

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

Fifteenth Sunday of the Year – 14th July 2024

Our second reading today, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, rejoices in the manifold ways through which we are blessed by God. The final phrase of this reading is, "...to make his glory praised." Today as we reflect on this, we ponder again Pope Francis' catechesis on praise. This was given on Wednesday, 13 January 2021 and we first looked at it at Pentecost.

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 night-time, 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.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider the prayer of praise. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Jesus himself, in facing hostility and rejection, responds by praising God. He thanks the Father for *who he is* and for his love in revealing himself “to mere children” (*Mt* 11:25), to the poor and humble of our world. Jesus’ example of praise calls us to respond as he did at times when we feel God is absent or evil seems victorious. In this way, we come to view things in a new and greater perspective, for – as the *Catechism* teaches – through praise we share “in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory” (No. 2639). We see this clearly in the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who composed his famous Canticle of the Creatures when he was troubled by sickness and impending blindness. In praising God for everything, even “Sister Death”, Francis, together with all the saints, teaches us the importance, in all the circumstances of our lives, of praising God who is always faithful and whose love is eternal.