

Meditations: Sunday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time (Year C)

- Moving God's Heart
- Praying as children
- Perseverance in prayer

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THE FIRST READING of the Mass presents us with the passage from Genesis where Abraham intercedes for the righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah. This dialogue is one of the most moving pages in the Old

Testament. The Lord is about to destroy the city, steeped in sin. But the patriarch, in a tone both reverent and trusting, insists with increasing boldness on his request for mercy, as though he were entering God's heart to probe his compassion and at the same time to awaken it.

Already in the Old Testament, we see the essence of prayer: man stands between good and evil, sin and guilt, God's justice and mercy, and pleads with the Lord to forgive or to bestow his gifts. This intercession has a mysterious quality: on the one hand, it is true that our supplications cannot change God, who is infinitely perfect; but on the other, by establishing a covenant with men, God has chosen in a certain way to make himself vulnerable. He is not indifferent to our petitions; but out of his love for us He has given us the power to move his heart, to grant us what we ask from Him or to lessen

the punishment we deserve. This is what we often see when the patriarchs intercede for the Chosen People.

In the Gospel, Jesus takes up this trusting way of praying, but perfects it with a decisive new approach. When the apostles ask Him to teach them how to pray, our Lord makes clear that the first condition for praying is to call God “Father,” to feel themselves to be his children. A deeply rooted conviction of the first Christians was that they could address God as his beloved children. “The new Life brought by Christ was shown to them as the life of God’s beloved children. This was neither a theoretical nor an abstract truth, but rather a reality that filled them with overflowing joy. We see this reflected in the joyful words of the Apostle Saint John in his first letter: ‘See what love the Father has given us,

that we should be called children of God; and so we are' (1 Jn 3:1).”^[1]

SAINT LUKE tells us that the apostles asked Jesus to teach them how to pray after seeing Him pray “in a certain place” (Lk 11:1), which very ancient traditions place on the summit of the Mount of Olives. When contemplating this Gospel scene, the founder of Opus Dei said that, also in our case, when we seek to have an authentic life of prayer, it is God himself who will teach us how to pray fruitfully: “Go to Jesus as his disciples did and say to him, 'Lord, teach us how to pray.' I have not been inventing anything. It's all there in Holy Scripture. That is where I learned to say, 'Lord, I don't know how to talk to you! Lord, teach us how to pray!' When we pray in this way, we receive all the loving

assistance of the Holy Spirit – that light, fire and driving wind which sets the flame alight and makes it capable of enkindling a great fire of love.”^[2] —

The Our Father is the principal prayer of a Christian. In teaching it to the apostles, “Jesus does not give us a formula to repeat mechanically. As in every vocal prayer, it is through the Word of God that the Holy Spirit teaches the children of God to pray to their Father. Jesus not only gives us the words of our filial prayer; at the same time he gives us the Spirit by whom these words become in us ‘spirit and life.’ Even more, the proof and possibility of our filial prayer is that the Father ‘sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’” (*Gal 4:6*).”^[3] —

Saint Josemaría advised people to bring the words of the Our Father to their personal meditation, in order to

help us be contemplatives: “You begin: *Father*. And you stop to consider for a moment what this word means. You think about what your father means to you, and that besides this earthly father, you have another father in Heaven: God. And you are filled with a holy pride. *Our Father*. He is not only yours: he is ours, everyone’s. So you are a brother to every other person on earth. And therefore you need to love people, you need to help them be good children of God, because all of us together make up the family of our Father in Heaven. *Who art in heaven*. And right away you remember what you have heard me say: that He is also in the Tabernacle and in our soul in grace.”^[4] —

AFTER transmitting the Lord’s Prayer to us, Luke recounts a parable that

Jesus told to exhort us to pray with trust and perseverance. The brief story presents us with a striking scene. It takes place in a typical home in Palestine, consisting of a single room where mats were spread out at night for the whole family to sleep on. Soon after they had retired for the night, a friend suddenly arrives knocking at the door to ask for three loaves of bread, presumably waking everyone up. The father of the family cannot hide his annoyance and points out the inappropriateness of the request. But Jesus concludes: "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (*Lk 11:8-9*).

St. Gregory the Great said that God, although fully aware of our needs at every moment, nevertheless “wants to be implored, wants to be coerced, wants to be overcome by a certain insistence.”^[5] And St. Augustine said that God wants to grant us his mercy more than we want to receive it.^[6] Therefore he advised: “Call upon the Lord in your prayer, ask, insist. He will arise and give it to you, but not overcome by your insistence like the friend in the parable. He wants to give it to you. And he delays giving you what he wants to give you so that, by delaying it, you may desire it more ardently, lest, by granting it to you immediately, it seem to you to be of little value.”^[7]

Prayer is always effective. Even if our Lord does not always promptly grant us what we ask for, prayer helps us to strengthen our friendship with Him, and to place our trust in God because we are sure that He

loves us and hears us. “Prayer always transforms reality, always. If things around us do not change, at least we change; our heart changes. To pray is already, even now, victory over loneliness and desperation.”^[8] — It is true that at times we must continue to live in uncertainty without yet receiving what we ask for. But then our Lord accompanies us more closely in our needs and, above all, we know that at the end of a life of prayer, a good Father awaits us with open arms. “May the Lord Jesus give us the grace to understand that prayer moves the heart of God, our compassionate Father, who loves us and gives us his Holy Spirit; and may the Blessed Virgin help us to be men and women of prayer, and to trust in the goodness of the Lord who always hears us.”^[9] —

^[1] — Lucas Buch, “The First Prayer of a Child of God,” in *New Mediterraneans*.

[2] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 244.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2766.

[4] St. Josemaría, Notes taken at a family gathering, 27 October 1972.

[5] St. Gregory the Great, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 8, 2.

[6] Cf. Saint Augustine, Sermon 105, 1.

[7] St. Augustine, Sermon 105, 3.

[8] Francis, Audience, 9 January 2019.

[9] Ibid.