of ecclesial life: listening to the apostles' teaching, first; second, the safeguarding of mutual communion; third, the breaking of the bread; and fourth, prayer. They remind us that the Church's existence has meaning if it remains firmly united to Christ, that is, in community, in his Word, in the Eucharist and in prayer. It is the way we unite ourselves to Christ. Preaching and catechesis bear witness to the words and actions of the Teacher; the constant quest for fraternal communion shields us from selfishness and particularisms; the breaking of the bread fulfils the sacrament of Jesus' presence among us. He will never be absent; it is really him in the Eucharist. He lives and walks with us. And lastly, prayer, which is the space of dialogue with the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Everything in the Church that grows outside of these "coordinates" lacks a foundation. To discern a situation, we need to ask ourselves: in this situation, how are these four coordinates present — preaching, the constant search for fraternal communion — charity — the breaking of the bread — that is, Eucharistic life — and prayer. Any situation needs to be evaluated in the light of these four coordinates. Whatever is not part of these coordinates lacks ecclesiality, it is not ecclesial. It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. The Church is not a market; the Church is not a group of businesspeople who go forward with a new business. The Church is the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to gather us together. The Church is precisely the work of the Spirit in the Christian community, in the life of the community, in the Eucharist, in prayer... always. And everything that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation, it is like a house built upon sand (cf. Mt 7:24-27). It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. It is Jesus' word that fills our efforts with meaning. It is in humility that we build the future of the world.

At times, I feel tremendous sadness when I see a community that has good will, but takes the wrong path because it thinks that the Church is built up in meetings, as if it were a political party: the majority, the minority, what does this one think, that one, the other.... "This is like a Synod, the synodal path that we must take". I ask myself: where is the Holy Spirit there? Where is prayer? Where is communitarian love? Where is the Eucharist?". Without these four coordinates, the Church becomes a human society, a political party — majority, minority — changes are made as if it were a company, according to majority or minority... But the Holy Spirit is not there. And the

presence of the Holy Spirit is precisely guaranteed by these four coordinates. To evaluate whether a situation is ecclesial or not ecclesial, let us ask ourselves whether these four coordinates are present: life in community, prayer, the Eucharist... [preaching] how is life developing along these four coordinates. If this is lacking, the Holy Spirit is lacking, and if the Holy Spirit is lacking, we will be a beautiful humanitarian charitable organization, good, good ... even an ecclesial party, let's put it that way. But it is not the Church. And this is why the Church cannot grow by these things: she does not grow through proselytism, as any other company, she grows by attraction. And who provokes attraction? The Holy Spirit. Let us never forget Benedict xvi's words: "The Church does not grow through proselytizing, she grows by attraction". If the Holy Spirit — who is the one who attracts [people] to Jesus — is lacking, the Church is not there. There might be a beautiful friendship club, good, with good intentions, but not the Church, not synodality.

In reading the Acts of the Apostles we then discover what a powerful driving force of evangelization the prayer gatherings can be, where those who participate actually experience Jesus' presence and are touched by the Spirit. The members of the first community — although this always applies, even to us today — sensed that the narrative of the encounter with Jesus did not stop at the moment of the Ascension, but continued in their life. In recounting what the Lord said and did — listening to the Word — in praying to enter into communion with him, everything became alive. Prayer infuses light and warmth: the gift of the Spirit endowed them with fervour.

In this regard, the Catechism contains a very substantial expression. It says this: "The Holy Spirit ... keeps the memory of Christ alive in his Church at prayer, also leads her toward the fullness of truth, to the whole truth, and inspires new formulations expressing the unfathomable mystery of Christ at work in his Church's life, sacraments, and mission" (n. 2625). This is the Spirit's work in the Church: making us remember Jesus. Jesus himself said so: he will teach you and remind you. The mission is to remember Jesus, but not as a mnemonic exercise. Christians, walking on the paths of mission, remember Jesus while they make him present once more; and from him, from his Spirit, they receive the "push" to go, to proclaim, to serve. In prayer, Christians immerse themselves in the mystery of God who loves each person, that God who desires the Gospel to be preached to everyone. God is God for everyone, and in Jesus every wall of separation has definitively crumbled: as Saint Paul says, He is our peace, that is, he "who has made us both one" (Eph 2:14). Jesus created unity.

In this way the life of the early Church had the rhythm of a continuous succession of celebrations, convocations, times of both communitarian and personal prayer. And it is the Spirit who granted strength to the preachers who set out on the journey, and who, for love of Jesus, sailed the seas, faced dangers, subjected themselves to humiliation.

God gives love, God asks for love. This is the mystical root of the believer's entire life. In prayer, the first Christians, but we too who have come many centuries later, all live the same experience. The Spirit inspires everything. And every Christian who is not afraid to devote time to prayer can make his or her own the words of the Apostle Paul: "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Prayer makes you aware of

this. Only in the silence of adoration do we experience the whole truth of these words. We must recapture this sense of adoration. To adore, to adore God, to adore Jesus, to adore the Spirit. The Father, the Son and the Spirit: to adore. In silence. The prayer of adoration is the prayer that makes us recognize God as the beginning and the end of all of History. And this prayer is the living flame of the Spirit that gives strength to witness and to mission. Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer - 17. The blessing

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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

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

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

Saint Paul proclaims God's plan of love with emotion. And he says it like this: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:3-6). There is no sin that can completely erase the image of Christ present in each one of us. No sin can erase that image that God has given us — the image of Christ. Sin can disfigure it, but not remove it from God's mercy. A sinner can remain in error for a long time, but God is patient till the end, hoping that [the sinner's] heart will eventually open and change. God is like a good father and like a good mother — he is also a good mother: they never stop loving their child, no matter what he or she may do wrong, always. What comes to my mind is the many times that I have seen people queue to enter a prison.

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

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

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

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

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

hearts. Each of us can think: do I have this habit of cursing like this? And ask the Lord for the grace to change this habit because we have a blessed heart and curses cannot come out of a blessed heart. May the Lord teach us never to curse, but to bless.

Catechesis on prayer - 18. The prayer of petition

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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

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

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

We human beings share this invocation of help with the rest of creation. We are not the only ones "praying" in this boundless universe: every fragment of creation bears the desire for God. And Saint Paul himself expressed it in this way. He says: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (Rom 8:22-24). The multiform cry of creatures resounds in us: of trees, of rocks, of animals. Everything yearns for fulfillment. Tertullian wrote: "Every creature prays; cattle and wild beasts pray and bend their knees; and when they issue from the layers and lairs, they look up heavenward with no idle mouth, making their breath vibrate after

their own manner. Nay, the birds too, rising out of the nest, upraise themselves heavenward, and instead of hands, expand the cross of their wings, and somewhat to seem like prayer" (De oratione, XXIX). This is a poetic expression commenting on what Saint Paul says: "the whole creation has been groaning". But we are the only ones who pray consciously, who know that we are addressing the Father, and entering into dialogue with the Father.

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

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

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

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

Catechesis on prayer: 19. The prayer of intercession

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Those who pray never turn their backs on the world. If prayer does not gather the joys and sorrows, the hopes and the anxieties of humanity, it becomes a “decorative” activity, a superficial, theatrical, solitary way of behaving. We all need interiority: to retreat within a space and a time dedicated to our relationship with God. But this does not mean that we evade reality. In prayer, God “takes us, blesses us, then breaks us and gives us”, to satisfy everyone’s hunger. Every Christian is called to become in God’s hands bread, broken and shared. That is, it is concrete prayer, that is not an escape.

So, men and women of prayer seek solitude and silence, not so as not be disturbed, but so as to listen better to God’s voice. Sometimes they withdraw from the world altogether, in the secret of their own room, as Jesus recommended (see Mt 6:6). But wherever they are, they always keep the doors of their hearts wide open: an open door for those who pray without knowing how to pray; for those who do not pray at all but who carry within themselves a suffocating cry, a hidden invocation; for those who have erred and have lost the way... Whoever can knock on the door of someone who prays finds a compassionate heart which does not exclude anyone. Prayer comes from our hearts and our voices and gives heart and voice to so many people do not know how to pray or who do not want to pray or for whom it is impossible to pray: we are the heart and the voice of these people, rising to Jesus, rising to the Father as intercessors. In the solitude of those who pray, whether the solitude lasts a long time or only a half hour, to pray, those who pray separate themselves from everything and from everyone to find everything and everyone in God. These people pray for the whole world, bearing its sorrows and sins on their shoulders. They pray for each and every person: they are like God’s “antennas” in this world. The one who prays sees the face of Christ in every poor person who knocks at the door, in every person who has lost the meaning of things. In the Catechism we read: “intercession - asking on behalf of another (...) has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy”. This is beautiful. When we pray we are in tune with God’s mercy; having mercy regarding our sins, being merciful with ourselves, but also merciful with all those who have asked to be prayed for, those for whom we want to pray in tune with God’s heart. This is true prayer: in tune with God’s mercy, with His merciful heart. “In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints” (n. 2635). What does it mean to participate in Christ’s intercession? When I intercede for someone or pray for someone: because Christ is before the Father He is the intercessor, He prays for us, He prays showing the Father the wounds of His hands because Jesus is physically present before the Father with His body. And Jesus is our intercessor and to pray is to be a bit like Jesus: to intercede in Jesus to the Father, for others. This is very beautiful.

The human heart tends toward prayer. It is simply human. Those who do not love their brother or sister do not pray seriously. Someone might say: one cannot pray when steeped in hatred; one cannot pray when steeped in indifference. Prayer is offered only in the spirit of love. Those who do not love pretend to pray, they believe they are praying, but they are not praying because they lack

the proper spirit, which is love. In the Church, those who are familiar with the sadness and joy of others dig deeper than those who investigate the worlds “chief systems”. Because of this, human experience is present in every prayer, because no matter what mistakes people may have committed, they should never be rejected or set aside.

When believers, moved by the Holy Spirit, pray for sinners, no selection is made, no judgement or condemnation is uttered: they pray for everyone. And they pray for themselves. At that moment they know they are not that different from those for whom they pray. They realize they are sinners among sinners and they pray for everyone. The lesson of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican is always alive and always relevant (see Lk 18:9-14): we are not better than anyone, we are all brothers and sisters who bear fragility, suffering and being sinners in common. Therefore, a prayer that we can say to God is this: “Lord, no one is just in your sight” (see Ps 143:2), this is what one of the Psalms says: “Lord, no one who lives is just in your sight, none of us: we are all sinners – we are all in debt, each with an outstanding balance to pay; no one is without sin in Your eyes. Lord, have mercy on us!” And with this spirit, prayer is fruitful because we go humbly before God and pray for everyone. Instead, the Pharisee was praying proudly: “I thank you, Lord, because I am not like others, sinners: I am just, always always do…”. This is not prayer: this is looking at yourself in a mirror, it is not looking at one’s own reality, no. It is like looking at yourself made-up in a mirror because of your pride.

The world keeps going thanks to this chain of people who pray, who intercede, and who are unknown for the most part…but not unknown to God! There are many anonymous Christians who, in times of persecution, have repeated the words of our Lord: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34).

The Good Shepherd remains faithful even before the awareness of the sin of His own people: the Good Shepherd continues to be a Father even when His children distance themselves and abandon Him. He perseveres in His service as shepherd even with those who have bloodied His hands; He does not close His heart to those who have even made Him suffer.

The Church, in all of her members, has the mission to practice the prayer of intercession: to intercede for others. This is especially so for those who exercise roles of responsibility: parents, teachers, ordained ministers, superiors of communities… Like Abraham and Moses, they must at times “defend” the people entrusted to them before God. In reality, we are talking about protecting them with God’s eyes and heart, with His same invincible compassion and tenderness. Pray with tenderness for others.

Brothers and sisters, we are all leaves on the same tree: each one that falls reminds us of the great piety that must be nourished in prayer, for one another. So let us pray for each other. It will do us good and do good for everyone. Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer - 20. The prayer of thanksgiving

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to focus on the prayer of thanksgiving. And I take my cue from an episode recounted by the Evangelist Luke. While Jesus was on the way, ten lepers approached Him, begging: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (17:13). We know that those who had leprosy suffered not only physically, but also from social marginalization and religious marginalization. They were marginalized. Jesus did not back off from meeting them. Sometimes, he went beyond the limitations imposed by the law and touched the sick — which was not permitted — he embraced and healed them. In this case, there was no contact. From a distance, Jesus invited them to present themselves to the priests (v. 14), who were designated by law to certify any healings that had occurred. Jesus said nothing else. He listened to their prayer, he heard their cry for mercy, and he sent them immediately to the priests.

Those 10 lepers trusted, they did not remain there until they were cured, no: they trusted and they went immediately, and while they were on their way, all 10 of them were cured. The priests would have therefore been able to verify their healing and readmit them to normal life. But here is the most important point: only one in the group, before going to the priests, returned to thank Jesus and to praise God for the grace received. Only one, the other nine continued on their way. And Jesus points out that that man was a Samaritan, a sort of “heretic” for the Jews of that time. Jesus comments: “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” (17:18). This narrative is touching.

This narrative, so to speak, divides the world in two: those who do not give thanks and those who do; those who take everything as if it is owed them, and those who welcome everything as a gift, as grace. The Catechism says: “every event and need can become an offering of thanksgiving” (n. 2638). The prayer of thanksgiving always begins from here: from the recognition that grace precedes us. We were thought of before we learned how to think; we were loved before we learned how to love; we were desired before our hearts conceived a desire. If we view life like this, then “thank you” becomes the driving force of our day. And how often we even forget to say “thank you”.

For us Christians, thanksgiving was the name given to the most essential Sacrament there is: the Eucharist . In fact, the Greek word means precisely this: thanksgiving . Eucharist: thanksgiving. Christians, as all believers, bless God for the gift of life. To live is above all to have received life. All of us are born because someone wanted us to have life. And this is only the first of a long series of debts that we incur by living. Debts of gratitude. During our lives, more than one person has gazed on us with pure eyes, gratuitously. Often, these people are educators, catechists, persons who carried out their roles above and beyond what was required of them. And they stirred gratitude within us. Even friendship is a gift for which we should always be grateful.

This “thank you” that we must say continually, this thanks that Christians share with everyone, grows in the encounter with Jesus. The Gospels attest that when Jesus passed by, he often stirred

joy and praise to God in those who met Him. The Gospel accounts of Christmas are filled with prayerful people whose hearts are greatly moved by the coming of the Saviour. And we too were called to participate in this immense jubilation. The episode of the ten lepers who are healed also suggests this. Naturally, they were all happy about having recovered their health, thus being allowed to end that unending forced quarantine that excluded them from the community. But among them, there was one who experienced an additional joy: in addition to being healed, he rejoices at the encounter with Jesus. He is not only freed from evil, but he now possesses the certainty of being loved. This is the crux: when you thank someone, you express the certainty that you are loved. And this is a huge step: to have the certainty that you are loved. It is the discovery of love as the force that governs the world. Dante would say: the Love that "moves the sun and other stars" (Paradise, XXIII, 145). We are no longer vagabonds wandering aimlessly here and there, no: we have a home, we dwell in Christ, and from that "dwelling" we contemplate the rest of the world which appears infinitely more beautiful to us. We are children of love, we are brothers and sisters of love. We are men and women of grace.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us seek to remain always in the joy of the encounter with Jesus. Let us cultivate joyfulness. The devil, instead, after having deluded us — with whatever temptation — always leaves us sad and alone. If we are in Christ, there is no sin and no threat that can ever prevent us from continuing our journey with joy, along with many fellow travel companions.

Above all, let us not forget to thank: if we are bearers of gratitude, the world itself will become better, even if only a little bit, but that is enough to transmit a bit of hope. The world needs hope. And with gratitude, with this attitude of thanksgiving, we transmit a bit of hope. Everything is united and everything is connected, and each one can do their part wherever they are. The path to happiness is the one that Saint Paul described at the end of one of his letters: "Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit" (1Thess 5:17-19). Do not quench the Spirit, what a beautiful project of life! Not quenching the Spirit that we have within leads us to gratitude.

Catechesis on prayer - 21. The prayer of praise

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us continue our catechesis on prayer, and today we will give space to the dimension of praise.

We will take our cue from a critical passage in the life of Jesus. After the first miracles and the involvement of the disciples in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, the mission of the Messiah undergoes a crisis. John the Baptist has doubts and makes Him receive this message — John is in jail: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Mt 11:3). He feels this anguish of not knowing whether he is mistaken in his proclamation. There are always dark moments, moments of spiritual nighttime, and John is going through this moment. There is hostility in the villages along the lake, where Jesus had performed so many prodigious signs (cf. Mt 11:20-24). Now, precisely in this disappointing moment, Matthew relates a truly surprising fact: Jesus does not raise a lament to the Father but, rather, a hymn of jubilation: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes" (Mt 11:25). Thus, in the midst of a crisis, amid the darkness of the soul of so many people, such as John the Baptist, Jesus blesses the Father, Jesus praises the Father. But why?

First and foremost, he praises Him for who He is : "Father, Lord of heaven and earth". Jesus rejoices in his spirit because he knows and feels that his Father is the God of the Universe, and vice versa, the Lord of all that exists is the Father, "My Father". Praise springs from this experience of feeling that he is "Son of the Most High". Jesus feels he is Son of the Most High.

And then Jesus praises the Father for favouring the little ones. It is what he himself experiences, preaching in the villages: the "learned" and the "wise" remain suspicious and closed; they make calculations; while the "little ones" open themselves and welcome his message. This can only be the will of the Father, and Jesus rejoices in this. We too must rejoice and praise God because humble and simple people welcome the Gospel. When I see these simple people, these humble people who go on pilgrimages, who go to pray, who sing, who praise, people who perhaps lack many things but whose humility leads them to praise God. In the future of the world and in the hopes of the Church there are always the "little ones": those who do not consider themselves better than others, who are aware of their own limitations and their sins, who do not want to lord it over others, who, in God the Father, recognize that we are all brothers and sisters.

Therefore, in that moment of apparent failure, where everything is dark, Jesus prays, praising the Father. And his prayer also leads us, readers of the Gospel, to judge our personal defeats in a different way, to judge differently the situations in which we do not see clearly the presence and action of God, when it seems that evil prevails and there is no way to stop it. Jesus, who highly recommended the prayer of asking, at the very moment when he would have had reason to ask the Father for explanations, instead begins to praise him. It seems to be a contradiction, but therein lies the truth.

To whom is praise helpful? To us or to God? A text of the Eucharistic liturgy invites us to pray to God in this way, it says this: “Although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness, but profit us for salvation” (Roman Missal , Common Preface IV). By giving praise, we are saved.

The prayer of praise is helpful to us. The Catechism defines it this way: it “shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory” (no. 2639). Paradoxically it must be practised not only when life fills us with happiness, but above all in difficult moments, in moments of darkness when the path becomes an uphill climb. That too is the time for praise, like Jesus who in the dark moment praises the Father. Because we learn that, through that ascent, that difficult path, that wearisome path, those demanding passages, we get to see a new panorama, a broader horizon. Giving praise is like breathing pure oxygen: it purifies the soul, it makes you look far ahead, it does not leave you imprisoned in the difficult and dark moment of hardship.

There is a great teaching in that prayer that for eight centuries has never lost its beat, that Saint Francis composed at the end of his life: the “Canticle of Brother Sun” or “of the creatures”. The Poverello did not compose it in a moment of joy, of well-being, but on the contrary, in the midst of difficulty. Francis was by then almost blind, and he felt in his soul the weight of a solitude he had never before experienced: the world had not changed since the beginning of his preaching, there were still those who let themselves be torn apart by quarrels, and in addition he was aware that death was approaching ever nearer.

It may have been a moment of disillusionment, of that extreme disillusionment and the perception of his own failure. But at that instant of sadness, in that dark instant Francis prays. How does he pray? “Praised be You, my Lord…”. He prays by giving praise. Francis praises God for everything, for all the gifts of creation, and even for death, which he courageously calls “sister”, “sister death”. These examples of saints, of Christians, and also of Jesus, of praising God in difficult moments, open to us the gates of a great road towards the Lord, and they always purify us. Praise always purifies.

The Saints show us that we can always give praise, in good times and bad, because God is the faithful Friend. This is the foundation of praise: God is the faithful Friend, and his love never fails. He is always beside us. He always awaits us. It has been said that “he is the sentinel who is close to you and keeps you going forward with confidence”. In difficult and dark moments, let us have the courage to say: “Blessed are you, O Lord”. Praising the Lord. This will do us much good.

Catechesis - Prayer for Christian Unity

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In this catechesis, we will reflect on the prayer for Christian unity. In fact, the week of the 18th to the 25th of January is dedicated specifically to this — to ask God for the gift of unity to overcome the scandal of division among believers in Jesus. After the Last Supper, he prayed for his own, "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). This was his prayer before the Passion; we could call it his spiritual testament. Let us note, however, that the Lord did not command that his disciples be united. No, he prayed to the Father for us, so that we might be one. This means that we are unable to achieve unity by our own strength. Unity is above all a gift, it is a grace to be requested through prayer.

Each one of us needs it. In fact, we know that we are incapable of preserving unity even within ourselves. The Apostle Paul, too, felt a painful conflict within himself: wanting the good but being inclined toward evil (cf. Rm 7:19). He had thus grasped the root of so many divisions that surround us — between people, in families, in society, between nations and even between believers — it is inside us. The Second Vatican Council stated, "the imbalances under which the world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another.[...] Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society" (Gaudium et spes, 10). Therefore, the solution to these divisions is not to oppose someone, because discord generates more discord. The true remedy begins by asking God for peace, reconciliation, unity.

This is true, first of all, for Christians. Unity can be achieved only as a fruit of prayer. Diplomatic efforts and academic dialogue are not enough. Jesus knew this and opened the way for us by praying. Our prayer for unity is thus a humble but trusting participation in the prayer of the Lord , who promised that any prayer said in his name would be heard by the Father (cf. Jn 15:7). At this point, we can ask ourselves: "Do I pray for unity?". It is Jesus' will but, if we inspect the intentions for which we pray, we will probably realize that we have prayed little, perhaps never, for Christian unity. And yet, the world's faith depends on it; in fact, the Lord asked for unity among us "so that the world might believe" (Jn 17:21). The world will not believe because we will convince it with good arguments, but rather if we will have borne witness to the love that unites us and draws all of us near.

During this time of serious hardship, the prayer that unity may prevail over conflict is even more necessary. It is urgent that we set aside particularism in order to promote the common good, and our good example is fundamental to this: it is essential that Christians pursue the path toward full visible unity. In the last decades, thanks be to God, there have been many steps forward, but we need to persevere in love and in prayer, without lacking trust nor tiring. It is a path that the Holy Spirit gave rise to in the Church, in Christians and in us all, from which there is no turning back. Ever onward!

To pray means to fight for unity. Yes, fight, because our enemy, the devil, is the one who divides, as the word itself says. Jesus asks for unity in the Holy Spirit, to create unity. The devil always divides. He always divides because it is convenient for him to divide. He fosters division everywhere, and in any way, while the Holy Spirit always joins in unity. In general, the devil does not tempt us with high theology, but with the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters. He is astute: he magnifies others' mistakes and defects, sows discord, provokes criticism and creates factions. God has another way: He takes us as we are, he loves us so much, but he loves us as we are and takes us as we are; he takes those of us who are different, he takes sinners, and he always spurs us towards unity.

We can evaluate ourselves and ask ourselves if, in the places in which we live, we nurture conflict or fight for an increase of unity with the tools that God has given us: prayer and love. What fuels conflict, instead, is gossip, always talking behind peoples' backs. Gossip is the most handy weapon the devil has to divide the Christian community, to divide families, to divide friends, to always divide. The Holy Spirit always inspires us to unity.

The theme of this Week of Prayer specifically regards love: "Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit" (cf. Jn 15:5-9). The root of communion is love of Christ who makes us overcome our prejudices to see in others a brother or sister to be loved always. Then we will discover that the Christians of other confessions — with their traditions, with their history — are gifts from God, they are gifts present within the territories of our diocesan and parish communities. Let us begin to pray for them and, when possible, with them. We will thus learn to love and appreciate them. Prayer, the Council reminds us, is the soul of the whole ecumenical movement (cf. Unitatis redintegratio, 8). Therefore, may prayer be the starting point to help Jesus achieve his dream: that they all may be one.

Catechesis on prayer - 22. The prayer with the Sacred Scripture

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today I would like to focus on the prayer we can do beginning with a Bible passage. The words of Sacred Scripture were not written to remain imprisoned on papyrus, parchment or paper, but to be received by a person who prays, making them blossom in his or her heart. The Word of God goes to the heart. The Catechism affirms that: "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture" — the Bible cannot be read like a novel — "so that a dialogue takes place between God and man" (n. 2653). This is where prayer leads you, because it is a dialogue with God. That Bible verse was written for me too, centuries and centuries ago, to bring me a word of God. It was written for each of us. This experience happens to all believers: a passage from Scripture, heard many times already, unexpectedly speaks to me one day, and enlightens a situation that I am living. But it is necessary that I be present on that day for that appointment with the Word. That I be there, listening to the Word. Every day God passes and sows a seed in the soil of our lives. We do not know whether today he will find dry ground, brambles, or good soil that will make that seed grow (cf. Mk 4: 3-9). That they become for us the living Word of God depends on us, on our prayer, on the open heart with which we approach the Scriptures. God passes continually through Scripture. And here I return to what I said last week, to what Saint Augustine said: "I am afraid of God when he passes". Why is he afraid? That he will not listen to him. That he will not realize that he is the Lord.

Through prayer a new incarnation of the Word takes place. And we are the "tabernacles" where the words of God seek to be welcomed and preserved, so that they may visit the world. This is why we must approach the Bible without ulterior motives, without exploiting it. The believer does not turn to the Holy Scriptures to support his or her own philosophical and moral view, but because he or she hopes for an encounter; the believer knows that those words were written in the Holy Spirit, and that therefore they should be welcomed and understood in that same Spirit, so that the encounter can occur.

It bothers me a little when I hear Christians who recite verses from the Bible like parrots. "Oh, yes... Oh, the Lord says... He wants this...". But did you encounter the Lord, with that verse? It is not only a question of memory: it is a question of the memory of the heart, which opens you to the encounter with the Lord. And that word, that verse, leads you to the encounter with the Lord.

Thus, we read the Scriptures so that they may "read us". And it is a grace to be able to recognize oneself in this passage or that character, in this or that situation. The Bible was not written for a generic humanity, but for us, for me, for you, for men and women in flesh and blood, men and women who have a name and a surname, like me, like you. And when the Word of God, infused with the Holy Spirit, is received with an open heart, it does not leave things as they were before: never. Something changes. And this is the grace and the power of the Word of God.

Christian tradition is rich in experiences and reflections on prayer with the Sacred Scripture. In particular, the method of "Lectio divina" was established; it originated in monastic circles, but is

now also practised by Christians who frequent their parishes. It is first of all a matter of reading the biblical passage attentively: even more, I would say with “obedience” to the text, to understand what it means in and of itself. One then enters into dialogue with Scripture, so that those words become a cause for meditation and prayer: while remaining faithful to the text, I begin to ask myself what it “says to me”. This is a delicate step: we must not slip into subjective interpretations, but rather become part of the living Tradition, which unites each of us to Sacred Scripture. The last step of Lectio divina is contemplation. Words and thoughts here give way to love, as between lovers for whom sometimes it is enough to just look at each other in silence. The biblical text remains, but like a mirror, like an icon to be contemplated. And in this way, there is dialogue.

Through prayer, the Word of God comes to abide in us and we abide in it. The Word inspires good intentions and sustains action; it gives us strength and serenity, and even when it challenges us, it gives us peace. On “bad” and confusing days, it guarantees to the heart a core of confidence and of love that protects it from the attacks of the evil one.

In this way the Word of God is made flesh — allow me to use this expression: made flesh — in those who receive it in prayer. The intuition emerges in some ancient texts that Christians identify so completely with the Word that, even if all the Bibles in the world were to be burned, its “mould” could still be saved through the imprint it left on the life of the saints. This is a beautiful expression.

Christian life is at the same time a work of obedience and of creativity. Good Christians must be obedient, but they must be creative. Obedient, because they listen to the Word of God; creative, because they have the Holy Spirit within who drives them to be so, to lead them forward. At the end of one of his discourses addressed in the form of parables, Jesus makes this comparison: “Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure” — the heart — “what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52). The Holy Scriptures are an inexhaustible treasure. May the Lord grant us all to draw ever more from them, though prayer. Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer - 23. Praying in the liturgy

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

In the history of the Church, there has often been a temptation to practice an intimist Christianity that does not recognize the spiritual importance of public liturgical rites. Often, this tendency claimed the supposed greater purity of a religiosity that did not depend on external ceremonies, which were considered a useless or harmful burden. At the centre of the criticism was not a particular ritual form, or a particular way of celebrating, but rather the liturgy itself, the liturgical form of praying.

Indeed, one can find certain forms of spirituality in the Church that were unable to adequately integrate the liturgical moment. Many of the faithful, while participating assiduously in the rites, especially in Sunday Mass, drew nourishment for their faith and spiritual life more from other sources, of a devotional type.

Much has been achieved in recent decades. The Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium of the Second Vatican Council represents a pivotal point in this long journey. It comprehensively and organically reaffirms the importance of the divine liturgy for the life of Christians, who find therein that objective mediation required by the fact that Jesus Christ is not an idea or a sentiment, but a living Person, and his Mystery a historical event. The prayer of Christians passes through tangible mediations: Sacred Scripture, the Sacraments, liturgical rites, the community. In Christian life, the corporeal and material sphere cannot be disregarded, because in Jesus Christ it became the way of salvation. We could say that we should pray with the body too: the body enters into prayer.

Therefore, there is no Christian spirituality that is not grounded in the celebration of the sacred mysteries. The Catechism writes: “In the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays” (n. 2655). The liturgy, in itself, is not just spontaneous prayer, but something more, and more original: it is an act that founds the whole Christian experience and, therefore, prayer, too, is an event, it is a happening, it is presence, it is encounter. It is an encounter with Christ. Christ makes himself present in the Holy Spirit through the sacramental signs: hence the need for us Christians to participate in the divine mysteries. A Christianity without a liturgy, I dare say, is perhaps a Christianity without Christ. Without the Total Christ. Even in the barest of rites, such as the one some Christians have celebrated and continue to celebrate in places of incarceration, or in the hiddenness of a house in times of persecution, Christ is truly present and gives himself to his faithful.

Precisely because of its objective dimension, the liturgy asks to be celebrated with fervour, so that the grace poured out in the rite is not dispersed, but rather reaches the experience of each one. The Catechism explains it very well and says this: “Prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration” (ibid.). Many Christian prayers do not originate from the liturgy, but all of them, if they are Christian, presuppose the liturgy, that is, the sacramental mediation of Jesus Christ. Every time we celebrate a Baptism, or consecrate the bread and wine in the

Eucharist, or anoint the body of a sick person with Holy Oil, Christ is here! It is he who acts and is present just as he was when he healed the weak limbs of a sick person, or when he delivered his testament for the salvation of the world at the Last Supper.

The prayer of the Christian makes the sacramental presence of Jesus his or her own. What is external to us becomes part of us: the liturgy expresses this even in the very natural gesture of eating. Mass cannot simply be “listened to”: it is also an incorrect expression, “I am going to listen to Mass”. Mass cannot merely be listened to, as if we were just spectators of something that slips away without our involvement. Mass is always celebrated , and not only by the priest who presides it, but by all Christians who experience it. And the centre is Christ! All of us, in the diversity of gifts and ministries, join in his action, because he, Christ, is the Protagonist of the liturgy.

When the first Christians began to worship, they did so by actualizing Jesus’ deeds and words, with the light and power of the Holy Spirit, so that their lives, reached by that grace, would become a spiritual sacrifice offered to God. This approach was a true “revolution”. Saint Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1). Life is called to become worship to God, but this cannot happen without prayer, especially liturgical prayer. May this thought help us all when we go to Mass: I go to pray in the community, I go to pray with Christ who is present. When we go to the celebration of a Baptism, for example, it is Christ present there, who baptizes. “But Father, this is an idea, a figure of speech”: no, it is not a figure of speech. Christ is present, and in the liturgy you pray with Christ who is beside you.

Catechesis on prayer - 24. Prayer in daily life

Good morning,

In the preceding catechesis we saw how Christian prayer is “anchored” in the Liturgy. Today, we will shed light on how it always returns into daily life from the Liturgy: on the streets, in offices, on public transportation… And there it continues the dialogue with God: one who prays is like someone in love who always carries the beloved person in his or her heart wherever they go.

Essentially, everything becomes a part of this dialogue with God: every joy becomes a reason for praise, every trial is an opportunity to ask for help. Prayer is always alive in our lives, like embers, even when the mouth does not speak, but the heart speaks. Every thought, even apparently “profane” ones, can be permeated by prayer. There is even a prayerful aspect in human intelligence; it is, in fact, a window peering into the mystery: it illuminates the few steps in front of us and then opens up to the entire reality, this reality that precedes it and surpasses it. This mystery does not have a disquieting or anxious face, no. Knowledge of Christ makes us confident that whatever our eyes and our minds’ eyes cannot see, rather than nothing being there, there is someone who is waiting for us; there is infinite grace. And thus, Christian prayer instils an invincible hope in the human heart: whatever experience may touch us on our journey, God’s love can turn it into good.

In this regard, the Catechism reads: “We learn to pray at certain moments by hearing the Word of the Lord and sharing in his Paschal Mystery, but his Spirit is offered us at all times, in the events of each day, to make prayer spring up from us… time is in the Father’s hands; it is in the present that we encounter him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today” (n. 2659). Today I meet God, today is always the day of the encounter.

There is no day more wonderful day than the one we are living. Those who live always thinking about the future: “But the future will be better…”, but do not take each day as it comes are people who live in their fantasy, they do not know how to deal with concrete reality. And today is real, today is concrete. And prayer takes place today. Jesus comes to meet us today, the day we are living. And it is prayer that transforms this day into grace, or better, that transforms us: it quells anger, sustains love, multiplies joy, instils the strength to forgive. Sometimes it will seem that it is no longer we who are living, but that grace lives and works in us through prayer. And when an angry, an unhappy thought comes to us, that moves us toward bitterness, let us stop ourselves and say to the Lord: “Where are you? And where am I going?” And the Lord is there, the Lord will give us the right word, the advice to go ahead without that bitter taste of negativity. For prayer is always — to use a profane word — positive. Always. It will carry you forward. Each day that begins, if welcomed in prayer, is accompanied by courage, so that the problems we have to face no longer seem to be obstacles to our happiness, but rather appeals from God, opportunities for our encounter with him. And when one is accompanied by the Lord, he or she feels more courageous, freer, and even happier.

Thus, let us always pray for everything and for everyone, even for our enemies. Jesus counselled us to do this: “Pray for your enemies”. Let us pray for our dear ones, but also for those we do not know. Let us pray even for our enemies, as I said, as the Scriptures often invite us to do. Prayer inclines us toward a superabundant love. Let us pray above all for unhappy people, for those who weep in solitude and give up hope that there might still be someone who loves them. Prayer works miracles; and so the poor understand, by God’s grace that, even in their precarious situation, the prayer of a Christian makes Christ’s compassion present. Indeed, he looked with great tenderness on the weary and lost crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd (cf Mk 6:34). The Lord is — let us not forget — the Lord of compassion, of nearness, of tenderness: three words never to be forgotten. Because this is the Lord’s style: compassion, nearness, tenderness.

Prayer helps us love others, despite their mistakes and their sins. The person is always more important than his or her actions, and Jesus did not judge the world, but saved it. The life of people who always judge others, who are always condemning, judging, is a horrible one… It is a horrible, unhappy life. Jesus came to save us. Open your heart, forgive, give others the benefit of the doubt, understand, you, too, be close to others, be compassionate, be tender, like Jesus. We have to love each and every one, remembering in prayer that we are all sinners and at the same time loved individually by God. Loving the world in this way, loving it with tenderness, we will discover that each day and everything bears within it a fragment of God’s mystery.

Again, the Catechism reads: “Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the Kingdom revealed to ‘little children,’ to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the beatitudes. It is right and good to pray so that the coming of the kingdom of justice and peace may influence the march of history, but it is just as important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations; all forms of prayer can be the leaven to which the Lord compares the kingdom” (n. 2660).

Mankind — the human person, men and women, all of us — is like a breath, like a blade of grass (cf Ps 144:4; 103:15). The philosopher Pascal once wrote: “There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him”.[1] We are fragile beings, but we know how to pray: this is our greatest dignity and it is also our strength. Have courage. Pray in every moment, in every situation because the Lord is near us. And when a prayer is said according to Jesus’ heart, it obtains miracles.

Catechesis on prayer - 25. Prayer and the Trinity. 1

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on prayer, today and next week we will see how, thanks to Jesus Christ, prayer opens us up to the Trinity — to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — to the immense sea of God who is Love. It is Jesus who opened up Heaven to us and projected us into a relationship with God. It was he who did this: he opened up to us this relationship with the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is what the Apostle John says at the conclusion of the prologue of his Gospel: "No one has ever seen God: the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Jesus revealed the identity to us, this identity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We really did not know how to pray: what words, what feelings and what language were appropriate for God. In that request the disciples addressed to the Teacher, which we have often recalled in the course of these catecheses, there is all of humanity's fumbling, repeated attempts, often unsuccessful, to address the Creator: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1).

Not all prayers are equal, and not all are convenient: the Bible itself attests to the negative outcome of many prayers, which are rejected. Perhaps God at times is not pleased with our prayers and we are not even aware of this. God looks at the hands of those who pray: to make them pure it is not necessary to wash them; if anything, one should refrain from evil acts. Saint Francis prayed: "Nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare ", that is, "no man is worthy to mention Your name" (Canticle of the Sun).

But perhaps the most moving acknowledgment of the poverty of our prayer came from the lips of the Roman centurion who one day begged Jesus to heal his sick servant (cf. Mt 8:5–13). He felt totally inadequate: he was not a Jew, he was an officer in the detested occupying army. But his concern for his servant emboldens him, and he says: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (v. 8). It is the phrase we also repeat in every Eucharistic liturgy. To dialogue with God is a grace: we are not worthy of it, we have no rights to claim, we "limp" with every word and every thought... But Jesus is the door that opens us to this dialogue with God.

Why should humanity be loved by God? There are no obvious reasons, there is no proportion.... So much so that most mythologies do not contemplate the possibility of a god who cares about human affairs; on the contrary, they are considered bothersome and boring, entirely negligible. Let us remember God's phrase to his people, repeated in Deuteronomy: "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us?". This closeness of God is the revelation! Some philosophers say that God can only think of himself. If anything, it is we humans who try to persuade the deity and be pleasing to his eyes. Hence the duty of "religion", with the procession of sacrifices and devotions to be offered continuously to ingratiate ourselves with a mute God, an indifferent God. There is no dialogue. It was only Jesus, it was only the revelation of God to Moses before Jesus, when God introduced himself; it was only the Bible that opened us up

to the path of dialogue with God. Let us remember: “What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as ours?”; this closeness of God that opens us up to dialogue with him.

A God who loves humanity: we would never have had the courage to believe in him, had we not known Jesus. The knowledge of Jesus made us understand this, it revealed this to us. It is the scandal that we find inscribed in the parable of the merciful father, or in that of the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep (cf. Lk 15). We would not have been able to conceive or even comprehend such stories if we had not encountered Jesus. What God is prepared to die for people? What God loves always and patiently, without demanding to be loved in return? What God accepts the tremendous lack of gratitude of a son who asks for his inheritance in advance and leaves home, squandering ev-ery-thing? (cf. Lk 15:12–13).

It is Jesus who reveals God’s heart. Thus Jesus tells us through his life the extent to which God is Father. Tam Pater nemo : No one is Father as he is. The paternity that is closeness, compassion and tenderness. Let us not forget these three words, that are God’s style: closeness, compassion and tenderness. It is his way of expressing his paternity towards us. It is difficult for us to imagine from afar the love with which the most Holy Trinity is filled, and the depth of the reciprocal benevolence that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Eastern icons offer us a glimpse of this mystery that is the origin and joy of the whole universe.

Above all, it was beyond us to believe that this divine love would expand, landing on our human shore: we are the recipients of a love that has no equal on earth. The Catechism explains: “The sacred humanity of Jesus is therefore the way by which the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray to God our Father” (no. 2664). And this is the grace of our faith. We really could not have hoped for a higher vocation: the humanity of Jesus — God made himself close in Jesus — made available to us the very life of the Trinity; he opened, he threw wide open this door of the mystery of the love of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Catechesis on prayer - 26. Prayer and the Trinity. 2

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we will complete the catechesis on prayer as a relationship with the Holy Trinity, in particular with the Holy Spirit.

The first gift of every Christian existence is the Holy Spirit. It is not one of many gifts, but rather the fundamental Gift. The Spirit is the gift that Jesus had promised to send us. Without the Spirit there is no relationship with Christ and with the Father, because the Spirit opens our heart to God's presence and draws it into that "vortex" of love that is the very heart of God. We are not merely guests and pilgrims journeying on this earth; we are also guests and pilgrims in the mystery of the Trinity. We are like Abraham, who, one day, welcoming three wayfarers in his own tent, encountered God. If we can truly invoke God, calling him "Abba — Dad", it is because the Holy Spirit dwells in us; he is the One who transforms us deep within and makes us experience the soul-stirring joy of being loved by God as his true children. All the spiritual work within us towards God is performed by the Holy Spirit, this gift. He works within us to carry Christian life forward towards the Father, with Jesus.

The Catechism, in this respect, says: "Every time we begin to pray to Jesus it is the Holy Spirit who draws us on the way of prayer by his prevenient grace. Since he teaches us to pray by recalling Christ, how could we not pray to the Spirit too? That is why the Church invites us to call upon the Holy Spirit every day, especially at the beginning and the end of every important action" (n. 2670). This is the work of the Spirit in us. He "reminds" us of Jesus and makes him present to us — we might say that he is our Trinitarian memory, he is the memory of God in us — and he makes it present to Jesus, so that he is not reduced to a character from the past: that is, the Spirit brings Jesus to the present in our consciousness. If Christ were only far away in time, we would be alone and lost in the world. Yes, we will remember Jesus, there, far away, but it is the Spirit that brings him today, now, at this moment, in our heart. But in the Spirit everything is brought to life: the possibility of encountering Christ is open to Christians of every time and place. The possibility of encountering Christ, not only as a historical figure, is open. No: he attracts Christ to our hearts; it is the Spirit who makes us encounter Jesus. He is not distant, the Spirit is with us: Jesus still teaches his disciples by transforming their hearts, as he did with Peter, with Paul, with Mary Magdalene, with all the apostles. But why is Jesus present? Because it is the Spirit who brings him to us.

This is the experience of so many people who pray: men and women whom the Holy Spirit has formed according to the "measure" of Christ, in mercy, in service, in prayer, in catechesis.... It is a grace to be able to meet people like this: you realize that a different life pulsates in them, their gaze sees "beyond". Let us not think only of monks and hermits; they are also found among ordinary people, people who have woven a long history of dialogue with God, sometimes of inner struggle, which purifies faith. These humble witnesses have sought God in the Gospel, in the Eucharist received and adored, in the face of a brother or sister in difficulty, and they safeguard his presence like a secret flame.

The first task of Christians is precisely to keep alive this flame that Jesus brought to the earth (cf. Lk 12:49); and what is this flame? It is love, the Love of God, the Holy Spirit. Without the fire of the Spirit, the prophecies are extinguished, sorrow supplants joy, routine substitutes love, service turns into slavery. The image of the lighted lamp next to the Tabernacle, where the Eucharist is reserved, comes to mind. Even when the church empties and evening falls, even when the church is closed, that lamp remains lit, and continues to burn; no one sees it, yet it burns before the Lord. This is how the Spirit, in our heart, is always present like that lamp.

Again we read in the Catechism: "The Holy Spirit, whose anointing permeates our whole being, is the interior Master of Christian prayer. He is the artisan of the living tradition of prayer. To be sure, there are as many paths of prayer as there are persons who pray, but it is the same Spirit acting in all and with all. It is in the communion of the Holy Spirit that Christian prayer is prayer in the Church" (n. 2672). Very often it happens that we do not pray, we don't feel like praying, or many times we pray like parrots, with the mouth, but our heart is not in it. This is the moment to say to the Spirit: "Come, come Holy Spirit, warm my heart. Come and teach me to pray, teach me to look to the Father, to look to the Son. Teach what the path of faith is like. Teach me how to love and, above all, teach me to have an attitude of hope". It means calling on the Spirit continually, so he may be present in our lives.

It is therefore the Spirit who writes the history of the Church and of the world. We are open books, willing to receive his handwriting. And in each of us the Spirit composes original works, because there is never a Christian who is completely identical to another. In the infinite field of holiness, the one God, the Trinity of Love, makes the variety of witnesses flourish: all are equal in dignity, but also unique in the beauty that the Spirit has willed to emanate in each of those whom God's mercy has made his children. Let us not forget, the Spirit is present; he is present in us. Let us listen to the Spirit, let us call to the Spirit — he is the gift, the gift that God has given us — and let us say to him: "Holy Spirit, I do not know your face — we do not know it — but I know that you are the strength, that you are the light, that you are able to make me go forth and to teach me how to pray. Come, Holy Spirit". This is a beautiful prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit".

Catechesis on prayer - 27. Praying in communion with Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today the catechesis is dedicated to prayer in communion with Mary. It occurs precisely on the Vigil of the Solemnity of the Annunciation. We know that the main pathway of Christian prayer is the humanity of Jesus. In fact, the confidence typical of Christian prayer would be meaningless if the Word had not become incarnate, giving us, in the Spirit, his filial relationship with the Father. We heard in the Reading of the gathering of the disciples, the pious women and Mary, praying after Jesus' Ascension. The first Christian community was awaiting Jesus' gift, Jesus' promise.

Christ is the Mediator, the bridge that we cross to turn to the Father (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2674). He is the only Redeemer: there are no co-redeemers with Christ. He is the Mediator par excellence. He is the Mediator. Each prayer we raise to God is through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, and is fulfilled thanks to his intercession. The Holy Spirit extends Christ's mediation to every time and every place: there is no other name by which we can be saved (cf. Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and humanity.

Other references Christians find for their prayer and devotion take on meaning from Christ's sole mediation, first among them, the Virgin Mary, Jesus' Mother.

She occupies a privileged place in the lives of Christians, and therefore, in their prayer as well, because she is the Mother of Jesus. Eastern Churches have often depicted her as the Odigitria, the one who "shows the way"; that is, her Son, Jesus Christ. The beautiful, ancient painting of the Odigitria in the Cathedral of Bari comes to my mind. It is simple. Our Lady who shows Jesus, naked. Then they put a shirt on him to cover his nakedness, but the truth is that Jesus is depicted naked, to reveal that he, man, born of Mary, is the Mediator. And she indicates the Mediator: she is the Odigitria. Her presence is everywhere in Christian iconography, sometimes very prominently, but always in relation to her Son and in connection with him. Her hands, her eyes, her behaviour are a living "catechesis", always indicating the cornerstone, the centre: Jesus. Mary is completely directed toward him (cf. CCC, 2674) to such an extent that we can say she is more disciple than Mother. That indication, at the wedding at Cana, Mary states: "do whatever he will tell you". She always refers to Christ. She is the first disciple.

This is the role Mary fulfilled throughout her entire earthly life and which she forever retains: to be the humble handmaid of the Lord, nothing more. At a certain point in the Gospels, she almost seems to disappear; but she reappears in the crucial moments, such as at Cana, when her Son, thanks to her caring intervention, performs his first "sign" (cf. Jn 2:1-12), and then on Golgotha at the foot of the cross.

Jesus extended Mary's maternity to the entire Church when he entrusted her to his beloved disciple shortly before dying on the cross. From that moment on, we have all been gathered under her mantle, as depicted in certain medieval frescoes or paintings. Even the first Latin antiphon — sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genitrix: Our Lady, who, as the Mother to whom

Jesus entrusted us, ‘enfolds’ us all; but as a Mother, not as a goddess, not as co-redeemer: as a Mother. It is true that Christian piety has always given her beautiful titles, as a child gives his or her mom: how many beautiful things children say to their mom whom they love so much! But let us be careful: the beautiful things that the Church, the Saints, say about Mary, take nothing away from Christ’s sole Redemption. He is the only Redeemer. They are expressions of love like a child for his or her mom — some are exaggerated. But love, as we know, always makes us exaggerate things, but out of love.

And so, we began to pray to her using several expressions present in the Gospels directed to her: “full of grace”, “blessed are you among women” (cf. CCC, 2676s.). Sanctioned by the Council of Ephesus, the title “Theotokos”, “Mother of God”, was soon added to the Hail Mary. And, analogously as with the Our Father, after the praise we add the supplication: we ask Mary to pray for us sinners, that she intercede with her tenderness, “now and at the hour of our death”. Now, in life’s concrete situations, and in the final moment, so that she may accompany us — as Mother, as the first disciple — in our passage to eternal life.

Mary is always present at the bedside of her children when they depart this world. If someone is alone and abandoned, she is Mother, she is nearby, as she was beside her Son when everyone had abandoned him.

Mary has been and is present in these days of the pandemic, close to the people who, unfortunately, have ended their earthly journey in a condition of isolation, without the comfort of the closeness of their loved ones. Mary is always there beside us, with her maternal tenderness.

Prayers said to her are not in vain. The Woman who said “yes”, who promptly welcomed the Angel’s invitation, also responds to our supplications; she hears our voices, even those that remain closed in our hearts that do not have the strength to be uttered but which God knows better than we ourselves do. She listens as Mother. Just like, and more than, every good mother, Mary protects us from danger, she is concerned about us even when we are focused on our own matters and lose a sense of the way, and endanger not only our health, but also our salvation. Mary is there, praying for us, praying for those who do not pray. Praying with us. Why? Because she is our Mother.

Catechesis on prayer - 28. Praying in communion with the Saints

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to reflect on the connection between prayer and the communion of saints. In fact, when we pray, we never do so alone: even if we do not think about it, we are immersed in a majestic river of invocations that precedes us and proceeds after us.

Contained in the prayers we find in the Bible, that often resound in the liturgy, are the traces of ancient stories, of prodigious liberations, of deportations and sad exiles, of emotional returns, of praise ringing out before the wonders of creation... And thus, these voices are passed on from generation to generation, in a continual intertwining between personal experience and that of the people and the humanity to which we belong. No one can separate themselves from their own history, the history of their own people. We always carry this inheritance in our attitudes, and also in prayer. In the prayers of praise, especially those that blossom from the hearts of the little ones and the humble, echo parts of the Magnificat that Mary lifted up to God in front of her relative Elizabeth; or of the exclamation of the elderly Simeon who, taking Baby Jesus in his arms, said: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word" (Lk 2:29).

Prayers — those that are good — are "expansive", they propagate themselves continuously, with or without being posted on social media: from hospital wards, from moments of festive gatherings to those in which we suffer silently... The suffering of each is the suffering of all, and one's happiness is transmitted to someone else's soul. Suffering and happiness are part of a single history: they are stories that create history in one's own life. This history is relived in one's own words, but the experience is the same.

Prayer is always born again: each time we join our hands and open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous saints and recognized saints who pray with us and who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters who have preceded us on this same human adventure. In the Church there is no grief that is borne in solitude, there are no tears shed in oblivion, because everyone breathes and participates in one common grace. It is no coincidence that in the ancient church people were buried in gardens surrounding a sacred building, as if to say that, in some way, the multitude who preceded us participate in every Eucharist. Our parents and grandparents are there, our godfathers and godmothers are there, our catechists and other teachers are there... That faith that was passed on, transmitted, that we received. Along with faith, the way of praying and prayer were also transmitted.

Saints are still here, not far away from us; and their representations in churches evoke that "cloud of witnesses" that always surrounds us (cf. Heb 12:1). At the beginning, we heard the Reading of the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. They are witnesses that we do not adore — certainly, we do not adore these saints — but whom we venerate and who, in thousands of different ways, bring us to Jesus Christ, the only Lord and Mediator between God and humanity. A "saint" who does not bring you to Jesus Christ is not a saint, not even a Christian. A saint makes you remember Jesus Christ because he or she journeyed along the path of life as a Christian.

Saints remind us that holiness can blossom even in our lives, however weak and marked by sin. In the Gospels we read that the first saint to be “canonized” was a thief, and he was “canonized”, not by a Pope, but by Jesus himself. Holiness is a journey of life, of a long, short or instantaneous encounter with Jesus, but always a witness. A saint is a witness, a man or woman who encountered Jesus and followed Jesus. It is never too late to convert to the Lord who is good and great in love (cf. Ps 103:8).

The Catechism explains that the saints “contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth.[…] Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC, 2683). There is a mysterious solidarity in Christ between those who have already passed to the other life and we pilgrims in this one: our deceased loved ones continue to take care of us from Heaven. They pray for us, and we pray for them and we pray with them.

We already experience this connection in prayer here in this earthly life, this connection of prayer between ourselves and the saints, that is, between us and those who have already reached the fullness of life, this bond of prayer: we pray for each other, we ask for and offer prayers… The first way to pray for someone is to speak to God about him or her. If we do this frequently, every day, our hearts are not closed but open to our brothers and sisters. To pray for others is the first way to love them and it moves us toward concretely drawing near. Even in moments of conflict, a way of dissolving the disagreement, of softening it, is to pray for the person with whom I am in conflict. And something changes with prayer. The first thing that changes is my heart, my attitude. The Lord changes it to make an encounter possible, a new encounter, to prevent the conflict from becoming a never-ending war.

The first way to face a time of anguish is to ask our brothers and sisters, the saints above all, to pray for us. The name given to us at Baptism is not a label or a decoration! It is usually the name of the Virgin, or a Saint, who expects nothing other than to “give us a hand” in life, to give us a hand to obtain the grace we need from God. If the trials in our life have not reached breaking point, if we are still capable of persevering, if despite everything we proceed trustingly, perhaps, more than to our own merits, we owe all this to the intercession of many saints, some who are in Heaven, others who are pilgrims like us on earth, who have protected and accompanied us, because we all know there are holy people here on this earth, saintly men and women who live in holiness. They do not know it; nor do we know it. But there are saints, everyday saints, hidden saints, or as I like to say, the “saints next door”, those who share their lives with us, who work with us and live a life of holiness.

Therefore, blessed be Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world, together with this immense flowering of saintly men and women who populate the earth and who have made their life a hymn to God. For — as Saint Basil said — “The Spirit is truly the dwelling of the saints since they offer themselves as a dwelling place for God and are called his temple” (Liber de Spiritu Sancto 26, 62: PG 32, 184A; cf. CCC, 2684)

Catechesis on prayer - 29. The Church, teacher of prayer

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The Church is a great school of prayer. Many of us learned how to whisper our first prayers while on our parents' or grandparents' laps. We might, perhaps, cherish the memory of our mommy and daddy who taught us to say our prayers before going to bed. These moments of recollection are often those in which parents listen to some intimate secret from their children and can give their advice inspired by the Gospel. Then, while growing up, there are other encounters, with other witnesses and teachers of prayer (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2686-2687). This is good to remember.

The life of a parish and of every Christian community is marked by liturgical moments and moments of community prayer. We become aware that that gift we received with simplicity in childhood is a great heritage, a rich inheritance and that the experience of prayer is worth deepening more and more (cf. ibid., 2688). The garment of faith is not starched, but develops with us; it is not rigid, it grows, even through moments of crisis and resurrection. Actually, there is no growth without moments of crisis because crises makes you grow. Experiencing crisis is a necessary way to grow. And the breath of faith is prayer: we grow in faith inasmuch as we learn to pray. After certain passages in life, we become aware that without faith we could not have made it and that our strength was prayer — not only personal prayer, but also that of our brothers and sisters, and of the community that accompanied and supported us, of the people who know us, of the people we ask to pray for us.

For this reason too, communities and groups dedicated to prayer constantly flourish in the Church. Some Christians even feel the call to make prayer the primary action of their day. In the Church there are monasteries, convents, hermitages where persons consecrated to God live. They often become centres of spiritual light. They are communities of prayer that radiate spirituality. They are small oases in which intense prayer is shared and fraternal communion is constructed day by day. They are cells that are vital not only for the ecclesial fabric, but for society itself. Let us think, for example, of the role that monasticism played in the birth and growth of European civilization, and other cultures as well. Praying and working in community keeps the world going. It is a driving force!

Everything in the Church originates in prayer and everything grows thanks to prayer. When the Enemy, the Evil One, wants to fight the Church, he does so first by trying to drain her fonts, preventing them from praying. For example, we see this in certain groups who agree on moving ecclesial reforms forward, changes in the life of the Church... There are all the organizations, there is the media that informs everyone... But prayer is not evident, there is no prayer. "We need to change this; we need to make this decision that is a bit tough...". The proposal is interesting. It is interesting, only with discussion, only through the media. But where is prayer? Prayer is what opens the door to the Holy Spirit, who inspires progress. Changes in the Church without prayer are not changes made by the Church. They are changes made by groups. And when the Enemy —

as I said — wants to fight the Church, he does it first of all by trying to drain her fonts, preventing prayer and [encouraging] these other proposals to be made. If prayer ceases, for a little while it seems that everything can go ahead like always — by inertia — but after a short time, the Church becomes aware that she has become like an empty shell, that she has lost her bearings, that she no longer possesses her source of warmth and love.

Holy women and men do not have easier lives than other people. Indeed, they too have their own problems to address, and, what is more, they are often the objects of opposition. But their strength is prayer, which they always draw from the inexhaustible "well" of Mother Church. Through prayer they nourish the flame of their faith, as oil would do for lamps. And thus, they move ahead walking in faith and hope. The saints, who often count for little in the eyes of the world, are in reality the ones who sustain it, not with the weapons of money and power, of the communications media, and so forth, but with the weapon of prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus poses a dramatic question that always makes us reflect: "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8), or will he find only organizations, like groups of "entrepreneurs of faith", everyone well organized, doing charitable works, many things ... or will he find faith? "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?". This question comes at the end of a parable that demonstrates the need to pray with perseverance, without tiring (cf. vv. 1-8). Therefore, we can conclude that the lamp of faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer. The lamp of the Church's true faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer. It is this that leads faith forward, and leads forward our poor, weak, sinful life, but prayer leads it securely forward. The question that we Christians need to ask ourselves is: Do I pray? Do we pray? How do I pray? Like parrots or do I pray with my heart? How do I pray? Do I pray, certain that I am in the Church and that I pray with the Church? Or do I pray somewhat according to my ideas and make my ideas become prayer? This is pagan prayer, not Christian. I repeat: We can conclude that the lamp of faith will always be lit on earth as long as there is the oil of prayer.

And this is the Church's essential task: to pray and to teach how to pray. To transmit the lamp of faith and the oil of prayer from generation to generation. The lamp of faith that illuminates, that sets things as they truly are, but that can only go forward with the oil of faith. Otherwise, it is extinguished. Without the light of this lamp, we would not be able to see the path of evangelization, or rather, we would not be able to see the path in order to believe well; we would not be able to see the faces of our brothers and sisters to draw near and serve; we would not be able to illuminate the room where we meet in community... Without faith everything collapses; and without prayer faith is extinguished. Faith and prayer together. There is no other way. For this reason the Church, which is the house and school of communion, is the house and school of faith and prayer.

Catechesis on prayer - 30. The vocal prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Prayer is dialogue with God; and every creature, in a certain sense, “dialogues” with God. Within the human being, prayer becomes word, invocation, hymn, poetry... The divine Word is made flesh, and in each person’s flesh the word returns to God in prayer.

We create words, but they are also our mothers, and to some extent they shape us. The words of a prayer get us safely through a dark valley, lead us towards green pastures rich in water, and enable us to feast in the presence of an enemy, as the Psalm teaches us (cf. Ps 23). Words are born from feelings, but there is also the reverse path, whereby words shape feelings. The Bible educates people to ensure that everything comes to light through the word, that nothing human is excluded, censored. Above all, pain is dangerous if it stays hidden, closed up within us... Pain that is closed up within us, that cannot express or give vent to itself, can poison the soul. It is deadly.

This is why Sacred Scripture teaches us to pray, sometimes even with bold words. The sacred writers do not want to deceive us about the human person: they know that our hearts also harbour unedifying feelings, even hatred. None of us is born holy, and when these negative feelings come knocking at the door of our hearts, we must be capable of defusing them with prayer and with God’s words. We also find very harsh expressions against enemies in the Psalms — expressions that the spiritual masters teach us are to be directed to the devil and to our sins — yet they are words that belong to human reality and ended up in the riverbed of the Sacred Scriptures. They are there to testify to us that if, in the face of violence, no words existed to make negative feelings harmless, to channel them in such a way that they do no harm, then the world would be overwhelmed.

The first human prayer is always a vocal recitation. The lips always move first. Although we are all aware that praying does not mean repeating words, vocal prayer is nevertheless the surest, and can always be practised. Feelings, on the other hand, however noble, are always uncertain: they come and go, they leave us and return. Not only that, but the graces of prayer are also unpredictable: at times consolations abound, but on the darkest days they seem to evaporate completely. The prayer of the heart is mysterious, and at certain times it is lacking. Instead, the prayer of the lips that is whispered or recited together, is always accessible, and is as necessary as manual labour. The Catechism teaches us about this, and states that: “Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. To his disciples, drawn by their Master’s silent prayer, Jesus teaches a vocal prayer, the Our Father” (n. 2701). “Teach us how to pray”, the disciples asked Jesus, and Jesus taught them a vocal prayer: the Lord’s Prayer. And everything is there, in that prayer.

We should all have the humility of certain elderly people who, in church, perhaps because their hearing is no longer acute, recite quietly the prayers they learned as children, filling the nave with whispers. That prayer does not disturb the silence, but testifies their fidelity to the duty of prayer,

practised throughout their lives without fail. These practitioners of humble prayer are often the great intercessors in parishes: they are the oaks that from year to year spread their branches to offer shade to the greatest number of people. Only God knows when and how much their hearts have been united to those prayers they recited: surely these people too had to face nights and moments of emptiness. But one can always remain faithful to vocal prayer. It is like an anchor: one can hold on to the rope and remain, faithful, come what may.

We all have something to learn from the perseverance of the Russian pilgrim, mentioned in a famous work on spirituality, who learned the art of prayer by repeating the same invocation over and over again: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord, have mercy on us, sinners!" (cf. CCC, 2616; 2667). He only repeated this. If his life received graces, if prayer became so warm one day as to perceive the presence of the Kingdom among us, if his gaze was transformed until it became like that of a child, it is because he insisted on reciting a simple Christian exclamation. In the end, it became part of his breathing. The story of the Russian pilgrim is beautiful: it is a book that is accessible to all. I recommend you read it; it will help you to understand what vocal prayer is.

Therefore, we must not disregard vocal prayer. One might say, "Ah, this is for children, for ignorant folk; I am seeking mental prayer, meditation, the inner void so that God might come to me". Please, one must not succumb to the pride of scorning vocal prayer. It is the prayer of the simple, the one Jesus taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven.... The words we speak take us by the hand; at times they restore flavour, they awaken even the sleepiest of hearts; they reawaken feelings we had forgotten. And they lead us by the hand towards the experience of God. And above all, they are the only ones that, in a sure way, address to God the questions that he wants to hear. Jesus did not leave us in a fog. He told us: "when you pray, say this". And he taught the Lord's Prayer (cf. Mt 6:9).

Catechesis on prayer: 31. The meditation

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today we will talk about the form of prayer called meditation. For a Christian, to "meditate" is to seek meaning: it implies placing oneself before the immense page of Revelation to try to make it our own, assuming it completely. And the Christian, after having welcomed the Word of God, does not keep it closed up within him or herself, because that Word must be met with "another book", which the Catechism calls "the book of life" (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2706). This is what we try to do every time we meditate on the Word.

The practice of meditation has received a great deal of attention in recent years. It is not only Christians who talk about it: the practice of meditation exists in almost all the world's religions. But it is also a widespread activity among people who do not have a religious view of life. We all need to meditate, to reflect, to discover ourselves, it is a human dynamic. Especially in the voracious western world, people seek meditation because it represents a barrier raised against the daily stress and emptiness that is rife everywhere. Here, then, is the image of young people and adults sitting in recollection, in silence, with eyes half closed... But what are these people doing, we might ask? They are meditating. It is a phenomenon to be looked on favourably. Indeed, we are not made for rushing all the time, we have an inner life that cannot always be trampled on. Meditating is therefore a need for everyone. Meditating, so to speak, is like stopping and taking a breath in life.

But we realise that this word, once accepted in a Christian context, takes on a uniqueness that must not be eradicated. Meditating is a necessary human dimension, but meditating in the Christian context goes further: it is a dimension that must not be eradicated. The great door through which the prayer of a baptised person passes — let us remind ourselves once again — is Jesus Christ. For the Christian, meditation enters through the door of Jesus Christ. The practice of meditation also follows this path. And when Christians pray, they do not aspire to full self-transparency, they do not seek the deepest centre of the ego. This is legitimate, but the Christian seeks something else. The prayer of the Christian is first of all an encounter with the Other, with a capital "O": the transcendent encounter with God. If an experience of prayer gives us inner peace, or self-mastery, or clarity about the path to take, these results are, so to speak, side effects of the grace of Christian prayer, which is the encounter with Jesus. That is, meditating means going to the encounter with Jesus, guided by a phrase or a word from Holy Scripture.

Throughout history, the term "meditation" has had various meanings. Even within Christianity it refers to different spiritual experiences. Nevertheless, some common lines can be traced, and in this we are helped again by the Catechism, which says the following: "There are as many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters... But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus" (n. 2707). And here, a travelling companion is indicated, one who guides us: the Holy Spirit. Christian meditation is not possible without the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us to the encounter with

Jesus. Jesus said to us, “I will send you the Holy Spirit. He will teach you and explain to you. He will teach you and explain to you”. And in meditation too, the Holy Spirit is the guide to going forward in our encounter with Jesus Christ.

Thus, there are many methods of Christian meditation: some are very simple, others more detailed; some highlight the intellectual dimension of the person, others the affective and emotional one instead. They are methods. They are all important and all worthy of practice, inasmuch as they can help the experience of faith to become an integral act of the person: one does not only pray with the mind; the entire person prays, the person in his or her entirety, just as one does not pray only with one’s feelings. The ancients used to say that the organ of prayer is the heart, and thus they explained that the whole person, starting from the centre — the heart — enters into a relationship with God, not just a few faculties. We must thus always remember that the method is a path, not a goal: any method of prayer, if it is to be Christian, is part of that Sequela Christi that is the essence of our faith. The methods of meditation are paths to travel in order to arrive at the encounter with Jesus, but if you stop on the road, and just look at the path, you will never find Jesus. You will make a “god” out of the path. However, the path is a means to bring you to Jesus. The Catechism specifies: “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilisation of the faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ” (n. 2708).

Here, then, is the grace of Christian prayer: Christ is not far away, but is always in a relationship with us. There is no aspect of his divine-human person that cannot become a place of salvation and happiness for us. Every moment of Jesus’ earthly life, through the grace of prayer, can become immediate to us, thanks to the Holy Spirit, the guide. But, you know, one cannot pray without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us! And thanks to the Holy Spirit, we too are present at the River Jordan when Jesus immerses himself to receive baptism. We too are guests at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus gives the best wine for the happiness of the couple, that is, it is the Holy Spirit who connects us with these mysteries of the life of Christ because in contemplation of Jesus we experience prayer, to join us more closely to him. We too are astonished onlookers of the thousands of healings performed by the Master. We take the Gospel, and meditate on those mysteries in the Gospel, and the Spirit guides us to being present there. And in prayer — when we pray — we are all like the cleansed leper, the blind Bartimaeus who regains his sight, Lazarus who comes out of the tomb… We too are healed by prayer just as the blind Bartimaeus was healed, the other one, the leper… We too rose again, as Lazarus rose again, because prayer of meditation guided by the Holy Spirit leads us to relive these mysteries of the life of Christ and to encounter Christ, and to say, with the blind man, “Lord, have pity on me! Have pity on me!” — “And what do you want?” — “To see, to enter into that dialogue”. And Christian meditation, led by the Spirit, leads us to this dialogue with Jesus. There is no page of the Gospel in which there is no place for us. For us Christians, meditating is a way to encounter Jesus. And in this way, only in this way, we rediscover ourselves. And this is not a withdrawal into ourselves, no: going to Jesus, and from Jesus, discovering ourselves, healed, risen, strong by the grace of

Jesus. And encountering Jesus, the Saviour of all, myself included. And this, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank you.

Catechesis on prayer: 32. Contemplative Prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on prayer and in this catechesis, I would like to reflect on contemplative prayer.

The contemplative dimension of the human being — which is not yet contemplative prayer — is a bit like the "salt" of life: it gives flavour, it seasons our day. We can contemplate by gazing at the sun that rises in the morning, or at the trees that deck themselves out in spring green; we can contemplate by listening to music or to the sounds of the birds, reading a book, gazing at a work of art or at that masterpiece that is the human face.... When Carlo Maria Martini was sent to be Bishop of Milan, he entitled his first Pastoral Letter The contemplative dimension of life: the truth is that those who live in a large city, where everything — we might say — is artificial and where everything is functional, risk losing the capacity to contemplate. First of all to contemplate is not a way of doing, but a way of being. To be contemplative.

And being contemplative does not depend on the eyes, but on the heart. And here prayer enters into play as an act of faith and love, as the "breath" of our relationship with God. Prayer purifies the heart and, with it, it also sharpens our gaze, allowing it to grasp reality from another point of view. The Catechism describes this transformation of the heart, which prayer effects, by citing a famous testimony of the Holy Curé of Ars who said this: "Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. 'I look at him and he looks at me': this is what a certain peasant of Ars in the time of his holy curé used to say while praying before the tabernacle.... The light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2715). Everything comes from this: from a heart that feels that it is looked on with love. Then reality is contemplated with different eyes.

"I look at him and he looks at me!". It is like this: loving contemplation, typical of the most intimate prayer, does not need many words. A gaze is enough. It is enough to be convinced that our life is surrounded by an immense and faithful love that nothing can ever separate us from.

Jesus was a master of this gaze. His life never lacked the time, space, silence, the loving communion that allows one's existence not to be devastated by the inevitable trials, but to maintain beauty intact. His secret was his relationship with his heavenly Father.

Let us think about the Transfiguration. The Gospels place this episode at the critical point of Jesus' mission when opposition and rejection were mounting all around him. Even among his disciples, many did not understand him and left him; one of the Twelve harboured traitorous thoughts. Jesus began to speak openly of the suffering and death that awaited him in Jerusalem. It is in this context that Jesus climbs up a high mountain with Peter, James and John. The Gospel of Mark says: "He was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (9:2-3). Right at the moment in which Jesus is not

understood — they were going away, they were leaving him alone because they did not understand him — in this moment that he is misunderstood, just when everything seems to become blurred in a whirlwind of misunderstanding, that is where a divine light shines. It is the light of the Father's love that fills the Son's heart and transfigures his entire Person.

Some spiritual masters of the past understood contemplation as opposed to action, and exalted those vocations that flee from the world and its problems to dedicate themselves entirely to prayer. In reality, in Jesus Christ, in his person and in the Gospel, there is no opposition between contemplation and action. No. In the Gospel and in Jesus there is no contradiction. This may have come from the influence of some Neoplatonic philosopher but it surely has to do with a dualism that is not part of the Christian message.

There is only one great call in the Gospel, and it is that of following Jesus on the way of love. This is the summit and it is the centre of everything. In this sense, charity and contemplation are synonymous; they say the same thing. Saint John of the Cross believed that a small act of pure love is more useful to the Church than all the other works combined. What is born of prayer and not from the presumption of our ego, what is purified by humility, even if it is a hidden and silent act of love, is the greatest miracle that a Christian can perform. And this is the path of contemplative prayer: I look at him and he looks at me. This act of love in silent dialogue with Jesus does so much good for the Church.

Catechesis on prayer: 33. The Struggle of Prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

I am happy to resume this face-to-face meeting, because I will tell you something: it is not nice to speak in front of nothing, to a video camera. It is not nice. And now, after many months, thanks to the courage of Msgr Sapienza, who said, "No, let's do it there", we are gathered here again. Msgr Sapienza is good! And finding people, finding you here, each one of you with your own story, people who come from all over, from Italy, from the United States, from Colombia, then that little football team of four Swiss brothers, I think ... who are over there ... four. The little sister is missing, I hope she arrives.... And seeing each one of you pleases me, as we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord, and looking at each other helps us to pray for one another. Also the people who are far away but always make themselves close to us. The ever-present Sister Geneviève who comes from Lunapark, people who work.... There are so many, and they are all here. Thank you for your presence and your visit. Take the Pope's message to everyone. The Pope's message is that I pray for everyone, and I ask you to pray for me, united in prayer.

And speaking of prayer, Christian prayer, like all Christian life, is not a "walk in the park". None of the great people of prayer that we meet in the Bible and in the history of the Church found prayer "comfortable". Yes, one can pray like a parrot — blah, blah, blah, blah, blah — but this is not prayer. Prayer certainly gives great peace, but through inner struggle, sometimes difficult, which can accompany even long periods of life. Praying is not something easy, and this is why we flee from it. Every time we want to pray, we are immediately reminded of many other activities, which at that moment seem more important and more urgent. This happens to me too: I go to pray a little ... and no, I must do this and that.... We flee from prayer; I don't know why, but that is how it is. Almost always, after putting off prayer, we realize that those things were not essential at all, and that we may have wasted time. This is how the Enemy deceives us.

All Godly men and women report not only the joy of prayer, but also the tediousness and fatigue it can bring: at times it is a difficult struggle to keep to the time and ways of praying. Some saints continued it for years without finding any satisfaction in it, without perceiving its usefulness. Silence, prayer and concentration are difficult exercises, and sometimes human nature rebels. We would rather be anywhere else in the world, but not there, in that church pew, praying. Those who want to pray must remember that faith is not easy, and sometimes it moves forward in almost total darkness, without points of reference. There are moments in the life of faith that are dark, and therefore some saints call this "the dark night", because we hear nothing. But I continue to pray.

The Catechism lists a long series of enemies of prayer, those that make it difficult to pray, that put us in difficulty (cf. nn. 2726-2728). Some doubt that prayer can truly reach the Almighty: why does God remain silent? If God is Almighty, he could say a couple of words and end the matter. Faced with the elusiveness of the divine, others suspect that prayer is merely a psychological

operation; something that may be useful, but is neither true nor necessary: and one could even be a practitioner without being a believer; and so on, many explanations.

However, the worst enemies of prayer are found within us. The Catechism describes them in this way: “Discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have ‘great possessions’, we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift” (2728). This is clearly a summary list that could be lengthened.

What should be done in the time of temptation, when everything seems to waver? If we look at the history of spirituality, we immediately see that the masters of the soul were very clear about the situation we have described. To overcome it, each of them offered some contribution: a word of wisdom, or a suggestion for facing moments fraught with difficulty. It is not a question of systematically developed theories, no, but of advice born of experience, which shows the importance of resisting and persevering in prayer.

It would be interesting to review at least some of these pieces of advice, because each one deserves to be explored further. For example, the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola is a short book of great wisdom that teaches how to put one’s life in order. It makes us understand that the Christian vocation is militancy, it is the decision to stand under the banner of Jesus Christ and not under that of the devil, trying to do good even when it becomes difficult.

In times of trial, it is good to remember that we are not alone, that someone is at our side, watching over and protecting us. Saint Anthony the Abbot, the founder of Christian monasticism, also faced terrible times in Egypt, when prayer became a difficult struggle. His biographer, Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, recounts one of the worst episodes in the life of the hermit saint when he was about 35, a time of middle age that for many people involves a crisis. Anthony was disturbed by the ordeal, but he resisted. When calm finally returned, he turned to his Lord with an almost reproachful tone: “But Lord, where were you? Why did you not come immediately to put an end to my suffering?” And Jesus answered: “Anthony, I was there. But I was waiting to see you fight” (Life of Anthony, 10). Fighting in prayer. And very often, prayer is combat. I am reminded of something I experienced close up, when I was in the other diocese. There was a married couple with a nine-year-old daughter, with an illness that the doctors were unable to diagnose. And in the end, in hospital, the doctor said to the mother: “Madam, call your husband”. And the husband was at work; they were labourers, they worked every day. And he told the father: “The child will not survive the night. There is an infection; there is nothing we can do”. Perhaps that man did not attend Mass every Sunday, but he had great faith. He left, weeping; he left his wife there with the little girl in the hospital, he took the train and he travelled seventy kilometres towards the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, Patroness of Argentina. And there — the Basilica was already closed, it was almost ten o’clock at night, in the evening — he clung to the grates of the Basilica and spent all night praying to Our Lady, fighting for his daughter’s health. This is not a figment of the imagination: I saw him! I saw him myself. That man there, fighting. At

the end, at six o'clock in the morning, the church opened, and he entered to salute Our Lady: all night "fighting", and then he returned home. When he arrived he looked for his wife but could not find her. And he thought: "She has left us. No, Our Lady cannot do this to me". Then he found her, smiling as she said: "I don't know what happened. The doctors said that something changed, and now she is cured". That man, fighting with prayer, received the grace of Our Lady. Our Lady listened to him. And I saw this: prayer works miracles, because prayer goes directly to the heart of the tenderness of God, who loves us like a father. And when he does not grant us a grace, he will grant us another that in time we will see. But always, it is necessary to battle in prayer to ask for grace. Yes, at times we ask for a grace we do not need, but we ask for it without truly wanting it, without fighting. But serious things are not asked for this way. Prayer is combat, and the Lord is always with us.

Jesus is always with us: If in a moment of blindness we cannot perceive his presence, we will succeed in the future. We will also end up repeating the same sentence that the patriarch Jacob said one day: "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it" (Gen 28:16). At the end of our life, looking back, we too will be able to say: "I thought I was alone, but I was not: Jesus was with me". We will all be able to say this.

Catechesis on prayer: 34. Distractions, time of barrenness, sloth

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Continuing along the same lines of the Catechism, in this catechesis we refer to the lived experience of prayer, trying to show some very common difficulties, which must be identified and overcome. Praying is not easy: many difficulties present themselves in prayer. It is necessary to know them, recognize them and overcome them.

The first problem that emerges to those who pray is distraction (cf. CCC, 2729). You start to pray and then your mind wanders, it wanders all over the world; your heart is here, your mind is there ... distraction from prayer. Prayer often co-exists with distraction. Indeed, the human mind struggles to dwell for long on a single thought. We all experience this constant whirlwind of images and illusions in perpetual motion, which accompanies us even during sleep. And we all know that it is not good to follow this inclination towards disorder.

The battle to achieve and maintain concentration does not relate only to prayer. If one does not attain a sufficient level of concentration, one cannot study profitably, nor can one work well. Athletes know that contests are not won solely through physical training, but also with mental discipline: above all, with the capacity to concentrate and to remain focused.

Distractions are not to blame, but they must be fought. In the heritage of our faith there is a virtue that is often forgotten, but which is quite present in the Gospel. It is called “vigilance”. And Jesus said, “Keep vigil. Pray”. The Catechism mentions it explicitly in its instruction on prayer (cf. no. 2730). Jesus often calls the disciples to the duty of a sober life, guided by the thought that sooner or later He will return, like a bridegroom from a wedding or a master from a journey. Not knowing the day and hour of his return, however, all the minutes of our lives are precious and should not be wasted on distractions. In a moment that we do not know, the voice of our Lord will resound: on that day, blessed will be those servants whom he will find diligent, still focused on what really matters. They did not stray in pursuit of every attraction that entered their minds, but tried to walk the right path, doing good and performing their own task.

This is distraction: the imagination wanders, it wanders and wanders.... Saint Teresa used to call this imagination that wanders and wanders in prayer “the madwoman in the house”; it is like a madwoman that leads you to wander here and there ... We must stop it and put it in a cage, with attention.

The time of barrenness warrants a different discourse. The Catechism describes it this way: “the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb” (n. 2731). Barrenness makes us think of Good Friday, at night, and Holy Saturday, the whole day: Jesus is not there, he is in the tomb; Jesus is dead: we are alone. And this is the “mother-thought” of barrenness. Often we do not know what the reasons for barrenness are: it may depend on ourselves, but also on God, who permits certain situations in the exterior or interior life. Or, at

times, it may be a headache or a sick feeling that stops us from entering into prayer. Often we do not really know the reason. Spiritual teachers describe the experience of faith as a continuous alternation between times of consolation and desolation; there are times when everything is easy, while others are marked by great weightiness. Very often, when we encounter a friend, we say, "How are you?" — "Today I am down". Very often we are "down", or rather, we don't have feelings, we don't have consolation, we can't do it. They are those grey days … and there are so many of them in life! But the danger is having a grey heart: when this "feeling down" reaches the heart and sickens it … and there are people who live with a grey heart. This is terrible: one cannot pray, one cannot feel consolation with a grey heart! Or, one cannot emerge from spiritual barrenness with a grey heart. The heart must be open and luminous, so that the light of the Lord can enter. And if it does not enter, we need to wait for it, with hope. But do not close it up in greyness.

Then, a different thing is sloth, another flaw, another vice, which is a real temptation against prayer and, more generally, against the Christian life. Sloth is "a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart" (CCC, 2733). It is one of the seven "deadly sins" because, fuelled by conceit, it can lead to the death of the soul.

So what can we do in this succession of enthusiasms and discouragements? One must learn to always walk. True progress in spiritual life does not consist in multiplying ecstasies, but in being able to persevere in difficult times: walk, walk, walk on.... and if you are tired, stop a bit and then start walking again. But with perseverance. Let us remember Saint Francis' parable on perfect joy: it is not in the infinite fortunes rained down from Heaven that a friar's skill is measured, but in walking with consistency, even when one is not acknowledged, even when one is mistreated, even when everything has lost its initial flavour. All the saints have passed through this "dark valley", and let us not be scandalized if, in reading their diaries, we find accounts of evenings of listless prayer, lived without enthusiasm. We must learn to say: "Even though You, my God, seem to be doing everything to make me stop believing in You, I still continue to pray to You". Believers never shut off prayer! It may sometimes resemble the prayer of Job, who does not accept that God treats him unjustly, protests and calls him to judgment. But, very often, even protesting before God is a way of praying or, as that little old lady said, "getting angry with God is a way to pray too", because a son often gets angry with his father: it is a way of relating to the father; since he recognizes him as "father", he gets angry....

And we too, who are far less holy and patient than Job, know that in the end, at the end of this time of desolation, during which we have raised silent cries to Heaven and many times have asked "why?", God will answer us. Do not forget the prayer that asks "why?". It is the prayer of children when they begin not to understand things, which psychologists call "the why stage", because the child asks his father, "Daddy, why? Daddy, why? Daddy, why?" But let us be careful: the child does not listen to his father's answer. The father starts to reply, but the child interrupts with another "why?". He simply wants to draw his father's attention to himself; and when we get a little angry with God and start asking why?, we are attracting our Father's heart towards our misery, towards our difficulty, towards our life. But yes, have the courage to say to God: "But

why?”. Because at times, getting a little angry is good for you, because it reawakens that son-father, daughter-father relationship we must have with God. And he will accept even our harshest and bitterest expressions with a father’s love, and will consider them as an act of faith, as a prayer.

Catechesis on prayer: 35. The certainty of being heard

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

There is a radical objection to prayer, which derives from an observation that we all make: we pray, we ask, and yet sometimes our prayers seem to go unheard: what we have asked for — for ourselves or for others — is not fulfilled. We often have this experience. If the reason for which we prayed was noble (such as intercession for the health of a sick person, or for the end of a war, for instance), the non-fulfilment seems scandalous. For example, for wars: we are praying for wars to end, these wars in so many parts of the world. Think of Yemen, think of Syria, countries that have been at war for years, for years. Countries ravaged by wars; we pray, and they do not come to an end. But how can this be? "Some even stop praying because they think their petition is not heard" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2734). But if God is Father, why does he not listen to us? He who assured us that he gives good things to his children who ask for them (cf. Mt 7:10), why does he not respond to our requests? We have all experienced this: we have prayed, prayed, for the illness of a friend, of a father, of a mother, and then they were gone. But God did not grant our request! It is an experience we have all had.

The Catechism offers us a good summary of the matter. It puts us on guard against the risk of not living an authentic experience of faith, but of transforming the relationship with God into something magical. Prayer is not a magic wand: it is a dialogue with the Lord. Indeed, when we pray we can fall into the risk that it is not we who serve God, but we expect it to be He who serves us (cf. 2735). This is, then, a prayer that is always demanding, that wants to direct events according to our own design, that admits no plans other than our own desires. Jesus, on the other hand, had great wisdom in teaching us the Lord's Prayer. It is a prayer of questions only, as we know, but the first ones we utter are all on God's side. They ask for the fulfilment not of our plan, but of his will for the world. Better to leave it to him: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done" (Mt 6:9-10).

And the Apostle Paul reminds us that we do not even know what is appropriate to ask (cf. Rm 8:26). We ask for our necessities, our needs, things that we want: "But is this more appropriate or not?" Paul tells us, we do not even know what we ought to ask. When we pray, we need to be humble: this is the first attitude for going to pray. Just as there is the habit in many places that, before going to pray in a church, women don a veil or people use holy water as they begin to pray, so too we must tell ourselves before praying what is most appropriate; may God give me what is most appropriate. He knows. When we pray we must be humble, so that our words may actually be prayers and not just idle talk that God rejects. We can also pray for the wrong reasons: such as to defeat the enemy at war, without asking ourselves what God thinks of such a war. It is easy to write "God is with us" on a banner; many are eager to ensure that God is with them, but few bother to check whether they are actually with God. In prayer, it is God who must convert us, not we who must convert God. It is humility. I go to pray but You, Lord, convert my heart so that it will ask for what is appropriate, for what will be best for my spiritual health.

However, the scandal remains: when people pray with a sincere heart, when they ask for things that correspond to the Kingdom of God, when a mother prays for her sick child, why does it sometimes seem that God does not listen to them? To answer this question, we have to meditate calmly on the Gospels. The accounts of Jesus' life are full of prayers: many people wounded in body and in spirit ask him to be healed; there are those who pray for a friend who can no longer walk; there are fathers and mothers who bring him their sick sons and daughters. They are all prayers imbued with suffering. It is an immense chorus that invokes: "Have mercy on us!"

We see that at times Jesus' response is immediate, whereas in some other cases it is delayed: it seems that God does not answer. Think of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus for her daughter: this woman has to insist for a long time to be heard (cf. Mt 15:21-28). She even has the humility to hear a word from Jesus that seems a little offensive towards her: we must not throw bread to the dogs, to the pooches. But humiliation does not matter to this woman: her daughter's health is what matters. And she goes on: "Yes, but even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table", and Jesus likes this. Courage in prayer. Or think of the paralytic brought by his four friends: Jesus initially forgives his sins and only later heals his body (cf. Mk 2:1-12). On some occasions, therefore, the solution to the problem is not immediate. In our life too, each one of us has this experience. Let us look back a little: how many times have we asked for a grace, a miracle, let's say, and nothing has happened. Then, over time, things have worked out but in God's way, the divine way, not according to what we wanted in that moment. God's time is not our time.

From this point of view, the healing of Jairus' daughter is worthy of particular attention (cf. Mk 5:21-33). There is a father who is rushing, out of breath: his daughter is ill and for this reason he asks for Jesus' help. The Master immediately accepts, but on their way home another healing occurs, and then news arrives that the girl has died. It seems to be the end, but instead Jesus says to the father: "Do not fear, only believe" (Mk 5:36). "Continue to have faith": because it is faith that sustains prayer. And indeed, Jesus will awaken that child from the sleep of death. But Jairus had to walk in the dark for some time, with only the flame of faith. Lord, give me faith! May my faith grow! Ask for this grace, to have faith. Jesus, in the Gospel, says that faith moves mountains. But, having real faith. Jesus, before the faith of his poor, of his people, is won over; he feels special tenderness, before that faith. And he listens.

The prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father in Gethsemane also seems to go unheard. "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me". It seems that the Father does not listen to him. The son must drink fully from the cup of the passion. But Holy Saturday is not the final chapter, because on the third day, Sunday, is the Resurrection. Evil is lord of the penultimate day: remember this well. Evil is never lord of the last day, no: the penultimate, the moment when the night is darkest, just before the dawn. There, on the penultimate day, there is temptation, when evil makes us think it has won: "Did you see? I won!". Evil is lord of the penultimate day: on the last day there is the Resurrection. But evil is never lord of the last day: God is the Lord of the last day. Because that belongs to God alone, and it is the day when all human longings for salvation will be fulfilled. Let us learn this humble patience, of waiting for the Lord's grace, waiting for the

final day. Very often, the penultimate day is very hard, because human sufferings are hard. But the Lord is there. And on the last day, he resolves everything.

Catechesis on prayer: 36. Jesus, model and soul of all prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

The Gospels show us how prayer was fundamental in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. This can already be seen in the choice of those who would later become the Apostles. Luke places their election in a precise context of prayer, and he says: “In these days he went out to the mountain 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” (6:12-13). Jesus chooses them after a night of prayer. It seems that there is no criterion in this choice other than prayer, the dialogue of Jesus with the Father. Judging from how those men were to behave, it would seem that the choice was not the best, as they all fled, they left him alone before the Passion; but it is precisely this, especially the presence of Judas, the future betrayer, that demonstrates that those names were inscribed in God’s plan.

Prayer on behalf of his friends continually resurfaces in the life of Jesus. The Apostles sometimes become a cause of concern for him, but as he had received them from the Father, after prayer, Jesus carries them in his heart, even in their errors, even when they fall. In all this we discover how Jesus was both teacher and friend, always willing to wait patiently for the disciple’s conversion. The highest point of this patient waiting is the “web” of love that Jesus weaves around Peter. At the Last Supper He says to him: “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). It is impressive to know that at that moment, during the time of weakness, Jesus’ love does not cease. “But father, if I am in mortal sin, does Jesus love me?” — “Yes” — “And does Jesus continue to love me?” — “Yes” — “But if I have done worse things, and committed many sins … does Jesus continue to love me?” — “Yes”. Jesus’ love and prayer for each one of us does not cease, it does not cease, but rather becomes more intense, and we are at the centre of his prayer! We must always keep this in mind: Jesus prays for me, he is praying now before the Father and makes him see the wounds he carried with him, to show the Father the price of our salvation, it is the love that he holds for us. But in this moment, let each one of us, let us think: in this moment, is Jesus praying for me? Yes. This is a great certainty that we must have.

Jesus’ prayer returns punctually at a crucial time of his journey, that of the verification of his disciples’ faith. Let us listen again to the evangelist Luke: “As [Jesus] was praying alone, the disciples were with him; and he asked them, ‘Who do the people say that I am?’ And they answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others say, Eli’jah, and others, that one of the old prophets has risen’. And he asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ And Peter answered, on behalf of them all, ‘The Christ of God’. But he charged and commanded them tell this to no one” (9:18-21). The great turning points of Jesus’ mission are always preceded by prayer, but not just in passing, but rather by intense, prolonged prayer. There is always prayer in those moments. This test of faith seems to be the goal, but instead it is a renewed starting point for the disciples, because from

then on, it is as if Jesus took on a new tone in his mission, speaking openly to them of his passion, death and resurrection.

With this prospect, which gives rise instinctively to repulsion, both in the disciples and in we who read the Gospel, prayer is the only source of light and strength. It is necessary to pray more intensely, every time the road takes an uphill turn.

And indeed, after announcing to the disciples what awaits him in Jerusalem, the episode of the Transfiguration takes place. Jesus "took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as He was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Eli'jah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:28-31), that is, the Passion. Therefore, this anticipated manifestation of the glory of Jesus took place in prayer, while the Son was immersed in communion with the Father and fully consented to his will of love, to his plan of salvation. And out of that prayer came a clear word for the three disciples involved: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (Lk 9:35). From prayer comes the invitation to listen to Jesus, always from prayer.

From this quick journey through the Gospel, we learn that Jesus not only wants us to pray as he prays, but assures us that, even if our attempts at prayer are completely vain and ineffective, we can always count on his prayer. We must be aware of this: Jesus prays for me. Once, a good bishop told me that in a very bad moment in his life, a great trial, a moment of darkness, he looked up in the Basilica and saw this phrase written: "I, Peter, will pray for you". And this gave him strength and comfort. And this happens every time that each of us knows that Jesus prays for him or for her. Jesus prays for us. In this moment, in this very moment. Do this memory exercise, repeat this. When there is a difficulty, when you feel the orbital pull of distractions: Jesus is praying for me. But, father, is this true? It is true! He said it himself. Let us not forget that what sustains each of us in life is Jesus' prayer for every one of us, with our first and last name, before the Father, showing him the wounds that are the price of our salvation.

Even if our prayers were only stuttering, if they were compromised by a wavering faith, we must never cease to trust in him: I do not know how to pray but he prays for me. Supported by Jesus' prayer, our timid prayers rest on eagle wings and soar up to Heaven. Do not forget: Jesus is praying for me. Now? Now. In the moment of trial, in the moment of sin, even in that moment, Jesus is praying for me with so much love.

Catechesis on prayer: 37. Perseverance in love

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Catechesis on prayer: 38. The Paschal prayer of Jesus for us

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

We have recalled several times in this series of catecheses that prayer is one of the most evident characteristics of Jesus' life: Jesus prayed, and he prayed a lot. In the course of his mission, Jesus immersed himself in it because dialogue with the Father was the incandescent core of his entire existence.

The Gospels testify how Jesus' prayer became even more intense and deep at the hour of his passion and death. These culminating events of his life constitute the central core of Christian preaching: those last hours lived by Jesus in Jerusalem are the heart of the Gospel, not only because the Evangelists reserve proportionally greater space to this narrative, but also because the event of his death and resurrection — like a flash of lightning — sheds light on the rest of Jesus' life. He was not a philanthropist who took care of human suffering and illness: he was and is much more. In him there is not only goodness: there is something more, there is salvation, and not an episodic salvation — the type that might save me from an illness or a moment of despair — but total salvation, messianic salvation, which gives hope in the definitive victory of life over death.

In the days of his last Passover, we thus find Jesus fully immersed in prayer.

He prays dramatically in the garden of Gethsemane, as we heard, assailed by mortal anguish. And yet, precisely in that moment, Jesus addresses God as "Abba", Father (cf. Mk 14: 36). This word, in Aramaic, which was Jesus' language, expresses intimacy, it expresses trust. Just as he feels the darkness gather around him, Jesus breaks through it with that little word: Abba, Father.

Jesus also prays on the cross, obscurely shrouded in God's silence. And yet once again the word "Father" emerges from his lips. It is the most ardent prayer, because on the cross, Jesus is the absolute intercessor. He prays for others. He prays for everyone, even for those who have condemned him, with no one, apart from a poor delinquent, taking his side. Everyone was against him or indifferent; only that criminal recognized the power. "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). In the midst of the tragedy, in the excruciating pain of soul and body, Jesus prays with the words of the psalms; with the poor of the world, especially those forgotten by all. He pronounces the tragic words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 1). He felt abandonment, and he prayed. On the cross is the fulfilment of the gift of the Father who offers love, that is, our salvation is fulfilled. And also, once, he calls Him "My God", "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit": that is, everything, everything is prayer in the three hours of the Cross.

Jesus therefore prays in the decisive hours of his passion and death. And with the resurrection, the Father will grant the prayer. Jesus' prayer is intense, Jesus' prayer is unique, and it also becomes the model for our prayer. Jesus prayed for everyone: He even prayed for me, for each one of you. Every one of you can say: "Jesus, on the cross, prayed for me". He prayed. Jesus can say to every

one of us: “I prayed for you at the Last Supper, and on the wood of the Cross”. Even in the most painful of our suffering, we are never alone. Jesus’ prayer is with us. “And now, Father, here, we who are listening to this, does Jesus pray for us?”. Yes, he continues to pray so that his word may help us keep going forward. But pray, and remember that he prays for us.

And this seems to me the most beautiful thing to remember. This is the final catechesis of this series on prayer: to remember the grace that not only do we pray, but that, so to speak, we have been “prayed for”. We have already been welcomed into Jesus’ dialogue with the Father, in communion with the Holy Spirit. Jesus prays for me: each one of us can carry this in their heart. We must not forget this. Even in the worst moments. We are already welcomed into Jesus’ dialogue with the Father, in communion of the Holy Spirit. We were willed by Christ Jesus, and even in the hour of his passion, death and resurrection, everything was offered for us. And so, with prayer and with life, all that remains is only to have courage and hope, and, with this courage and hope, to deeply feel Jesus’ prayer and to keep on going: so that our life may be one of giving glory to God in the knowledge that he prays for me to the Father, that Jesus prays for me.


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