

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

Eighteenth Sunday of the Year - 4th August 2024

Our first two scripture readings today give examples of peoples' dissatisfaction, with their hearts turned away from giving their full attention to God. Today we read Pope Francis' catechesis on prayer when distractions, times of barrenness, or sloth are present. He first gave this teaching on Wednesday, 19 May 2021.

Distractions, time of barrenness, sloth

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

Continuing along the same lines of the *Catechism*, in this catechesis we refer to the lived experience of prayer, trying to show some very common difficulties, which must be identified and overcome. Praying is not easy: many difficulties present themselves in prayer. It is necessary to know them, recognize them and overcome them.

The first problem that emerges to those who pray is *distraction* (cf. CCC, 2729). You start to pray and then your mind wanders, it wanders all over the world; your heart is here, your mind is there ... distraction from prayer. Prayer often co-exists with distraction. Indeed, the human mind struggles to dwell for long on a single thought. We all experience this constant whirlwind of images and illusions in perpetual motion, which accompanies us even during sleep. And we all know that it is not good to follow this inclination towards disorder.

The battle to achieve and maintain concentration does not relate only to prayer. If one does not attain a sufficient level of concentration, one cannot study profitably, nor can one work well. Athletes know that contests are not won solely through physical training, but also with mental discipline: above all, with the capacity to concentrate and to remain focused.

Distractions are not to blame, but they must be fought. In the heritage of our faith there is a virtue that is often forgotten, but which is quite present in the Gospel. It is called "vigilance". And Jesus said, "Keep vigil. Pray". The *Catechism* mentions it explicitly in its instruction on prayer (cf. no. 2730). Jesus often calls the disciples to the duty of a sober life, guided by the thought that sooner or later He will return, like a bridegroom from a wedding or a master from a journey. Not knowing the day and hour of his return, however, all the minutes of our lives are precious and should not be wasted on distractions. In a moment that we do not know, the voice of our Lord will resound: on that day, blessed will be those servants whom he will find diligent, still focused on what really matters. They did not stray in pursuit of every attraction that entered their minds, but tried to walk the right path, doing good and performing their own task.

This is distraction: the imagination wanders, it wanders and wanders.... Saint Teresa used to call this imagination that wanders and wanders in prayer "the madwoman in the house"; it is like a madwoman that leads you to wander here and there ... We must stop it and put it in a cage, with attention.

The time of barrenness warrants a different discourse. The *Catechism* describes it this way: "the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb" (n. 2731).

Barrenness makes us think of Good Friday, at night, and Holy Saturday, the whole day: Jesus is not there, he is in the tomb; Jesus is dead: we are alone. And this is the “mother-thought” of barrenness. Often we do not know what the reasons for barrenness are: it may depend on ourselves, but also on God, who permits certain situations in the exterior or interior life. Or, at times, it may be a headache or a sick feeling that stops us from entering into prayer. Often we do not really know the reason. Spiritual teachers describe the experience of faith as a continuous alternation between times of consolation and desolation; there are times when everything is easy, while others are marked by great weightiness. Very often, when we encounter a friend, we say, “How are you?” — “Today I am down”. Very often we are “down”, or rather, we don’t have feelings, we don’t have consolation, we can’t do it. They are those grey days ... and there are so many of them in life! But the danger is having a grey heart: when this “feeling down” reaches the heart and sickens it ... and there are people who live with a grey heart. This is terrible: one cannot pray, one cannot feel consolation with a grey heart! Or, one cannot emerge from spiritual barrenness with a grey heart. The heart must be open and luminous, so that the light of the Lord can enter. And if it does not enter, we need to wait for it, with hope. But do not close it up in greyness.

Then, a different thing is *sloth*, another flaw, another vice, which is a real temptation against prayer and, more generally, against the Christian life. Sloth is “a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart” (CCC, 2733). It is one of the seven “deadly sins” because, fuelled by conceit, it can lead to the death of the soul.

So what can we do in this succession of enthusiasms and discouragements? One must learn to always walk. True progress in spiritual life does not consist in multiplying ecstasies, but in being able to persevere in difficult times: walk, walk, walk on.... and if you are tired, stop a bit and then start walking again. But with perseverance. Let us remember Saint Francis’ parable on perfect joy: it is not in the infinite fortunes rained down from Heaven that a friar’s skill is measured, but in walking with consistency, even when one is not acknowledged, even when one is mistreated, even when everything has lost its initial flavour. All the saints have passed through this “dark valley”, and let us not be scandalized if, in reading their diaries, we find accounts of evenings of listless prayer, lived without enthusiasm. We must learn to say: “Even though You, my God, seem to be doing everything to make me stop believing in You, I still continue to pray to You”. Believers never shut off prayer! It may sometimes resemble the prayer of Job, who does not accept that God treats him unjustly, protests and calls him to judgment. But, very often, even protesting before God is a way of praying or, as that little old lady said, “getting angry with God is a way to pray too”, because a son often gets angry with his father: it is a way of relating to the father; since he recognizes him as “father”, he gets angry....

And we too, who are far less holy and patient than Job, know that in the end, at the end of this time of desolation, during which we have raised silent cries to Heaven and many times have asked “why?”, God will answer us. Do not forget the prayer that asks “why?”. It is the prayer of children when they begin not to understand things, which psychologists call “the why stage”, because the child asks his father, “Daddy, why? Daddy, why? Daddy, why?” But let us be careful: the child does not listen to his father’s answer. The father starts to reply, but the child interrupts with another “why?”. He simply wants to draw his father’s attention to himself; and when we get a little angry with God and start asking *why?*, we are attracting our Father’s heart towards our misery, towards our difficulty, towards our life. But yes, have the courage to say to God: “But why?”. Because at times, getting a little angry is good for you, because it reawakens that son-father, daughter-father relationship we must have with God. And he will accept even our harshest and bitterest expressions with a father’s love, and will consider them as an act of faith, as a prayer.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider some common difficulties we encounter in our practice of prayer. The first is *distraction*. Prayer, like study

and work, demands concentration and mental discipline. This calls for our cultivation of the virtue of vigilance, by which we focus our lives on doing the Lord's will daily in expectation of his return. A second difficulty is the experience of *spiritual aridity*, moments of dryness when our hearts – as the Catechism teaches – have “no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones” (No. 2731). The spiritual masters acknowledge that the life of faith involves times of consolation but also of desolation, when we share in the Lord's sufferings. A third difficulty is *acedia* or sloth, a form of spiritual fatigue that leads to the deadly temptation to abandon prayer altogether. The saints faced these same difficulties in their prayer and they teach us that true progress in the spiritual life comes about through daily perseverance, like that of Job who remained constant even amid his many afflictions. As we strive to grow in our own life of prayer let us ask for the grace of perseverance, confident that our loving Father will grant us, through the Son and in the Spirit, all that we need to draw us ever closer to him.