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"Mary accompanied the first steps of the Church in prayer"

In his 18 November general audience Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer, speaking about the prayer of our Lady.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

On our course of catechesis on prayer, today we meet *the Virgin Mary as the prayerful woman*. The

Madonna prayed. When the world still knew nothing of her, when she was a simple girl engaged to a man of the house of David, Mary prayed. We can imagine the young girl of Nazareth wrapped in silence, in continual dialogue with God who would soon entrust her with a mission. She is already full of grace and immaculate from the moment she was conceived; but she knows nothing yet of her surprising and extraordinary vocation and the stormy sea she will have to cross. One thing is certain: Mary belongs to a great host of the humble of heart whom the official historians never include in their books, but with whom God prepared the coming of His Son.

Mary did not autonomously conduct her life: she waits for God to take the reins of her path and guide her where He wants. She is docile, and with her availability she prepares the

grand events in which God takes part in the world. The *Catechism* recalls her constant and caring presence in the benevolent design of the Father throughout the course of Jesus's life (see CCC, 2617-2618).

Mary was praying when the Archangel Gabriel came to bring his message to her in Nazareth. Her small yet immense "Here I am", which makes all of creation jump for joy at that moment, was preceded throughout salvation history by many other "Here I am"s, by many trusting obediences, by many who were open to God's will. There is no better way to pray than to place oneself in an attitude of openness, of a heart open to God: "Lord, what You want, when You want, and how You want". That is, with a heart open to God's will. And God always responds. How many believers live their prayer like this! Those who are the most humble of heart pray like this: with

essential humility, let's put it that way; with simple humility: "Lord, what You want, when You want, and how You want". They pray like this and do not get upset when problems fill their days, but they go about facing reality and knowing that in humble love, in love offered in each situation, we become instruments of God's grace. "Lord, what You want, when You want, and how You want". A simple prayer, but one in which we place ourselves in the Lord's hands so that He might guide us. All of us can pray like this, almost without words.

Prayer knows how to calm restlessness. We are restless, we always want things before asking for them, and we want them right away. This restlessness harms us. And prayer knows how to calm restlessness, knows how to transform it into availability. When we are restless, I pray and prayer opens my

heart and makes me open to God's will. In those few moments of the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary knew how to reject fear, even while sensing that her "yes" would bring her tremendously difficult trials. If in prayer we understand that each day given by God is a call, our hearts will then widen and we will accept everything. We will learn how to say: "What You want, Lord. Promise me only that You will be present every step of my way". This is important: to ask the Lord to be present on every step of our way: that He not leave us alone, that He not abandon us in temptation, that He not abandon us in the bad moments. The Our Father end this way: the grace that Jesus Himself taught us to ask of the Lord.

Mary accompanied Jesus's entire life in prayer, right up to His death and resurrection; and in the end, she continued and she accompanied the first steps of the nascent Church (see

Acts 1:14). Mary prayed with the disciples who had witnessed the scandal of the cross. She prayed with Peter who had succumbed to fear and cried for remorse. Mary was there, with the disciples, in the midst of the men and women whom her Son had called to form His Community. Mary did not act like a priest among them, no! She is Jesus's Mother who prayed with them, in the community, as a member of the community. She prayed with them and prayed for them. And, once again, her prayer preceded into the future that was about to be fulfilled: by the work of the Holy Spirit she became the Mother of God, and by the work of the Holy Spirit she became the Mother of the Church. Praying with the nascent Church, she becomes the Mother of the Church, accompanying the disciples on the first steps of the Church in prayer, awaiting the Holy Spirit. In silence, always silently. Mary's prayer is

silent. The Gospels recount only one of Mary's prayers at Cana, when she asks her Son for those poor people who are about to make a horrible impression during the banquet. So, let us imagine: there is a wedding banquet and it will end up with milk because there is no wine! What an impression! And she prays and asks her Son to resolve that problem. In and of itself, Mary's presence is prayer, and her presence among the disciples in the Upper Room, awaiting the Holy Spirit, is in prayer. Thus Mary gives birth to the Church, she is the Mother of the Church. The *Catechism* explains: "In the faith of his humble handmaid, the Gift of God", that is, the Holy Spirit, "found the acceptance he had awaited from the beginning of time" (CCC, 2617).

In the Virgin Mary, natural feminine intuition is exalted by her most singular union with God in prayer. This is why, reading the Gospel, we

note that she seems to disappear at times, only to reappear for crucial moments: Mary was open to God's voice that guided her heart, that guided her steps where her presence was needed. Her silent presence as mother and as disciple. Mary is present because she is Mother, but she is also present because she is the first disciple, the one who best learned Jesus's ways. Mary never says: "Come, I will take care of things". Instead she says: "Do whatever He will tell you", always pointing her finger at Jesus. This behaviour is typical of the disciple, and she is the first disciple: she prays as Mother and she prays as a disciple.

"Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (*Lk 2:19*). Thus the evangelist Luke depicts the Mother of the Lord in the infancy narrative in his Gospel. Everything that happens around her ends up

being reflected on in the depths of her heart: the days filled with joy, as well as the darkest moments when even she struggles to understand by which roads the Redemption must pass. Everything ends up in her heart so that it might pass through the sieve of prayer and be transfigured by it: whether it be the gifts of the Magi, or the flight into Egypt, until that terrible passion Friday. The Mother keeps everything and brings it to her dialogue with God. Someone has compared Mary's heart to a pearl of incomparable splendour, formed and smoothed by patient acceptance of God's will through the mysteries of Jesus meditated on in prayer.

How beautiful it would be if we too could be a bit like our Mother! With a heart open to God's Word, with a silent heart, with an obedient heart, with a heart that knows how to receive God's Word and that allows

itself to grow with the seed of good
for the Church.

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