

"Pray without ceasing"

On 9 June, in his penultimate catechesis on prayer, Pope Francis stressed the need to pray always in everything we do, including our work.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In this penultimate catechesis on prayer we are going to speak about perseverance in praying. It is an invitation, indeed a command that

comes to us from Sacred Scripture. The spiritual journey of the *Russian pilgrim* begins when he comes across a phrase of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Thessalonians: “Pray constantly, always and for everything give thanks” (5:17-18). The Apostle’s words struck the man and he wondered how it was possible to pray without interruption, given that our lives are fragmented into so many different moments, which do not always make concentration possible. From this question he begins his search, which will lead him to discover what is called the prayer of the heart. It consists in repeating with faith: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” A simple prayer, but very beautiful. A prayer that, little by little, adapts itself to the rhythm of breath and extends throughout the day. What was it? “Lord Jesus Christ,

Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”. I can’t hear you. Louder! “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”. And repeat it, repeat it, eh! This is important. Indeed, the breath never stops, not even while we sleep; and prayer is the breath of life.

How, then, it is possible always to preserve a state of prayer? The *Catechism* offers beautiful quotations from the history of spirituality, which insist on the need for continuous prayer, that it may be the fulcrum of Christian existence. I will look at some of them.

The monk Evagrius Ponticus thus states: “We have not been commanded to work, to keep watch and to fast continually” – no, this is not demanded – “but it has been laid down that we are to pray without ceasing” (2742). The heart in prayer. There is therefore an ardour in the

Christian life, which must never fail. It is a little like that sacred fire that was kept in the ancient temples, that burned without interruption and which the priests had the task of keeping alive. So there must be a sacred fire in us too, which burns continuously and which nothing can extinguish. And it is not easy. But this is how it must be.

Saint John Chrysostom, another pastor who was attentive to real life, preached: “Even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, while buying or selling, or even while cooking” (2743). Little prayers: “Lord, have pity on us”, “Lord, help me”. So, prayer is a kind of musical staff, where we inscribe the melody of our lives. It is not in contrast with daily work, it does not contradict the many small obligations and appointments; if anything, it is the place where every

action finds its meaning, its reason and its peace. In prayer.

Certainly, putting these principles into practice is not easy. A father and a mother, caught up in a thousand tasks, may feel nostalgia for a time in their life in which it was easy to find regular times and spaces for prayer. Then come children, work, family life, ageing parents... One has the impression that it will never be possible to get through it all. And so it is good for us to think that God, our Father, who must take care of all the universe, always remembers each one of us. Therefore, we too must always remember Him!

We can also remember that in Christian monasticism work has always been held in great esteem, not only because of the moral duty to provide for oneself and others, but also for a sort of balance, an inner balance – work, no? It is dangerous

for man to cultivate an interest so abstract that he loses contact with reality. Work helps us to stay in touch with reality. The monk's hands joined in prayer bear the calluses of those who wield shovels and hoes. When, in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 10:38-42), Jesus tells Saint Martha that the only thing that is truly necessary is to listen to God, He does not in any way mean to disparage the many services that she was performing with such effort.

Everything in the human being is “binary”: our body is symmetrical, we have two arms, two eyes, two hands... And so, work and prayer are also complementary. Prayer - which is the “breath” of everything - remains as the living backdrop of work, even in moments in which this is not explicit. It is inhuman to be so absorbed by work that you can no longer find the time for prayer.

At the same time, a prayer that is alien from life is not healthy. A prayer that alienates itself from the concreteness of life becomes spiritualism, or worse, ritualism. Let us remember that Jesus, after showing the disciples His glory on Mount Tabor, did not want to prolong that moment of ecstasy, but instead came down from the mountain with them and resumed the daily journey. Because that experience had to remain in their hearts as the light and strength of their faith; also a light and strength for the days that were soon to come: those of the Passion. In this way, the time dedicated to staying with God revives faith, which helps us in the practical aspects of daily life, and faith, in turn, nurtures prayer, without interruption. In this circularity between faith, life and prayer, one keeps alight that flame of Christian life that God expects of us.

And let us repeat the simple prayer that it is so good to repeat during the day. Let's see if you can still remember it. All together: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!". Saying this prayer continually will help you in the union with Jesus. Thank you.

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