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"The Holy Spirit teaches us how to intercede"

In his 6 November general audience, Pope Francis continued catechetical cycle on how the Holy Spirit guides the People of God through salvation history, speaking about Christian prayer.

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Appeal before the General Audience

I wished to greet the Virgen de los Desamparados, our Lady who takes care of the poor, Patroness of Valencia; Valencia, which is suffering greatly, and also other parts of Spain, but Valencia which is underwater and suffering. I wanted her to be here, the Patroness of Valencia: this little image that the Valencians themselves gave to me. Today, in a special way, let us pray for Valencia and for the other areas of Spain that are suffering because of the water.

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

The sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, in addition to the Word of God and the Sacraments, is expressed in prayer, and we wish to dedicate today's reflection to this: prayer. The Holy Spirit is both the subject and

object of Christian prayer. That is, He is the One who gives prayer and He is the One who is given by prayer. We pray to receive the Holy Spirit, and we receive the Holy Spirit in order to truly pray, that is, as children of God, not as slaves. Let us think a little about this: pray as children of God, not as slaves. One must always pray with freedom. “Today I have to pray for this, this, and this, because I promised this, this and this.

Otherwise, I will go to hell.” No, that is not prayer! Prayer is free. You pray when the Spirit helps you to pray.

You pray when you feel the need to pray in your heart, and when you do not feel anything, you stop and ask: “Why do I not feel the wish to pray? What is happening in my life?” But always, spontaneity in prayer is what helps us the most. This is what is meant by praying as children, not as slaves.

First of all, we must pray to receive the Holy Spirit. In this regard, Jesus has a very precise word in the Gospel: “If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (*Lk 11:13*). Everyone, each one of us, knows how to give good things to little children, whether they may be our children, our grandparents or our friends. The little ones always receive good things from us. Will the Father not give the Spirit to us? This should give us courage to move forward. In the New Testament, we see the Holy Spirit always descend during prayer. He descends upon Jesus in the baptism in the Jordan, while he “was praying” (*Lk 3:21*), and He descends at Pentecost upon the disciples, while they “devoted themselves with one accord to prayer” (*Acts 1:14*).

It is the only “power” we have over the Spirit of God. The power of prayer: He does not resist prayer. We pray, and He comes. On Mount Carmel, the false prophets of Baal – remember that passage from the Bible – were agitating to invoke fire from heaven on their sacrifice, but nothing happened, because they were idolators; they worshipped a God that does not exist. Elijah began to pray, and the fire descended and consumed the offering (cf. *I Kings* 18:20-38). The Church follows this example faithfully: whenever she addresses the Holy Spirit, she always implores Him, “Come! Come!” And she does this especially at Mass, so that He may descend like dew and sanctify the bread and wine for the Eucharistic sacrifice.

But there is another aspect, which is the most important and encouraging for us: the Holy Spirit is He who gives us the true prayer. Saint Paul affirms

this: “In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for many times we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God’s will” (*Rm 8: 26-27*).

It is true, we do not know how to pray. We do not know. We must learn every day. The reason for this weakness of our prayer was expressed in the past in just one word, used in three different ways: as an adjective, as a noun and as an adverb. It is easy to remember, even for those who do not know Latin, and it is worth keeping it in mind, because it contains in itself an entire treatise, these three things. We human beings, according to that saying, “*mali, mala, male petimus*”, which means, being bad (*mali*), we

ask for the wrong things (*mala*) and in the wrong way (*male*). Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom [of God] ... and all these things will be given you besides” (*Mt 6:33*); instead, we seek the extra, namely, our interests – many times – and we completely forget to ask for the kingdom of God. Let us ask the Lord for the kingdom, and everything comes with Him.

Yes, the Holy Spirit comes to aid us in our weakness, but He does something more important still: He testifies to us that we are children of God and puts on our lips the cry: “*Abba!* Father!” (*Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6*). We cannot say “Father, *Abba*” without the strength of the Holy Spirit. Christian prayer is not man at one end of the telephone, speaking to God on the other; no, it is God who prays in us! We pray to God through God. Praying means placing oneself inside God, so that God enters into us.

It is precisely in prayer that the Holy Spirit is revealed as the “Paraclete,” that is, advocate and defender. He does not accuse us before the Father, but defends us. Yes, He defends us, He convinces us of the fact that we are sinners (cf. *Jn* 16:8), but He does so in order to make us able to savour the joy of the Father’s mercy, not to destroy us with fruitless feelings of guilt. Even when our heart reproaches us for something, He reminds us that “God is greater than our hearts” (*1 Jn* 3:20). God is greater than our sin. We are all sinners, but think: perhaps some of you – I don’t know – are very afraid because of the things you have done, afraid of being reproached by God, afraid of many things and unable to find peace. Pray, call to the Holy Spirit, and He will teach you how to ask for forgiveness. And do you know something? God does not know much grammar, and when we ask for forgiveness, He does not let us finish! “For...” and there,

He does not even let us finish the word *forgiveness*. He forgives us first, He always forgives, and He is always beside us to forgive us, before we complete the word *forgiveness*. We say “For...” and the Father always forgives us.

The Holy Spirit intercedes and He also teaches us how to intercede, in turn, for our brothers and sisters – He intercedes for us and teaches us how to intercede for others. He teaches us the prayer of *intercession*: praying for this person, praying for that sick person, for the one who is in prison, praying... even praying for one’s mother in law! And pray, always. Always. This prayer is particularly pleasing to God, because it is the most gratuitous and altruistic. When someone prays for everyone, it happens – as Saint Ambrose used to say – that everyone prays for someone; prayer multiplies (*De Cain et Abel*, I, 39). This is how

prayer is. This is a task that is so precious and necessary in the Church, particularly during this time of preparation for the Jubilee: to unite ourselves to the Paraclete who “intercedes for all of us according to God's plans”. But do not pray like parrots, please! Do not say, “Blah, blah, blah...” No. Say “Lord,” but say it with your heart. “Help me, Lord,” “I love you, Lord.” And when you pray the Lord’s Prayer, pray “Father, You are my Father.” Pray with the heart, not the lips; don’t be like parrots.

May the Holy Spirit help us in prayer, which we need so much. Thank you.

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