

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

First Week of Advent - Sunday 3rd December 2023

For this Sunday's Mass in our second scripture reading (1 Cor 1: 3-9), St Paul thanks God for all the graces the Corinthian church has received through Christ: *"I never stop thanking God for all the graces you have received through Jesus Christ ..."*.

Pope Francis teaches the importance of thanksgiving to God in prayer in his catechesis given on 30th December 2020. In this catechesis he starts by reflecting on the ten healed lepers, only one of whom came back to say thanks (Lk 17:13 ff). There is a major division between those who thank and those who do not. Francis challenges us as to whether we really see ourselves as being given gifts, or only have a sense of entitlement (a sense of, "I am owed this"). A sense of thanksgiving always grows when there is true encounter with Jesus.

The prayer of thanksgiving

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to focus on the prayer of thanksgiving. And I take my cue from an episode recounted by the Evangelist Luke. While Jesus was on the way, ten lepers approached Him, begging: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" (17:13). We know that those who had leprosy suffered not only physically, but also from social marginalization and religious marginalization. They were marginalized. Jesus did not back off from meeting them. Sometimes, he went beyond the limitations imposed by the law and touched the sick — which was not permitted — he embraced and healed them. In this case, there was no contact. From a distance, Jesus invited them to present themselves to the priests (v. 14), who were designated by law to certify any healings that had occurred. Jesus said nothing else. He listened to their prayer, he heard their cry for mercy, and he sent them immediately to the priests.

Those 10 lepers trusted, they did not remain there until they were cured, no: they trusted and they went immediately, and while they were on their way, all 10 of them were cured. The priests would have therefore been able to verify their healing and readmit them to normal life. But here is the most important point: only one in the group, before going to the priests, returned to thank Jesus and to praise God for the grace received. Only one, the other nine continued on their way. And Jesus points out that that man was a Samaritan, a sort of "heretic" for the Jews of that time. Jesus comments: "Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (17:18). This narrative is touching.

This narrative, so to speak, divides the world in two: those who do not give thanks and those who do; those who take everything as if it is owed them, and those who welcome everything as a gift, as grace. The *Catechism* says: "every event and need can become an offering of thanksgiving" (n. 2638). The prayer of thanksgiving always begins from here: from the recognition that grace precedes us. We were thought of before we learned how to think; we were loved before we learned how to love; we were desired before our hearts conceived a desire. If we view life like this, then "thank you" becomes the driving force of our day. And how often we even forget to say, "thank you".

For us Christians, thanksgiving was the name given to the most essential Sacrament there is: the *Eucharist*. In fact, the Greek word means precisely this: *thanksgiving*. Eucharist: thanksgiving. Christians, as all believers, bless God for the gift of life. To live is above all to have received life. All of us are born because someone wanted us to have life. And this is only the first of a long series of debts that we incur by living. Debts of gratitude. During our lives, more than one person has gazed on us with pure eyes, gratuitously. Often, these people are educators, catechists, persons who carried out their roles

above and beyond what was required of them. And they stirred gratitude within us. Even friendship is a gift for which we should always be grateful.

This “thank you” that we must say continually, this thanks that Christians share with everyone, grows *in the encounter with Jesus*. The Gospels attest that when Jesus passed by, he often stirred joy and praise to God in those who met Him. The Gospel accounts of Christmas are filled with prayerful people whose hearts are greatly moved by the coming of the Saviour. And we too were called to participate in this immense jubilation. The episode of the ten lepers who are healed also suggests this. Naturally, they were all happy about having recovered their health, thus being allowed to end that unending forced quarantine that excluded them from the community. But among them, there was one who experienced an additional joy: in addition to being healed, he rejoices at *the encounter with Jesus*. He is not only freed from evil, but he now possesses the certainty of being loved. This is the crux: when you thank someone, you express the certainty that you are loved. And this is a huge step: to have the certainty that you are loved. It is the discovery of love as the force that governs the world. Dante would say: the Love that “moves the sun and other stars” (*Paradise*, XXIII, 145). We are no longer vagabonds wandering aimlessly here and there, no: we have a home, we dwell in Christ, and from that “dwelling” we contemplate the rest of the world which appears infinitely more beautiful to us. We are children of love, we are brothers and sisters of love. We are men and women of grace.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us seek to remain always in the joy of the encounter with Jesus. Let us cultivate joyfulness. The devil, instead, after having deluded us — with whatever temptation — always leaves us sad and alone. If we are in Christ, there is no sin and no threat that can ever prevent us from continuing our journey with joy, along with many fellow travel companions.

Above all, let us not forget to thank: if we are bearers of gratitude, the world itself will become better, even if only a little bit, but that is enough to transmit a bit of hope. The world needs hope. And with gratitude, with this attitude of thanksgiving, we transmit a bit of hope. Everything is united and everything is connected, and each one can do their part wherever they are. The path to happiness is the one that Saint Paul described at the end of one of his letters: “Pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit” (*1Thess* 5:17-19). Do not quench the Spirit, what a beautiful project of life! Not quenching the Spirit that we have within leads us to gratitude.