

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

Nineteenth Sunday of the Year – 11th August 2024

In today's first reading we meet Elijah, who Pope Francis describes as follows: "Scripture presents Elijah as a man of crystalline Faith". In this catechesis, first given by Pope Francis on Wednesday, 7 October 2020, we can compare our faith and prayer with that of Elijah.

Elijah's prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Today, we resume our catechesis on prayer, which we interrupted for the catechesis on the care of creation, and will now resume; and we meet one of the most compelling characters in all of Sacred Scripture: the prophet Elijah. He goes beyond the confines of his time, and we can also see his presence in some of the episodes in the Gospels. He appeared at Jesus' side, along with Moses, at the moment of the Transfiguration (cf. *Mt 17:3*). Jesus himself refers to him to give credit to the testimony of John the Baptist (cf. *Mt 17:10-13*).

In the Bible, Elijah appears suddenly, in a mysterious way, coming from a small village that is completely marginal (cf. *1 Kings 17:1*); and in the end he leaves the scene, under the eyes of the disciple Elisha, on a chariot of fire that takes him to heaven (cf. *2 Kings 2:11-12*). He is therefore a man without a precise origin, and above all without an end, carried off into heaven. For this reason his return was expected before the coming of the Messiah, as a precursor. Elijah's return was thus awaited.

Scripture presents Elijah as a man of crystalline faith: his very name, which may mean "Yahweh is God", encloses the secret of his mission. He will be like this for the rest of his life: a man of integrity, incapable of petty compromises. His symbol is fire, the image of God's purifying power. He will be the first to be put to the test, and he will remain faithful. He is the example of all people of faith who know temptation and suffering, but do not fail to live up to the ideal for which they were born.

Prayer is the lifeblood that constantly nourishes his existence. This is why he is one of those most dear to the monastic tradition, so much so that some have elected him as the spiritual father of a life consecrated to God. Elijah is the man of God, who stands as a defender of the primacy of the Most High. And yet, he too is forced to come to terms with his own frailties. It is difficult to say which experiences were most useful to him: the defeat of the false prophets on Mount Carmel (cf. *1 Kings 18:20-40*), or the bewilderment in which he finds that he is "no better than his ancestors" (cf. *1 Kings 19:4*). In the soul of those who pray, the sense of their own weakness is more precious than moments of exaltation, when it seems that life is a series of victories and successes. This always happens in prayer: moments of prayer that we feel lift us up, even of enthusiasm, and moments of prayer of pain, aridity, trial. This is what prayer is: letting ourselves be carried by God, and also allowing ourselves to be struck by unpleasant situations and even temptations. This is a reality found in many other biblical vocations, even in the New Testament; think, for example, of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Their lives were like this too: moments of exultation and moments of low spirits, of suffering.

Elijah is the man of contemplative life and, at the same time, of active life, preoccupied with the events of his time, capable of clashing with the king and queen after they had Naboth killed to take possession of his vineyard (cf. *1 Kings 21:1-24*). How much we need believers, zealous Christians who take action when facing those with managerial responsibility, with the courage of Elijah, to say: "This must not be done! This is murder!". We need Elijah's spirit. He shows us that there should be no dichotomy in the life of those who pray: one stands before the Lord and goes towards the brothers

and sisters to whom He sends us. Prayer is not about locking oneself up with the Lord to put “make-up” on one’s soul: no, this is not prayer, this is false prayer. Prayer is a confrontation with God, and allowing oneself to be sent to serve one’s brothers and sisters. The touchstone of prayer is concrete love towards our neighbour. And vice versa: believers act in the world after having first kept silent and prayed; otherwise, their action is impulsive, it is devoid of discernment, it is rushing without a destination. Believers behave this way, they do many injustices because they did not go to pray to the Lord first, to discern what they must do.

The pages of the Bible suggest that Elijah’s faith also made progress: he too grew in prayer, he refined it little by little. God’s face came into focus for him as he walked. He reached his peak in that extraordinary experience, when God manifested himself to Elijah on the mount (cf. 1 *Kings* 19:9-13). He manifested himself not in the fierce storm, not in the earthquake or the devouring fire, but in “a still small voice” (v. 12). Or better, a translation that reflects that experience well: in a thread of resounding silence. This is how God manifests himself to Elijah. It is with this humble sign that God communicates with Elijah, who at that moment was a fugitive prophet who had lost peace. God comes forward to meet a tired man, a man who thought he had failed on all fronts, and with that gentle breeze, with that thread of resounding silence, He brings calm and peace back into his heart.

This is the story of Elijah, but it seems written for all of us. Some evenings we may feel useless and alone. It is then that prayer will come and knock on the door of our hearts. We can all gather a corner of Elijah’s cloak, just as his disciple Elisha collected half his cloak. And even if we have done something wrong, or if we feel threatened and frightened, when we return before God with prayer, serenity and peace will return as if by miracle. This is what the example of Elijah teaches us.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, today we resume our series of catecheses on prayer by reflecting on the life of the great Prophet Elijah. In the Gospels, Elijah appears with Moses on the Mount of the Transfiguration, bearing witness to Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. Elijah is venerated above all in the monastic tradition as a model of prayer and unshakeable faith amid trials. Prayer and contemplation sustained the Prophet not only in moments of great success but also in the face of adversity and persecution. Elijah teaches us that fervent prayer and union with God cannot be separated from concern for the needs of others. In prayer, he grew in discernment of the Lord’s will and found the courage to denounce injustice, even at great personal cost. Elijah’s experience of God in prayer culminated, as we know, when the Lord appeared to him not in wind and fire, but in a quiet whisper. May we too, like the Prophet, persevere in prayer, strive to discern God’s will every day of our lives, and come to experience, even at times of uncertainty and trial, the consolation of his presence and providential care.