

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Sixth Sunday of the Year – 11th February 2024

In this Sunday's Mass our Responsorial Psalm (Ps 31). In this catechesis on Psalms Pope Francis reflects on the images presented of evil and of goodness. He says, "The world is always present in the Psalter's prayer". He invites us to find the wisdom needed in our lives through reflection on our lives in the light of the Psalms. This teaching was given on Wednesday, 21 October 2020.

The prayer of the Psalms.

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 fulfilment 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 anyone 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.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on prayer, today we turn once more to the Psalms. In the Psalter, prayer appears as essential to a good and truly human life, guiding our steps according to God's will and teaching us to avoid the snares of evil. Genuine prayer enables us, even at times of great distress, to see reality with God's eyes and to look upon our brothers and sisters with compassion and respect. In the Psalms, personal and communal prayer merge, and praise of God is joined to concern for others, especially the poor and those in need. Even the Psalms that seem most personal and private were prayed in the liturgy of the Temple and in the synagogues, and then in the assemblies of the earliest Christian community. They remind us that prayer must embrace every aspect of our lives in this world. Sometimes, prayer begins in our churches but then leads us to serve others in the streets of our cities. At