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"Vocal prayer is the prayer of the simple"

Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer in his 21 April general audience, speaking about vocal prayer.

04/21/2021

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, direct us towards green meadows rich in water, and enable us to feast in front of the eyes 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 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 harbour also unedifying feelings, even hatred. None of us are 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 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 which is whispered or recited chorally 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” (no.

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 to 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

empty moments. 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 repeated only this: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Lord, have mercy on us, sinners!”. If graces arrive in our life, if prayer becomes so warm one day that the presence of the Kingdom were perceived here among us, if that vision could be transformed until it became like that of a child, it would be because we have insisted on reciting a simple Christian exclamation. In the end, it becomes part of our breathing. It is

beautiful, the story of the Russian pilgrim: 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! Do not succumb to the pride of scorning vocal prayer. It is the prayer of the simple, the prayer that Jesus taught: Our Father, who is 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, these words... And above all, they are the only ones that, in a sure way, direct to God the questions he wants to hear. Jesus did not leave us in a

fog. He told us: “Pray then like this”.
And he taught the Lord's Prayer (cf.
Mt 6:9).

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of-the-simple/](https://opusdei.org/en-ke/article/vocal-prayer-is-the-prayer-of-the-simple/) (04/12/2025)