

## 2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

### Eleventh Sunday of the Year – 16<sup>th</sup> June 2024

In our first reading, from the book of Ezekiel, we are given the image of a shoot of a cedar tree growing to prominence in Israel and providing shelter for all the birds. In the Old Testament this was seen as the power of the Covenant between God and his people. We see a similar image in our Gospel, of a mustard seed which, though it starts small, grows to prominence. Jesus used the phrase “The Kingdom of God”, when explaining what it signifies. The Church is the environment in which that Kingdom flourishes on earth and is joined to Heaven. In Pope Francis' catechesis this morning we are given his teaching on the Church as teacher of prayer. This catechesis was given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 14 April 2021.

#### **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 make 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.

### **Summary of the Holy Father's words:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer we now consider the Church herself as a great school of prayer. Our parents, who first taught us to pray, planted within us a seed that matures through our experience of the Christian life. Through the example of other men and women of faith, through our sharing in the life of our parishes and above all through the sacred liturgy, we not only develop our prayer life as individuals, but gradually come to appreciate the richness of the Church’s patrimony of prayer and spirituality. Particularly at difficult moments in life, we come to realize the importance of prayer in strengthening our faith and hope. History shows the importance of communities of prayer – monasteries and religious congregations – for the spiritual renewal of the Church and of society as a whole. Prayer remains the wellspring of the Church’s life and the true source of her strength in bearing witness to the risen Lord. For this reason, Jesus insists on the need of his disciples to pray tirelessly and without ceasing. To pray and to teach others to pray, then, is essential for the Church’s mission of proclaiming the Gospel, serving Christ in our brothers and sisters, and drawing all people into the unity of his kingdom.