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To Know Him and To Know Yourself (II): With Words Jesus Taught Us

"It is only by knowing what God holds deep in his heart that we can learn to pray truly." A new article in the series on prayer.

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The first disciples of Jesus were constantly captivated and surprised by their Master. He taught with authority. The demons were subject to Him. He claimed the power to

forgive sins. And He worked miracles that removed all their doubts... Such an amazing person had to be hiding something mysterious. Early one day at sunrise, when they were about to begin another exhausting day, the disciples couldn't find Jesus.

Worried, they searched for Him through the small town of Capernaum. But Jesus was nowhere to be found. Finally, on a hill overlooking the Lake, they caught sight of Him—praying! (cf. *Mk 1:35*).

The evangelist implies that at first they didn't understand this. But soon they realized that what had happened in Capernaum wasn't an isolated event. Prayer was as much a part of the Master's life as his preaching, his concern for people's needs, and resting. Those times spent in silent prayer fascinated them, even if they couldn't fully understand it. Only after some time had passed alongside the Master did

they dare to ask Him: *Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples* (Lk 11:1).

Non multa...

We know how Jesus replied to their petition: with the prayer of the Our Father. And we can also imagine the disciples being a bit disappointed: just these few words? Was that how the Master spent those long hours, repeating always the same thing? They may have wanted Jesus to expand on this teaching for them. Hence the gospel of Saint Matthew can be more enlightening for us, since it places Jesus' teaching of the Our Father in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. There Christ sets forth the main requirements for prayer, for a true relationship with God. What are these requirements?

The first is a *right intention*. We need to address God because of who He is, and not for other reasons; and

certainly not merely so that others will see us, or so we appear good in their eyes (cf. *Mt* 6:8). We address God because He is a personal being, whom we can't make use of for our own ends. He has given us everything we possess, and we exist only through his Love. He has made us his children and cares for us lovingly, and has laid down his life in order to save us. He doesn't deserve our attention only, or principally, because He can give us things. He deserves it... because of who He is! Saint John Paul II, when still the bishop of Krakow, told a group of young people: "Why does everyone pray: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, pagans? Why do they all pray? Why do people who don't even think they pray do so? The answer is quite simple. I pray because God exists. I know there is a God. Therefore I pray."[1]

The second is *trust*: we address the one who is Father, *Abba*. God is not a distant being, nor much less an enemy we need to placate, by soothing his anger or satisfying his constant demands. He is a Father who watches over his children, who knows what they need and gives them what is best for them (cf. *Mt* 6:8), and who takes delight in them (cf. *Prov* 8:31).

Hence we can better understand the third requirement for prayer: *not using too many words* (cf. *Mt* 6:7).

Then we will be able to experience what Pope Francis tells us: “How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence!”^[2] Too many words can dull our heart and distract us.

Instead of looking at God and resting in his Love, the danger exists of ending up prisoners of our own urgent needs, of our worries or

plans. That is, we can end up trapped in ourselves, without letting our prayer open our heart to God and his transforming Love.

There is a Latin saying, *non multa, sed multum*,^[3] which Saint Josemaria employed to speak about a way of studying that avoids getting dispersed in many things—*non multa*—but rather goes more deeply into what is essential—*sed multum*. This advice is also of use for understanding Jesus’ teaching on prayer. The Our Father, with its brevity, is not a “disappointing” lesson, but rather an authentic revelation of how to make a true “connection” with God.

...sed multum

“At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved and abandon your own ways of acting.”^[4] These words of Saint John of the Cross

remind us that loving means adapting ourselves to the other person, sensing what they like and finding our own happiness in bringing it about; it means learning—which at times will cause us to suffer—that our good intentions are not enough, and that we have to learn how to “get it right.”

And in loving God, how can we get it right? How can we know what He really likes? We need to ask Him to show us what he holds deep in his heart. The disciples implored Jesus: *teach us to pray*. Learning how to pray, therefore, is not mainly a question of “techniques” or “methods.” Above all, it is opening oneself to a God who has shown his true face to us and opened the depths of his heart to us. It is only by knowing what God holds deep in his heart that we can learn to pray truly, to love Him as He wants to be loved. And hence we can learn to

“abandon” our own way of praying, and to pray in the best way, in the way He wants.

The Our Father is thus Jesus’ great instruction for us to align our heart with the Father’s heart. It is a prayer that is truly “performative,” as some commentators have stressed: its words bring about in us what they signify; they are words that change us. They aren’t merely phrases to repeat. These words are meant to educate our heart, to teach it to beat with a love that is pleasing to our Father in heaven.

In saying “Father” and “our,” I place myself existentially in the relationship that configures my whole life. The words “thy will be done” teach me to love God’s plans. And praying “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” helps me to acquire a more merciful heart

towards others. Saint Augustine, in commenting on the Our Father, said: “To us, therefore, words are necessary, that by them we may be assisted in considering and observing what we ask, not as means by which we expect that God is to be either informed or moved to compliance.”[5] By praying these words we learn to address God by focusing on what is truly important.

Reflecting on the various petitions in the Our Father, perhaps with the help of one of the great commentaries such as that of Saint Cyprian or Saint Thomas Aquinas,[6] or with more recent ones such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, can be a good way to begin or renew our life of prayer, and thus deepen in the Love that should ground our entire life.

With inspired words

The disciples, witnesses of Jesus' prayer, also saw Him address the Father frequently with words from the Psalms. He must have learned this from his Mother and Saint Joseph. The Psalms nourished his prayer right up to the supreme moment of his sacrifice on the Cross. *Elí, Elí, lamma sabachtani?*—these words in Aramaic are the first verse of Psalm 22, which Jesus spoke at the culminating moment of our redemption. Saint Matthew also tells us that at the Last Supper, *when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:30)*. What hymns would Christ himself have prayed?

During the Passover meal, the Jews drink four glasses of wine, which symbolize the four promises of God for his people when freeing them from Egypt: *I shall take you out, I shall free you, I shall redeem you, I shall bring you...* (Ex 6:6-7). These are

drunk at different moments during the meal while singing the *Hallel* hymns, whose name comes from the first word *hallel* or “aleluya.”[7] Jesus would surely have recited them with great gratitude and abandonment in God, his Father, as a true Israelite, knowing that in these inspired prayers the entire history of God’s love for his people is contained. They teach the human heart how to draw close to a God whose infinite richness can never be exhausted: with praise, adoration, petition, asking for pardon...

It isn’t surprising, then, that the first Christians followed Jesus’ example in praying in this way, encouraged also by Saint Paul’s advice: *be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to*

God the Father (Eph 5:19-20). Like the Our Father, the words of the Psalms educated their hearts, opening them to an authentic relationship with God. They discovered, with amazement and gratitude, how those verses had foretold the life of Christ. And, above all, they understood that no human heart had made these words of praise and petition its own as perfectly as His had. “Prayed and fulfilled in Christ, the Psalms are an essential and permanent element of the prayer of the Church. They are suitable for men of every condition and time.”^[8] We too will find in them “solid nourishment” (cf. *Heb* 5:14) for our prayer.

And not only the Psalms. These were soon complemented by *hymns and spiritual songs*, employed for praising the thrice holy God, who had revealed Himself as a communion of Persons, Father, Son and Spirit. Thus began the

composition of the prayers that would be used in the Liturgy and nourish people's piety down through the ages. These prayers, fruit of the Church's love for her Lord, are a treasure that can guide and educate our heart. As Saint Josemaria stressed: "Your prayer should be liturgical. How I would like to see you using the psalms and prayers from the missal, rather than private prayers of your own choice."[9]

Under the Holy Spirit's impetus

The words of the Our Father, the Psalms and other prayers of the Church have certainly guided us in our relationship with God, although we may not have reflected on this reality. Nevertheless, the word of God is "living," and thus can open up new and unsuspected horizons. As we read in the letter to the Hebrews: *the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,*

piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12).

Therefore the same words, reflected on once and again, can take on different tones. Sometimes they may open up new horizons before our eyes, without our being able to explain clearly why this is so. It is the Holy Spirit who is acting in our mind and heart. As Saint Augustine eloquently preached: “The sound of my words strikes your ears, but the Teacher is within ... Do you want proof of this? Have you not all heard this homily? And yet how many will go from this place untaught! I, for my part, have spoken to all; but they to whom the Anointing within speaks not, they whom the Holy Spirit within teaches not, those go back untaught.”[10]

Hence we see the close tie between the Holy Spirit, the inspired word and our life of prayer. The Church invokes the Holy Spirit as the “interior Teacher,” who guides and educates our heart with the words that Jesus himself taught us, helping us to discover in them ever new horizons, in order to know God better and love Him more deeply each day.

Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart (Lk 2:19). The prayer of our Mother drew nourishment from her own life and diligent meditation on the Word of God. There Mary sought the light needed to understand more deeply what was happening around her. In her song of praise—the *Magnificat*—we see how abundantly Sacred Scripture was the constant nourishment for her prayer. The

Magnificat is filled with references to the Psalms and other words from Scripture, including the “song of Hannah” (1 Sam 2:1-11) and the vision of Isaiah (Is 29:19-20), among others.[11] Thus the Holy Spirit was preparing in our Lady’s heart her unconditional Yes to the message of the angel. We entrust ourselves to Mary’s intercession, asking that we too may let the divine word educate our heart and make us ready to answer *fiat!*—be it done!, I want to!—to so many plans that God has prepared for our life.

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[1] Karol Wojtyla, *Ejercicios espirituales para jóvenes*, BAC, Madrid 1982, p. 89.

[2] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 264.

[3] Cf. *The Way*, no. 333.

[4] Saint John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*, 59

[5] Saint Augustine, *Letter 130*.

[6] Cf. Saint Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer*, Early Church Classics, London, 1914; *The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas*, "Explanation of the Lord's Prayer," Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012, pp. 253ff.

[7] The *Hallel* is composed of the *small Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) and the *great Hallel* (Psalm 136), in which the refrain "for his mercy endures forever" is repeated in each verse. The Passover meal ends with the singing of Psalm 136.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2597.

[9] *The Way*, no. 86.

[10] Saint Augustine, 3rd *Homily on the First Letter of Saint John*, 13.

[11] Besides those just cited, it also contains references to *Hab* 3:18; *Job* 12:19-20; 5:11-12 and *Psalms* 113:7; 136:17-23; 34:2-3; 111:9; 103:1; 89:11; 107:9; 34:10; 98:3; 22:9.

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