



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *Library of the Apostolic Palace*

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Catechesis on prayer - 30. *The vocal prayer*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

Prayer is dialogue with God; and every creature, in a certain sense, “dialogues” with God. Within the human being, prayer becomes *word*, invocation, hymn, poetry... The divine Word is made flesh, and in each person’s flesh the word returns to God in prayer.

We create words, but they are also our mothers, and to some extent they shape us. The words of a prayer get us safely through a dark valley, lead us towards green pastures rich in water, and enable us to feast in the presence of an enemy, as the Psalm teaches us (cf. *Ps 23*). Words are born from feelings, but there is also the reverse path, whereby words shape feelings. The Bible educates people to ensure that everything comes to light through the word, that nothing human is excluded, censored. Above all, pain is dangerous if it stays hidden, closed up within us... Pain that is closed up within us, that cannot express or give vent to itself, can poison the soul. It is deadly.

This is why Sacred Scripture teaches us to pray, sometimes even with bold words. The sacred writers do not want to deceive us about the human person: they know that our hearts also harbour unedifying feelings, even hatred. None of us is born holy, and when these negative feelings come knocking at the door of our hearts, we must be capable of defusing them with prayer and with God’s words. We also find very harsh expressions against enemies in the Psalms — expressions that the spiritual masters teach us are to be directed to the devil and to our sins — yet they are words that belong to human reality and ended up in the riverbed of the Sacred Scriptures. They are there to testify to us that if, in the face of violence, no words existed to make negative feelings harmless, to channel them in such a way that they do no harm, then the world would be overwhelmed.

The first human prayer is always a vocal recitation. The lips always move first. Although we are all aware that praying does not mean repeating words, vocal prayer is nevertheless the surest, and can always be practised. Feelings, on the other hand, however noble, are always uncertain: they come and go, they leave us and return. Not only that, but the graces of prayer are also unpredictable: at times consolations abound, but on the darkest days they seem to evaporate completely. The prayer of the heart is mysterious, and at certain times it is lacking. Instead, the prayer of the lips that is whispered or recited together, is always accessible, and is as necessary as manual labour. The *Catechism* teaches us about this, and states that: “Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. To his disciples, drawn by their Master’s silent prayer, Jesus teaches a vocal prayer, the Our Father” (n. 2701). “Teach us how to pray”, the disciples asked Jesus, and Jesus taught them a vocal prayer: the Lord’s Prayer. And everything is there, in that prayer.

We should all have the humility of certain elderly people who, in church, perhaps because their hearing is no longer acute, recite quietly the prayers they learned as children, filling the nave with whispers. That prayer does not disturb the silence, but testifies their fidelity to the duty of prayer, practised throughout their lives without fail. These practitioners of humble prayer are often the great intercessors in parishes: they are the oaks that from year to year spread their branches to offer shade to the greatest number of people. Only God knows when and how much their hearts have been united to those prayers they recited: surely these people too had to face nights and moments of emptiness. But one can always remain faithful to vocal prayer. It is like an anchor: one can hold on to the rope and remain, faithful, come what may.

We all have something to learn from the perseverance of the Russian pilgrim, mentioned in a famous work on spirituality, who learned the art of prayer by repeating the same invocation over and over again: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord, have mercy on us, sinners!” (cf. *CCC*, 2616; 2667). He only repeated this. If his life received graces, if prayer became so warm one day as to perceive the presence of the Kingdom among us, if his gaze was transformed until it became like that of a child, it is because he insisted on reciting a simple Christian exclamation. In the end, it became part of his breathing. The story of the Russian pilgrim is beautiful: it is a book that is accessible to all. I recommend you read it; it will help you to understand what vocal prayer is.

Therefore, we must not disregard vocal prayer. One might say, “Ah, this is for children, for ignorant folk; I am seeking mental prayer, meditation, the inner void so that God might come to me”. Please, one must not succumb to the pride of scorning vocal prayer. It is the prayer of the simple, the one Jesus taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven.... The words we speak take us by the hand; at times they restore flavour, they awaken even the sleepest of hearts; they reawaken feelings we had forgotten. And they lead us by the hand towards the experience of God. And above all, they are the only ones that, in a sure way, address to God the questions that he wants to hear. Jesus did not leave us in a fog. He told us: “when you pray, say this”. And he taught the Lord’s Prayer (cf. *Mt* 6:9).

Special Greeting

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. In the joy of the Risen Christ, I invoke upon you and your families the loving mercy of God our Father. May the Lord bless you all!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. During this Easter Season, which invites us to meditate on the mystery of Christ's Resurrection, may the glory of the Lord be for each of us a wellspring of new energy in the journey towards salvation. I offer my blessing to you all!

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider the importance of vocal prayer. In our dialogue with God, he first spoke to us through his own Word made flesh. He invites us in turn to speak to him in words that embody our deepest thoughts, emotions and experiences. Words do not only express our ideas, they also shape us and often reveal us to ourselves. In the inspired words of the Book of Psalms, we find a model of vocal prayer. The Psalmist gives us the words to bring our joys, fears, hopes and needs to God and to share with him every aspect of our lives. The prayer of the heart and the prayer of our lips can never be separated. As the Catechism tells us, "vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life" (No. 2701). Through our spoken or chanted prayer, alone or in common, we find the words that enable us to grow daily in our relationship with God. Prayer thus quietly becomes an essential part of our lives, like the air we breathe. When the disciples asked Jesus to show them how to pray, he responded by teaching them, and us, the words of the Our Father.
