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The Prayer of Praise

Pope Francis continued his catechesis on prayer in his 13 January general audience, speaking about the need to imitate Jesus in his praise for God the Father.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our catechesis on prayer, and today we will give space to the dimension of praise.

We will take as our starting point a critical passage in the life of Jesus. After the first miracles and the involvement of the disciples in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the mission of the Messiah goes through a crisis. John the Baptist, who is in jail, doubts and makes Him receive this message: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (*Mt* 11:3), because he feels this anguish of not knowing whether he is mistaken in his proclamation. There are always dark moments, moments of spiritual nighttime, and John is going through this moment. There is hostility in the villages along the lake, where Jesus had performed so many prodigious signs (see *Mt* 11:20-24). Now, precisely in this disappointing moment, Matthew relates a truly surprising fact: Jesus does not lift up a lament to the Father, but rather He raises a hymn of jubilation: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth”, Jesus

says. “You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes” (*Mt* 11:25). So, in the midst of a crisis, amid the darkness of the soul of so many people, such as John the Baptist, Jesus blesses the Father, Jesus praises the Father. But why?

First and foremost, He praises Him *for who He is*: “Father, Lord of heaven and earth”. Jesus rejoices in His spirit because He knows and He feels that His Father is the God of the Universe, and vice versa, the Lord of all that exists is Father “My Father”. Praise springs from this experience of feeling that He is “Son of the Most High”. Jesus feels he is Son of the Most High.

And then Jesus praises the Father for *favouring the little ones*. It is what He Himself experiences, preaching in the villages: the “learned” and the “wise” remain suspicious and closed,

who are calculating; while the “little ones” open themselves and welcome His message. This can only be the will of the Father, and Jesus rejoices in this. We too must rejoice and praise God because humble and simple people welcome the Gospel. When I see these simple people, these humble people who go on pilgrimages, who go to pray, who sing, who praise, people who perhaps lack many things but whose humility leads them to praise God... In the future of the world and in the hopes of the Church there are the "little ones": those who do not consider themselves better than others, who are aware of their own limitations and their sins, who do not want to lord it over others, who, in God the Father, recognise that we are all brothers and sisters.

Therefore, in that moment of apparent failure, where everything is dark, Jesus prays, praising the

Father. And His prayer also leads us, the readers of the Gospel, to judge our personal defeats in a different way, to judge differently the situations in which we do not see clearly the presence and action of God, when it seems that evil prevails and there is no way to stop it. In those moments Jesus, who highly recommended the prayer of asking questions, at the very moment when He would have had reason to ask the Father for explanations, instead begins to praise Him. It seems to be a contradiction, but it is there, it is the truth.

To whom is praise helpful? To us or to God? A text of the Eucharistic liturgy invites us to pray to God in this way, it says this: “Although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness, but profit us for salvation” (*Roman Missal*, Common

Preface IV). By giving praise, we are saved.

The prayer of praise serves us. The *Catechism* defines it this way - the prayer of praise “shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing Him in glory” (no. 2639). Paradoxically it must be practised not only when life fills us with happiness, but above all in difficult moments, in moments of darkness when the path becomes an uphill climb. That too is the time for praise. Like Jesus [who] in the dark moment praises the Father. Because we learn that, through that ascent, that difficult path, that wearisome path, those demanding passages, we get to see a new panorama, a broader horizon. Giving praise is like breathing pure oxygen: it purifies the soul, it makes you look far ahead so as not to remain imprisoned in the

difficult moment, in the darkness of difficulty.

There is a great teaching in that prayer that for eight centuries has never lost its beat, that Saint Francis composed at the end of his life: the “Canticle of Brother Sun” or “of the creatures”. The *Poverello* did not compose it in a moment of joy, in a moment of wellbeing, but on the contrary, in the midst of hardship. Francis was by then almost blind, and he felt in his soul the weight of a solitude he had never before experienced: the world had not changed since the beginning of his preaching, there were still those who let themselves be torn apart by quarrels, and in addition he was aware that death was approaching ever nearer. It could have been the moment of disillusionment, of that extreme disillusionment and the perception of his own failure. But Francis prayed at that instant of

sadness, in that dark instant: “All praise is yours, my Lord”. He prays by giving praise. Francis praises God for everything, for all the gifts of creation, and even for death, which he courageously calls “sister”. These examples of saints, of Christians, and also of Jesus, of praising God in difficult moments, open to us the gates of a great road towards the Lord, and they purify us always. Praise always purifies.

The Saints show us that we can always give praise, in good times and bad, because God is the faithful Friend. This is the foundation of praise: God is the faithful friend, and His love never fails. He is always beside us, He always awaits us. It has been said, “He is the sentinel who is close to you and keeps you going with confidence”. In difficult and dark moments, let us have the courage to say: “Blessed are you, O

Lord”. Praising the Lord. This will do us so much good. Thank you.

Special Greetings

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. May the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which we have just celebrated, remind us of our own baptism and inspire us to follow Jesus Christ more faithfully each day. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord. God bless you!

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now consider the prayer

of praise. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus himself, in facing hostility and rejection, responds by praising God. He thanks the Father for *who he is* and for his love in revealing himself "to mere children" (Mt 11:25), to the poor and humble of our world. Jesus' example of praise calls us to respond as he did at times when we feel God is absent or evil seems victorious. In this way, we come to view things in a new and greater perspective, for – as the Catechism teaches – through praise we share "in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory" (No. 2639). We see this clearly in the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, who composed his famous Canticle of the Creatures when he was troubled by sickness and impending blindness. In praising God for everything, even "Sister Death", Francis, together with all the saints, teaches us the importance, in all the

circumstances of our lives, of
praising God who is always faithful
and whose love is eternal.

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