

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

Tenth Sunday of the Year – 9th June 2024

In today's first reading from Genesis we see the first fall from Grace – depicted in the story of disobedience to God of Adam and Eve. Pope Francis made use of this passage of scripture in his catechesis on the prayer of the righteous, given on Wednesday, 27 May 2020.

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 heartAnd 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.