

PATHS OF CONTEMPLATION

One of the attitudes the Gospels highlight about Jesus' fulfilment of his mission is how often He has recourse to prayer. The rhythm of his ministry is marked by the times when He turns to the Father. Jesus prays before his Baptism (cf. *Lk* 3:21), the night before choosing the Twelve (cf. *Lk* 6:12), on the mountain before the Transfiguration (cf. *Lk* 9:28), in the Garden of Olives while preparing to face his Passion (cf. *Lk* 22:41-44). Our Lord spent a lot of time in prayer: at dusk, or the whole night, or very early in the morning, or amid days of intense preaching. In fact, he prayed constantly, and repeatedly reminded his disciples of the need to *pray always without becoming weary* (*Lk* 18:1).

Why this example and insistence by our Lord? Why is prayer so necessary? In reality, prayer responds to the most intimate desires of each human being, created to enter into dialogue with God and contemplate Him. But prayer, above all, is a gift from God, a gift that He offers to us: “The living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response.”¹

To imitate Christ and share in his Life, we have to be souls of prayer. Through the contemplation of the Mystery of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, our life is gradually transformed into his. Saint Paul’s words to the Corinthians become a reality: *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit* (2 *Cor* 3:18). Like Saint Paul, all Christians are called to reflect Christ’s face in their own features: by being apostles, messengers of God’s love, which is experienced personally during times of prayer. That is why we need to “deepen in our contemplative prayer in the middle of the world, and help others to travel along ‘paths of contemplation’.”²

Accepting God’s gift

An apostle grows at the rhythm of prayer, and contemplation is the starting point for growing in the eagerness to evangelize. As the Pope reminds us: “The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us.”³ Therefore we need to acquire “a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2567.

² Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter* (14 February 2017), 8 (quoting Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 67).

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 264.

more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others.”⁴

The Gospels introduce us to a variety of persons whose encounter with Christ changes their life and makes them the bearers of our Lord’s saving message. One of these is the Samaritan woman who, as Saint John recounts, only wants to fetch water at the well where Jesus is sitting and resting. It is He who begins the dialogue: *Give me a drink (Jn 4:8)*. At first, the Samaritan woman is not very willing to continue the conversation: *How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? (Jn 4:9)*. But our Lord makes her see that, in reality, He is the water she is seeking: *If you knew the gift of God... (Jn 4:10); whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life (Jn 4:14)*.

After reaching the Samaritan woman’s heart, Christ reveals with clarity and simplicity that He knows her past (cf. 4:17-18). But He does so with such great love that she does not feel discouraged or rejected. On the contrary, Jesus introduces her to a new universe, a new world of hope, because the moment of reconciliation has arrived, the moment when the doors of prayer are opened to all men and women: *Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn 4:21.23)*.

In her dialogue with Jesus, the Samaritan woman discovers the truth about God and about her own life. She accepts God’s gift and is radically converted. Therefore the Church has seen in this Gospel passage one of the most expressive images of prayer: “Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.”⁵ Prayer is a sign of God’s initiative, who goes out in search of us and waits for our response to make us his friends. Sometimes it can seem that we are the ones who take the initiative to dedicate time to prayer, but in reality it is a response to God’s call. Prayer is in truth a reciprocal call: God seeks me and waits for me, and I need God and seek Him.

Time for God

Men and women thirst for God, even though they often fail to realize it, and even refuse to go to the sources of living water, which are the times dedicated to prayer. The story of the Samaritan woman is repeated in many souls. Jesus asks for a little attention

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2560 (referencing St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 64,4:PL 40, 56)

and tries to begin a dialogue in a person's heart, at a moment that perhaps seems untimely. Those daily minutes can seem too many to us; there's no space for them in such a tight schedule! But when we allow ourselves to be drawn by our Lord into a contemplative dialogue, we discover that prayer is not something that I do for God, but above all a gift that God gives me and that I simply welcome.

Devoting time to our Lord is not just one more job on a to-do list, or another burden on an already demanding schedule. It is rather the acceptance of an infinitely valuable gift, a precious pearl or hidden treasure amid our normal daily life that we need to care for lovingly.

The choice of when to pray depends on a will that wants to be conquered by Love; prayer isn't done when we have extra time, but rather we need to make time for prayer. When prayer is left for the gaps that may appear in a person's daily schedule, it will in all likelihood not be done regularly. The choice of when to devote time to prayer reveals the secrets of a person's heart; it shows the place that love for God occupies in the hierarchy of our daily interests.⁶

Prayer is always possible. A Christian's time belongs to the risen Christ, who is with us every day (cf. *Mt* 28:20). The most frequent temptation for setting aside prayer is a certain lack of faith, which shows our true preferences: "When we begin to pray, a thousand labors or cares thought to be urgent vie for priority; once again, it is the moment of truth for the heart: what is its real love?"⁷ Our Lord comes first. Therefore we need to decide on the best time for prayer, perhaps seeking advice in spiritual direction, in order to adapt that plan to our personal circumstances.

Saint Josemaría often did times of prayer in the car during his apostolic trips; he also prayed on the tram, or walking through the streets of Madrid, when he had no other possibility. Those who are striving for sanctity in the middle of ordinary life can find themselves in similar situations; a father or a mother may sometimes have no other option but to pray while caring for their little children. This is very pleasing to God. But realizing that our Lord is waiting for us and wants to offer us the graces we need in our prayer can encourage us to choose the best possible time and place for it.

Spiritual combat in prayer

To consider prayer as an art implies recognizing that we can always grow in its practice, allowing God's grace to act ever more fully in our souls. Hence prayer is also combat.⁸ It is a struggle, first of all, against ourselves. Distractions invade the mind when

⁶ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2710.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2732

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 2725 and ff.

we try to create inner silence. They reveal to us what our heart is attached to and can serve as a light to ask God for help.⁹

Today we have abundant technological possibilities that facilitate communication in many ways, but that also increase occasions for distraction. And hence we are facing a new challenge for growing in our contemplative life: learning to foster inner silence surrounded by so much external noise. In many places getting things done quickly and effectively is viewed as more important than reflection or study. We have become used to multi-tasking, to dividing our attention among a number of jobs carried out simultaneously, which can easily lead to living in the agitated environment of “action-reaction.” But in the face of this situation, new importance is also being given today to values such as attention and concentration, seen as a way to protect our capacity to pause and inquire into what is truly worthwhile.

Interior silence is a necessary condition for the contemplative life. It frees us from the attachment to the immediate, to what seems easy, to what distracts but does not fulfill us, so that we can focus on our true good: on our Lord Jesus Christ, who comes to meet us in prayer.

Interior recollection involves moving away from being dispersed in many activities towards acquiring a stronger interior world. There it is easier for us to find God and recognize his presence in our daily lives, in small signs of his action each day, in lights we receive, in the attitudes of other people.... And thus we are better able to express to Him our adoration, repentance, thanksgiving and petition. That is why interior recollection is so vital for a contemplative soul in the middle of the world. “True prayer that absorbs a person’s whole life is fostered—more than by the solitude of the desert—by interior recollection.”¹⁰

In search of new lights

Prayer is also a search for God by man, and therefore entails the desire not to settle for a routine way of addressing Him. All lasting relationships require the continuous effort to renew one’s love. Therefore this effort should also be found in our relationship with God that is forged especially in the moments dedicated exclusively to Him.

“If you put your mind to it, everything in your life can be offered to God and provide an opportunity to talk with your Father in Heaven, who always wants to grant you new lights.”¹¹ Certainly God, in granting these lights, counts on the ardent search for Him by his children, who are ready to listen with simplicity to the word He addresses to us and set aside the thought that there is nothing new to discover there. Here the attitude of the

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 2729.

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, *Furrow* 460.

¹¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge* 743.

Samaritan woman at the well is an example for us, since she kept alive in her heart the desire for the Messiah's arrival.

This effort will lead us to bring the happenings of each day to our dialogue with our Lord, but without expecting an immediate solution that suits our pressing needs. It is more important to consider what our Lord wants from us, since more often than not, the only thing He expects of us is to put ourselves with simplicity before Him, and gratefully recall all that the Holy Spirit is doing silently within us. Or it may also involve taking scenes from the Gospels and calmly contemplating them and taking part as "another character" in the scene,¹² letting ourselves be challenged by Christ. We can also nourish our dialogue by using texts from the Church's liturgy that we celebrated that day. The sources of prayer are inexhaustible. If we have recourse to them with new hope, the Holy Spirit will do the rest.

When words don't come

Nevertheless, despite our efforts, we can sometimes encounter difficulties in our dialogue with God. How comforting it is then to remember our Lord's admonition: *In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words (Mt 6:7)*. It is time once again to trust in the action of the Holy Spirit, who *helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26)*.

Commenting on these words of Saint Paul, Benedict XVI described the attitude of abandonment that should imbue our prayer: "We want to pray, but God is far, we do not have the words, the language, to speak with God, not even the thought. We can only open ourselves, set our time at the disposal of God, waiting for him to help us enter into true dialogue. The Apostle says: this very lack of words, this absence of words, even the desire to enter into contact with God is a prayer that the Holy Spirit not only understands, but carries, interprets, to God. It is precisely our weakness which becomes, through the Holy Spirit, true prayer, true contact with God."¹³

Therefore we shouldn't become discouraged if we find it difficult to keep up a dialogue with our Lord. When our heart seems closed to spiritual realities, when the minutes spent in prayer become long and our thoughts wander to other things, perhaps the following considerations from Saint Josemaría can help us:

"Remember that prayer does not consist in making pretty speeches, or high-sounding or consoling phrases.

¹² Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 222.

¹³ Benedict XVI, General Audience, 16 May 2012.

“Prayer, at times, will be a glance at a picture of our Lord or of his Mother; sometimes a petition, expressed in words; or offering good works, and the fruits of faithfulness.

“We have to be like a guard on sentry duty at the gate of God our Lord: that’s what prayer is. Or like a small dog that lies down at its master’s feet.

“Don’t mind telling him: Lord, here I am, like a faithful dog; or better still like a little donkey, who won’t kick the one who loves him.”¹⁴

The source that changes the world

A life of prayer opens the door for coming closer to God; it helps us see the relative importance of problems to which we sometimes give too much prominence, and reminds us that we are always in the hands of our Father in Heaven. At the same time, prayer does not isolate us from the world, nor is it an escape from daily problems. True prayer is impactful: it affects our life, illuminates it, and opens our eyes to our surroundings with a supernatural perspective. As Pope Saint John Paul II said: “Intense prayer ... does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan.”¹⁵

In prayer, our Lord not only wants to quench our thirst, but also to encourage us to share with others the joy of drawing close to Him. This is what happened in the heart of the Samaritan woman. After her encounter with Jesus, she hastens to make Him known to those around her. *Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did” (Jn 4:39).* A sign of authentic prayer is the desire to share the experience of Christ with others: “What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known?”¹⁶

Our holy Mother Mary teaches us how to pray. Our Lady meditated in her heart on the concerns of her Son (cf. *Lk 2:51*) and accompanied Jesus’ disciples in prayer (cf. *Acts 1:14*). She shows them the path for receiving in all its fullness the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will spur them to launch out in the divine adventure of evangelization.

¹⁴ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, 73.

¹⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, 33.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 264.