

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

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

First Sunday of Lent – 18th February 2024

In today's Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent we see Jesus driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days. Jesus shares our struggles as well as being our model of life. In Pope Francis' catechesis he starts with the certainty that no one's life is a "walk in the park", and shows us some ways to approach the struggles in prayer as they arise.

The Struggle of Prayer

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

I am happy to resume this face-to-face meeting, because I will tell you something: it is not nice to speak in front of nothing, to a video camera. It is not nice. And now, after many months, thanks to the courage of Mgr. Sapienza, who said, "No, let's do it there", we are gathered here again. Mgr. Sapienza is good! And finding people, finding you here, each one of you with your own story, people who come from all over, from Italy, from the United States, from Colombia, then that little football team of four Swiss brothers, I think ... who are over there ... four. The little sister is missing, I hope she arrives.... And seeing each one of you pleases me, as we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord, and looking at each other helps us to pray for one another. Also the people who are far away but always make themselves close to us. The ever-present Sister Geneviève who comes from Lunapark, people who work.... There are so many, and they are all here. Thank you for your presence and your visit. Take the Pope's message to everyone. The Pope's message is that I pray for everyone, and I ask you to pray for me, united in prayer.

And speaking of prayer, Christian prayer, like all Christian life, is not a "walk in the park". None of the great people of prayer that we meet in the Bible and in the history of the Church found prayer "comfortable". Yes, one can pray like a parrot — blah, blah, blah, blah, blah — but this is not prayer. Prayer certainly gives great peace, but through inner struggle, sometimes difficult, which can accompany even long periods of life. Praying is not something easy, and this is why we flee from it. Every time we want to pray, we are immediately reminded of many other activities, which at that moment seem more important and more urgent. This happens to me too: I go to pray a little ... and no, I must do this and that.... We flee from prayer; I don't know why, but that is how it is. Almost always, after putting off prayer, we realize that those things were not essential at all, and that we may have wasted time. This is how the Enemy deceives us.

All Godly men and women report not only the joy of prayer, but also the tediousness and fatigue it can bring: at times it is a difficult struggle to keep to the time and ways of praying. Some saints continued it for years without finding any satisfaction in it, without perceiving its usefulness. Silence, prayer and concentration are difficult exercises, and sometimes human nature rebels. We would rather be anywhere else in the world, but not there, in that church pew, praying. Those who want to pray must remember that faith is not easy, and sometimes it moves forward in almost total darkness, without points of reference. There are moments in the life of faith that are dark, and therefore some saints call this "the dark night", because we hear nothing. But I continue to pray.

The *Catechism* lists a long series of enemies of prayer, those that make it difficult to pray, that put us in difficulty (cf. nn. 2726-2728). Some doubt that prayer can truly reach the Almighty: why does God remain silent? If God is Almighty, he could say a couple of words and end the matter. Faced with the

elusiveness of the divine, others suspect that prayer is merely a psychological operation; something that may be useful, but is neither true nor necessary: and one could even be a practitioner without being a believer; and so on, many explanations.

However, the worst enemies of prayer are found within us. The *Catechism* describes them in this way: “Discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have ‘great possessions’, we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift” (2728). This is clearly a summary list that could be lengthened.

What should be done in the time of temptation, when everything seems to waver? If we look at the history of spirituality, we immediately see that the masters of the soul were very clear about the situation we have described. To overcome it, each of them offered some contribution: a word of wisdom, or a suggestion for facing moments fraught with difficulty. It is not a question of systematically developed theories, no, but of advice born of experience, which shows the importance of resisting and persevering in prayer.

It would be interesting to review at least some of these pieces of advice, because each one deserves to be explored further. For example, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola is a short book of great wisdom that teaches how to put one’s life in order. It makes us understand that the Christian vocation is militancy, it is the decision to stand under the banner of Jesus Christ and not under that of the devil, trying to do good even when it becomes difficult.

In times of trial, it is good to remember that we are not alone, that someone is at our side, watching over and protecting us. Saint Anthony the Abbot, the founder of Christian monasticism, also faced terrible times in Egypt, when prayer became a difficult struggle. His biographer, Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, recounts one of the worst episodes in the life of the hermit saint when he was about 35, a time of middle age that for many people involves a crisis. Anthony was disturbed by the ordeal, but he resisted. When calm finally returned, he turned to his Lord with an almost reproachful tone: “But Lord, where were you? Why did you not come immediately to put an end to my suffering?” And Jesus answered: “Anthony, I was there. But I was waiting to see you fight” (*Life of Anthony*, 10). Fighting in prayer. And very often, prayer is combat. I am reminded of something I experienced close up, when I was in the other diocese. There was a married couple with a nine-year-old daughter, with an illness that the doctors were unable to diagnose. And in the end, in hospital, the doctor said to the mother: “Madam, call your husband”. And the husband was at work; they were labourers, they worked every day. And he told the father: “The child will not survive the night. There is an infection; there is nothing we can do”. Perhaps that man did not attend Mass every Sunday, but he had great faith. He left, weeping; he left his wife there with the little girl in the hospital, he took the train and he travelled seventy kilometres towards the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, Patroness of Argentina. And there — the Basilica was already closed, it was almost ten o’clock at night, in the evening — he clung to the grates of the Basilica and spent all night praying to Our Lady, fighting for his daughter’s health. This is not a figment of the imagination: I saw him! I saw him myself. That man there, fighting. At the end, at six o’clock in the morning, the church opened, and he entered to salute Our Lady: all night “fighting”, and then he returned home. When he arrived he looked for his wife but could not find her. And he thought: “She has left us. No, Our Lady cannot do this to me”. Then he found her, smiling as she said: “I don’t know what happened. The doctors said that something changed, and now she is cured”. That man, fighting with prayer, received the grace of Our Lady. Our Lady listened to him. And I saw this: prayer works miracles, because prayer goes directly to the heart of the tenderness of God, who loves us like a father. And when he does not grant us a grace, he will grant us another that in time we will see. But always, it is necessary to battle in prayer to ask for grace. Yes, at times we ask for a grace we do not need, but we ask for it without truly wanting it, without fighting. But serious things are not asked for this way. Prayer is combat, and the Lord is always with us.

Jesus is always with us: If in a moment of blindness we cannot perceive his presence, we will succeed in the future. We will also end up repeating the same sentence that the patriarch Jacob said one day: “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it” (*Gen 28:16*). At the end of our life, looking back, we too will be able to say: “I thought I was alone, but I was not: Jesus was with me”. We will all be able to say this.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: In our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider the traditional theme of “spiritual combat”. The great spiritual masters recognize that prayer is not always easy, for our human nature is frequently distracted or tempted by seemingly more important priorities. The Catechism teaches that prayer, although a free and unmerited gift of God’s grace, can be affected by our human experiences of discouragement, sadness or disappointment (cf. No. 2728). Many of the saints in fact experienced long periods of spiritual dryness and even darkness. They teach us that the only response to these temptations is greater perseverance. Saint Ignatius of Loyola uses military imagery to stress the importance of discipline in our efforts to serve under the banner of Christ. Saint Anthony learned from his harsh spiritual battles in the desert that although God may at times seem absent amid these struggles, he remains always at our side. In our daily efforts to persevere in prayer may we trust that our own spiritual combat, like that of Jacob and the angel (cf. *Gen 28:16*), will bear fruit in a deeper and more mature relationship with the Lord. (Wednesday, 12 May 2021).