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Meditations: Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during this Lenten season.

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- A humble attitude in order to pray
- The Pharisee's close-mindedness
- The tax collector's "advantage"

BEFORE relating the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Saint

Luke informs us that Jesus told it in reference to *some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and regarded others with contempt* (Lk 18:9). Thus our Lord seeks to show us the correct attitude when speaking with God. That is, we need to speak from our own truth, from the humility of knowing we are sinners and in need of divine mercy. “Humility is the foundation of prayer,”^[1] the Catechism of the Church stresses.

Saint Josemaría defined himself as “a sinner who loves Jesus Christ.”^[2] We see this frequently in the lives of the saints; they let God’s light shine into every corner of their life, helping them to discover their own failings. This is the attitude of the priest at Mass, when addressing God in the name of the whole Church: “To us, also, your servants, who, though sinners, hope in your abundant mercies, graciously grant some share

and fellowship with your holy
Apostles and Martyrs.”^[3]—

The recognition of our own weakness leads us, at the same time, to sense God’s strength supporting us. His mercy is greater than our failings. That is why a Christian faces life without discouragement; the awareness of being a sinner does not prevent us from being aware of a more decisive reality: we are beloved children of God. “Take refuge in your divine filiation: God is your most loving Father. In this lies your security, a haven where you can drop anchor no matter what is happening on the surface of the sea of life. And you will find joy, strength, optimism: victory!”^[4]— This is the attitude with which God wants us to approach Him, and which is exemplified in the parable: we are not self-sufficient “righteous” men and women, but children who stand in great need of their Father.

THE FIRST CHARACTER in the parable is a Pharisee who goes up to the temple to pray. Apparently, his prayer begins quite well, since he begins by giving thanks to God. But we see right away that something is wrong. His gratitude is not due to an acknowledgment of God's action in him; rather it is limited to listing all his good qualities and merits: *I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income*. And he tells us the reason why he does all this: *I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector* (Lk 18:11- 12).

The Pharisee falls into the attitude that Saint Luke warned us against before relating the parable: he holds others in contempt and sees himself as righteous. Comparing himself in his own mind to the tax collector, he sees himself as clearly superior.

Perhaps in the eyes of the people he could even be right, since tax collectors were considered public sinners for having betrayed the people of Israel. But he fails to realize that only God sees into the depths of a person's heart. No comparison with others can capture what God's all-knowing look does.

This was the big obstacle that prevented many people from recognizing the Messiah: taking refuge in their own self-security and in a merely human outlook. "This closed-mindedness immediately affects our relations with others. The Pharisee, who believes himself to be light and does not let God open his eyes, will treat his neighbor unjustly, pridefully."^[5] — Therefore our Lord will say that he did not go down to his house justified. Since he already had everything he thought he needed, he would not be able to accept the salvation God offered him.

THE SECOND character in the parable is a tax collector who does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven when praying. He beats his chest while saying, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*. And Jesus adds: *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other* (Lk 18:13-14).

This tax collector begins his prayer knowing that he is a sinner. Moreover, in his case, the whole town knows this, since he collaborated with the foreign authorities. This situation, which might seem to be an obstacle, is rather the “advantage” he has with respect to the Pharisee: his neediness is evident to everyone. But the security on which he has built his life are not his own qualities, nor the recognition of others, but God’s compassion. “He acts out of humility,

certain only that he is a sinner in need of mercy. If the Pharisee asked for nothing because he already had everything, the tax collector can only beg for God's mercy. And this is beautiful: to beg for God's mercy! Presenting himself with 'empty hands,' with a bare heart and acknowledging himself to be a sinner, the tax collector shows us the attitude needed to receive the Lord's forgiveness."^[6] —

The tax collector's attitude is exactly the opposite of that of the Pharisee. He does not consider himself righteous or look on others with disdain, despite the way he is treated by those around him. Jesus says that "this man went down to his house justified." The prayer of this man reminds us, in some way, of that of our Lady, whom God looked on with special favor because of her humility (cf. *Lk* 1:48). Mary will teach us to follow this path faithfully so that God

may also carry out in our lives the great marvels our Mother sang about.

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2559.

[2] Alvaro del Portillo, 40 Years with a Saint, no. 113.

[3] Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer I.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, Seventh Station, no. 2.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 71.

[6] Francis, Audience, 1 June 2016.