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Pray Without Ceasing

"Undoubtedly, continual prayer is a gift from God, but he will not refuse this gift to someone who responds generously to his grace." A new article on Christian life.

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Saint Luke is the Evangelist who most clearly highlights the importance of prayer in Christ's ministry.[1] He is the only one to record three parables told by Jesus about prayer.

The second parable is this: *In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor regarded man; and there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying: "Vindicate me against my adversary." For a while he refused; but afterwards he said to himself: "Though I neither fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming." And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night*.[2]

When introducing this parable, Saint Luke writes: *He told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart*.[3] And shortly afterwards he quotes some other words of Jesus about the need for vigilance: *Watch at all times, praying*...[4] The third Evangelist stresses that Jesus tells his disciples to persevere in prayer "day and night," "at all times." From the tone

of our Lord's words it is also clear that this is a command, and not just a piece of advice.

To follow our Lord closely we need to pray without ceasing, because he himself set us an example and prayed continually to his Father God. As Saint Luke recounts: *He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.*[5] And also: *He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."*[6]

The third gospel includes many scenes where we see Jesus praying before the decisive moments in his mission: for instance, his Baptism; his Transfiguration; before choosing and calling the Twelve; before fulfilling God the Father's loving plan by his Passion.[7]

Speaking about the example of our Lord's prayer, Saint Josemaria said:

“The Apostles were filled with love when they saw Christ pray; and, after seeing this constant attitude in their master, they asked him: ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’”[8]

In the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Luke sketches in three rapid strokes the prayer of the first faithful: *all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus.*[9] And a little later: *they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*.[10] When Peter was imprisoned for having preached the truth boldly, *earnest prayer for him was made to God by the Church*.[11]

After Saint Luke, it is Saint Paul who echoes most clearly Jesus’ command about continual prayer. He often exhorts the faithful to put it into practice; for example, when he writes to the Thessalonians: *pray*

constantly;[12] and to the Ephesians: *Pray at all times in the Spirit*.[13] Saint Paul himself sets us an example, when he says that he prays without ceasing for his flock, *night and day*.[14]

Following the teachings of Scripture, some Fathers of the Church and ancient Church writers also exhort Christians to lead a life of unceasing prayer. Clement of Alexandria, for example, writes: “Some assign fixed hours to prayer, for instance the third, the sixth and the ninth; but the perfect Christian prays throughout his or her whole life, endeavoring by prayer to have fellowship with God.”[15]

A life of constant prayer

As ordinary Christians who want to follow Christ closely at all the crossroads of the world, we have to seek union with God through constant prayer. “Whenever we feel

in our hearts a desire to improve, a desire to respond more generously to our Lord, and we look for something to guide us, a north star to guide our lives as Christians, the Holy Spirit will remind us of the words of the Gospel that we ‘ought to pray continually and never be discouraged’ . . . I would like us, in our meditation today, to make up our minds once and for all that we need to aspire to become contemplative souls, in the street, in the midst of our work, by maintaining a constant conversation with our God and not breaking it off at any time of the day. If we really want to be loyal followers of our Master, this is the only way.”[16]

Christians coherent with their faith should strive to turn each day into a constant, intimate conversation with God. Prayer is not an isolated act that is done and then left aside. “‘Through the night I meditate on you’ and ‘my

prayer comes to you like incense in the evening.' Our whole day can be a time for prayer—from night to morning and from morning to night. In fact, as Holy Scripture reminds us, even our sleep should be a prayer."17]

This last point was made by some Fathers of the Church such as Saint Jerome, who said: "the Apostle commands us to pray always, and for the saints sleep itself is prayer."[18]

Undoubtedly, continual prayer is a gift from God, but he will not refuse this gift to someone who responds generously to his grace. Some practices of Christian piety are especially suited to this uninterrupted dialogue with God in our soul. These practices are at one and the same time a result of the love we have for our Lord, and a way of increasing that love.

Therefore we cannot be passive in our inner battle; we have to seek and put into practice “human reminders” to achieve a life of continual prayer. These reminders or “alarm-clocks” in our interior life are something very personal, because love is inventive. They will vary according to our individual circumstances, but we all have to decide on the means we are going to use in order to pray constantly.

At the same time, our prayer is openness towards others. By praying for them, and by placing them in the Heart of Christ, we learn to love them more and better, and to serve them: “if we wish to help others, if we really wish to encourage them to discover the true meaning of their life on earth, we must base everything on prayer.”[19]

As Benedict XVI said in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, our relationship with

our Lord “should be present as the bedrock of our soul. In order for that to happen, this relation has to be constantly revived and the affairs of our everyday lives have to be constantly related back to it.”[20] Habitually seeking God’s presence, for example, makes it easier for us to recognize the good things that he gives us and thank him for them. The reverse is equally true: when we strive to thank God for the good things we receive each day, including our life, our faith and our Christian vocation, we find it easier to remember God at other moments, and discover many opportunities for praising him. “This orientation pervasively shaping our whole consciousness, this silent presence of God at the heart of our thinking, our meditating and our being, is what we mean by ‘prayer without ceasing’.”[21]

Saint Paul set us an example of how to lead a life of constant thanksgiving: *I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus*.[22]

Similarly, Saint Josemaria exhorts us to turn our whole life into a continual act of thanksgiving: “Can we realize that God loves us and not be overcome with love ourselves? . . . Our life is turned into a continuous prayer, we find ourselves with good humor and a peace which never ends, and everything we do is an act of thanksgiving running through all our day.”[23]

Our Blessed Lady prayed constantly, and attained the heights of contemplation. How Jesus must have looked at her, and how Mary must have returned her Son’s gaze! Nor should we be surprised that this inexpressible reality was passed over

in silence, hardly even hinted at: these were the things that Mary kept in her heart.[24]

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[1] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2600

[2] Lk 18:2-7

[3] Lk 18:1

[4] Lk 21:36

[5] Lk 5:16

[6] Lk 11:1

[7] Cf. Lk 3:21; 9:28; 6:12; 22:41-44

[8] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 119

[9] Acts 1:14

[10] Acts 2:42

[11] Acts 12:5

[12] 1Thess 5:17

[13] Eph 6:18

[14] 1 Thess 3:10; cf. 2 Thess 1:11; Rom 1:10; 1 Cor 1:4; Phil 1:4; 1 Thess 1:2; Philem 4

[15] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 7, 7, 40, 3

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 238

[17] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 119

[18] Saint Jerome, *Epistulae*, 22, 37

[19] *Friends of God*, 239

[20] Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 129

[21] Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 130

[22] 1 Cor 1:4; cf. Eph 1:16

[23] *Christ is Passing By*, 144

[24] Cf. Lk 2:51

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