

# **"The first Christians persevered in prayer"**

"We must recapture this sense of adoration. To adore God, to adore Jesus, to adore the Spirit." In his 25 November general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer, speaking about the central place of prayer in the early Church.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Good morning!

The Church's first steps in the world were interspersed with prayer. The apostolic writings and the great narration of the *Acts of the Apostles* give us the image of an active Church, a Church on the move, yet which, gathered in prayer, finds the basis and impulse for missionary action. The image of the early Community of Jerusalem is the point of reference for every other Christian experience. Luke writes in the Book of Acts: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). The community persevered in prayer.

We find here four essential characteristics of ecclesial life: listening to the apostles' teaching, first; second, the safeguarding of mutual communion; third, the breaking of the bread; and fourth,

prayer. They remind us that the Church's existence has meaning if it remains firmly united to Christ, that is, in community, in His Word, in the Eucharist and in prayer – the way we unite ourselves to Christ. Preaching and catechesis bear witness to the words and actions of the Teacher; the constant quest for fraternal communion shields us from selfishness and particularisms; the breaking of the bread fulfils the sacrament of Jesus' presence among us. He will never be absent – particularly in the Eucharist, He is there. He lives and walks with us. And lastly, prayer, which is the space of dialogue with the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Everything in the Church that grows outside of these “coordinates” lacks a foundation. To discern a situation, we need to ask ourselves about these four coordinates: how in this situation these four coordinates are

present – the preaching, the constant search for fraternal communion, charity, the breaking of the bread (that is, the Eucharistic life), and prayer. Any situation needs to be evaluated in the light of these four coordinates. Whatever is not part of these coordinates lacks ecclesiality, it is not ecclesial. It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. The Church is not a market; the Church is not a group of businesspeople who go forward with a new business. The Church is the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to us to gather us together. The Church is precisely the work of the Spirit in the Christian community, in the life of the community, in the Eucharist, in prayer... always. And everything that grows outside of these coordinates lacks a foundation, is like a house built upon sand (see *Mt 7:24-27*). It is God who creates the Church, not the clamour of works. It is Jesus' word that fills our efforts

with meaning. It is in humility that we build the future of the world. At times, I feel tremendous sadness when I see a community that has good will, but takes the wrong road because it thinks that the Church is built up in meetings, as if it were a political party. “But, the majority, the minority, what do they think about this, that and the other... And this is like a Synod, the synodal path that we must take...” I ask myself: “But where is the Holy Spirit there? Where is prayer? Where is communitarian love? Where is the Eucharist?” Without these four coordinates, the Church becomes a human society, a political party – majority, minority – changes are made as if it were a company, according to majority or minority... But the Holy Spirit is not there. And the presence of the Holy Spirit is precisely guaranteed by these four coordinates. To evaluate whether a situation is ecclesial or not ecclesial,

let us ask ourselves about these four coordinates: life in community, prayer, the Eucharist...how is life developing along these four coordinates. If this is lacking, the Holy Spirit is lacking, and if the Holy Spirit is lacking, we are a beautiful organization, humanitarian, doing good things, good, good...even an ecclesial party, let's put it that way. But it is not the Church. It is for this reason that the Church does not grow with these things: it does not grow through proselytism, as any other company, it grows by attraction. And who provokes attraction? The Holy Spirit. Let us never forget Benedict XVI's words: "The Church does not grow through proselytizing, she grows by attraction". If the Holy Spirit is lacking, who is the one who attracts [people] to Jesus, the Church is not there. There might be a beautiful friendship club, good, with good

intentions, but not the Church, not synodality.

In reading the Acts of the Apostles we then discover what a powerful driving force of evangelization the *prayer gatherings* can be, where those who participate actually experience Jesus' presence and are touched by the Spirit. The members of the first community - although this always applies, even to us today – sensed that the narrative of the encounter with Jesus did not stop at the moment of the Ascension, but continued in their life. In recounting what the Lord said and did – listening to the Word – in praying to enter into communion with Him, everything became alive. Prayer infuses light and warmth: the gift of the Spirit endowed them with fervour.

For this reason, the *Catechism* contains a very substantial

expression. It says this: “The Holy Spirit... keeps the memory of Christ alive in his Church at prayer, also leads her toward the fullness of truth, to the whole truth, and inspires new formulations expressing the unfathomable mystery of Christ at work in his Church's life, sacraments, and mission” (n. 2625). This is the Spirit's work in the Church: *making us remember Jesus*. And Jesus Himself said it: He will teach you and remind you. The mission is to *remember* Jesus, but not as a mnemonic exercise. Christians, walking on the paths of mission, remember Jesus while they make Him present once more; and from Him, from His Spirit, they receive the “push” to go, to proclaim, to serve. In prayer, Christians immerse themselves in the mystery of God, that mystery who loves each person, that God who desires that the Gospel to be preached to every one. God is God

for everyone, and in Jesus every wall of separation has definitively crumbled: as Saint Paul says, He is our peace, that is, “He who has made us both one” (*Eph* 2:14). Jesus created unity, unity.

In this way the life of the early Church had the rhythm of a continuous succession of celebrations, convocations, times of both communitarian and personal prayer. And it is the Spirit who granted strength to the preachers who set out on the journey, and who, for love of Jesus, sailed the seas, faced dangers, subjected themselves to humiliation.

God gives love, God asks for love. This is the mystical root of the believer's entire life. In prayer, the first Christians – and us as well, who come many centuries afterwards – we all live the same experience. The Spirit inspires everything. And every

Christian who is not afraid to devote time to prayer can make his or her own the words of the Apostle Paul, who says this: “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Gal 2:20*). Prayer makes you aware of this. Only in the silence of adoration do we experience the whole truth of these words. And we must recapture this sense of adoration. To adore, to adore God, to adore Jesus, to adore the Spirit. The Father, the Son and the Spirit: to adore. In silence. The prayer of adoration is that prayer that makes us recognize God as the beginning and the end of all of History. And this prayers is the living flame of the Spirit that gives strength to witness and to mission. Thank you.

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