



To Know Him and to Know Yourself

**Meeting God
in prayer**

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Stealing Christ's Heart

“Perhaps we could define prayer like this: a word that ‘steals Christ’s heart’ and enables us to live, from now on, close to Him.”

Outside the walls of Jerusalem, shortly after midday, three men were crucified on Mount Calvary. It was the first Good Friday in history. Two of them were robbers; the third, in contrast, was the only absolutely innocent man, for He was the Son of God. One of the two thieves, despite his intense suffering and physical exhaustion, was eager to speak briefly with Jesus. His words of sincere humility—*remember me when you come into your kingdom (Lk 23:42)*—touched the heart of God made Man, who assured him that in a few hours he would be in paradise. Saint Josemaria was often moved by the attitude of the “good thief,” who “with a word stole Christ’s heart and ‘opened up to himself’ the gates of heaven.”^[1] Perhaps we could define prayer like this: a word that “steals Christ’s heart” and enables us to live, from now on, close to Him.

Two dialogues on the Cross

We too want our prayer, like that of the good thief whose name according to tradition was Dismas, to yield abundant fruit. And we are eager for our own dialogue with God to transform our lives. To steal a person’s heart means to win them over, to earn their love, to enthuse them. We need to “steal” it because we don’t deserve to receive such great affection; to “assault” it because even though we greatly desire it, we have no right to possess it. Prayer is based on something as simple—although not at all easy—as learning how to welcome God’s gift in our heart, letting ourselves be accompanied by Jesus, who never imposes his gifts, nor his grace, nor his Love.

Suffering alongside Dismas on Calvary was his robber companion, whose dialogue with Jesus differed greatly from that of the good thief. He addresses Jesus with words of caustic reproach: “*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*” (Lk 23:39). Both of them spoke with Jesus, but only Dismas was willing to welcome the gift the Master has prepared for him. It was his last and best “robbery,” asking to at least be remembered by Christ. His companion, in contrast, refused to open his heart with humility to the One who wanted to free him from his past and offer him a priceless treasure. He demanded his “right” to be saved, and reproached Jesus for his

apparent passivity. Perhaps that is how he had carried out all his robberies: pretending he was taking what rightfully belonged to him. Dismas, however, was well aware that he had no right to anything. And thus he opened wide the treasure chest of God's Love. He acknowledged God for who He really is: a Father who pours Himself out for each of his children.

In light of these two Gospel dialogues, we come to realize that our Lord counts on our freedom to make us happy. And also that it isn't always easy to let ourselves be loved. Prayer can be a marvelous means to discover Jesus' sentiments and thoughts, and to learn what He wants from us. The divine life we share in is a gift. Hence we can view prayer as a channel for receiving the torrent of Love that God wants to offer us, an unexpected invitation to share in his Life in a new way.

To open the gates of heaven

Saint Josemaria reminded us that God "wants to run the risk of our freedom."^[2] A good way to thank Him for this is to open ourselves also to His. But if we do so, in reality we don't run any risk, but only the appearance of one, since the guarantee of his promise is etched in stone by his burning love for us. And we come to realize how absurd it is to resist God's will, although in fact we frequently fall into this mistake. Saint Paul tells us: *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood (1 Cor 13:12)*. The best way to get to know ourselves is to see ourselves from Christ's point of view, viewing our life through his eyes.

Dismas has come to understand his own life in this way and is not afraid to face the enormous gap between Jesus' goodness and his personal mistakes. He recognizes the King of the world in the humble and disfigured face of Christ; the affection in Jesus' eyes restores his human dignity and, in a surprising way, reminds him that he is infinitely loved. It is true that the "happy ending" of the good thief could strike us as being too easy. But we will never know the drama of the conversion his heart underwent during those final moments, nor the preparation that surely made it possible.

Opening oneself to such immense affection has a great similarity with the discovery that prayer is a gift, a privileged channel for welcoming the Love of a Heart that knows no half-measures or calculations. We receive the gift of a new and fuller life, a much more

happy and meaningful one. As Pope Francis wrote: “When we pray, we let Him act [*le abrimos la jugada a Él*], we give Him room so that He can enter and be victorious.”^[3] God is the One who will transform us, and God Himself will accompany us. He will do everything. All He needs from us is that we let Him act. And this is where our freedom, which Christ won for us on the Cross, comes into play.

Prayer helps us understand that “when He asks us for something, in reality He is offering us a gift. We are not the ones doing Him a favor. It is God who illuminates our life, filling it with meaning.”^[4] This is how we “steal” God’s Heart: by opening the door of our life to let Him act, to let Him love and transform us, with a desire to correspond to Him, although we don’t know very well how to do so. *Taste and see how good the Lord is (Ps 34:9)*. This is the path for becoming a soul of prayer. As Saint Teresa of Avila wrote: “if we aren’t aware of what we are receiving, we won’t awaken to Love.”^[5] What is the last time we told God how good He is? How often do we stop to consider and “taste” this reality.

Hence wonder is an essential part of our life of prayer: being amazed by a marvel that exceeds all our hopes and dreams. And we will often feel the need to exclaim: “How great you are, how beautiful and how good! And I, how foolish I am, by trying to understand you. How little you would be, if you could fit in my head! But you fit in my heart, which is no small feat.”^[6] By praising God we realize the truth of our relationship with Christ; the weight of our personal concerns lessens and previously unsuspected horizons open up. These are the consequences of having “run the risk” of placing ourselves in the hands of God’s freedom.

Infinite ways of praying

When Saint Josemaria was in Mexico, he told the story of a son of his, a philosopher, who unexpectedly had to take charge of his family’s business: “When he started to tell me about running a business I looked at him and laughed. And I told him: A business? The money you earn will fit here in the palm of my hand, with room to spare.” Years went by and one day he saw him again and said: “Here is my hand. Didn’t I tell you that you could put everything you earn here? He got up and, with everyone watching, kissed the palm of my hand. And he said: there it is. I gave him a hug and said: you have paid me more than enough. Get going, you thief, may God bless you!”^[7]

In our prayer we can kiss God's hand, and give Him the only treasure we have: our affection. For some people, a gesture like this, addressed to our Lord, will be enough to enkindle in them a prayer of affections and resolutions. For them a look seems much more expressive than a thousand words. They would like to experience everything that refers to God. In their encounter with our Lord, they want to feel the breeze on the shore coming from the Sea of Galilee. Their senses respond and their closeness to Jesus fills their heart with peace and joy. It is a joy that needs to be shared with others, and they open their arms with Christ to embrace the entire world and try to help Him save it.

But there are infinite ways of praying, as many as there are persons. Some people, for example, simply seek to hear some consoling words. Jesus is always ready to offer words of encouragement and praise for the one who needs it: *Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!* (Jn 1:47). He will speak them to us if we open our heart to Him. No one has ever spoken words of Love as He did, with so much affection and truth. When we hear them, the love we receive is reflected in our look. Thus we learn to look through God's eyes. And we discern what each friend of ours would be capable of doing if they let themselves be accompanied by God's grace.

There are some people whose greatest joy is to serve others, like Martha, our Lord's friend who lived in Bethany. Jesus, when He visited her home, didn't tell Martha to sit down, but rather invited her to discover the one thing necessary (cf. Lk 10:42) in the midst of her daily activities. People like Martha are probably comforted, as they pray, by the thought that God acts through them to bring many souls to heaven. And they like to fill their prayer with faces and names of specific people, with the realization that they are co-redeemers amid all their activities. In fact, Mary was able to choose "the better part" because of Martha's efforts to serve. Martha's only concern was to know that those around her were happy.

Other people, in turn, find their heart more easily moved by small things, by gifts, even if of little value. Theirs is a heart that is always thinking of others and that is quick to grasp anything related to those they love. Such people may find it helpful to dwell on all the gifts God has lavished on them. "Prayer, because it is nourished by the gift of God present and at work in our lives, must always be marked by remembrance."^[8] They may also feel spurred to try to "surprise" God with a thousand tiny details. The "surprise factor" is important

for them, and it isn't hard for them to guess what will please our Lord. Although it's a mystery, even the smallest gesture fills his Heart with gratitude and makes his eyes shine. Each soul that we strive to draw close to his Love—like Dismas in his final moments—steals his Heart anew.

Without trying to exhaustively list all the possibilities, there are also souls who need to spend time with the Person they love. They may find themselves drawn, for example, to try to console Jesus. Any time “wasted” with the one they love seems little to them. To grasp the divine affection in Jesus' Heart, they can find it helpful to consider Nicodemus, who was received by Jesus in the quiet of the evening, in the intimacy of a trust-filled home. As a result of this time spent together, Nicodemus will find the strength to stand up for Him in very trying circumstances and stay close to Christ when others flee out of fear.

At times we can think that getting to know ourselves means identifying our missteps; this is true, but it is only part of the truth. Getting to know our own heart in depth and our most intimate longings is crucial for being able to listen to God, for letting Him fill us with his Love.

Jesus' conversation with the good thief was brief but intense. Dismas discovered a “crack” in Christ's immense and loving Heart: an easy way to “assault” it and gain entry. The robber's humble petition illumines for us God's will, which so often can seem obscure and painful. His only desire is that we be happy, very happy, the happiest people in the world. The good thief entered through this cleft and won the greatest treasure. Our Lady witnessed how Dismas defended her Son. Perhaps, with her glance, Mary beseeched Jesus to save him. And Christ, unable to deny his Mother anything, said: *today you will be with me in Paradise (Lk 23:43)*.

Diego Zalbidea

[1] Saint Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, Twelfth Station, point 4.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 113.

[3] Pope Francis, *Christus vivit*, no. 155.

[4] Fernando Ocariz, “Light To See, Strength To Want To,” article published in *Aleteia*, September 20, 2018.

[5] Saint Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 10, 3.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Notes from his preaching*, 9 June 1974; in *Catechesis* 1974/1, p. 386.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Notes from a family get-together*, 27 November 1972; in *Dos meses de catequesis* 1972, vol. II, p. 616.

[8] Pope Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 153.

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.

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. *Eli, Eli, 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.

Nicolás Álvarez de las Asturias

[1] Karol Wojtyła, *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.

In the Company of the Saints

The example of the saints, especially our Lady, can be a great help for our life of prayer. A new article in the series on prayer.

For the first time, Jesus goes up publicly to Jerusalem. There He begins announcing the kingdom of God through his words and miracles. Since his astounding deeds at the wedding in Cana, his renown has been steadily growing. It is then that, hidden by the silence of the night, a well-known Jewish figure comes to speak with Him (cf. *Jn* 3:1). Nicodemus' heart has been deeply moved on seeing and listening to Christ. His head is spinning with many questions, and he decides to seek an answer through an intimate, face-to-face conversation. Jesus sees the sincerity in his heart and quickly tells him: *unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God (Jn 3:5)*.

The ensuing dialogue continues with a question that any of us would have asked: What does this mean? How can one be born a second time? But what Jesus is really telling Nicodemus is that he shouldn't simply seek to understand but, more importantly, he needs to let God enter his life. Striving to be a saint is like being born a second time, seeing everything with a new light. Really, it means becoming a new person, being transformed, little by little, into Christ himself: "letting his Life show forth in ours."^[1] So much so that one way to come to recognize Christ is precisely through the saints. Their lives can play an important role in the personal path of every baptized person who wants to learn how to pray.

Mary prays when joyful...

The women and men who have preceded us are witnesses to the possibility of carrying out a real dialogue with God in our life amid so many ups and downs that might lead us to think the opposite. A key witness to this is our Lady. Mary enjoyed the tender closeness of her son Jesus in the daily life of a family, and kept up a constant dialogue with God the Father amid the good moments and difficult ones found in any family, including the home in Nazareth.

Our Lady teaches us to pray in every state of mind. Soon after receiving the angel's news, *Mary went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah (Lk 1:39)* to visit her cousin Elizabeth.

She had received the news of the nephew who will soon increase the size of their family, always a joyful occasion, especially if unexpected as in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah due to their advanced age. “Saint Luke’s description of the encounter between the two cousins is very moving, and is imbued with thanksgiving and joy.”[2] The Holy Spirit seems to share in their joy when revealing, both to the Baptist and his mother, the Messiah’s physical presence.

As soon as Mary enters their house, Elizabeth addresses her with words of ardent praise, words that will become a universal prayer and that we echo each day, partaking in their joy: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! (Lk 1:42)*. Mary responds to her cousin’s enthusiasm with an overflowing heart: *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*. The “Magnificat,” as tradition has called our Mother’s response, is a prayer of praise saturated with God’s word. As Benedict XVI said: “Mary had a deep knowledge of Sacred Scripture. Her *Magnificat* is a tapestry woven with threads from the Old Testament.”[3]

When we find our hearts filled with gratitude for a gift we have received, we can give voice to this in our prayer, perhaps with words from Scripture, thanking God for the “great things” He has done in our life. Thanksgiving is a fundamental attitude in a Christian’s prayer, especially in moments of joy.

...and also amid sorrow and discouragement.

Nevertheless, our Lady also prays in moments of darkness, when confronted with sorrow or a situation apparently without meaning. Thus Mary teaches us another fundamental attitude in a Christian’s prayer, seen so clearly in the narrative of Jesus’ death: *standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister (Jn 19:25)*. Jesus’ mother, overwhelmed with sorrow, is simply present there. She doesn’t do anything to try to save her Son, nor does she reproach God for what she doesn’t understand. Her only concern is not to miss a single word that Jesus pronounces from the Cross. Hence she accepts the new mission she is given without hesitating: “*Woman, behold, your son!*” Then he said to the disciple, “*Behold, your mother!*” (Jn 19:26-27). Mary’s sorrow is the deepest that a person can experience: being present at the death of a son. But Mary rises above her pain and accepts this new call to welcome John as her son and, with him, the men and women of all times.

Prayer amid sorrow is above all “standing” next to one’s own cross, accepting and loving God’s will; it is being ready to say “yes” to the persons and situations that our Lord places in our life. To pray is to open our eyes to reality, even when it seems especially dark, with the certitude that we can always find a gift there, that God is always present. Then we will be able to welcome persons and situations with Mary’s response: *fiat*, “be it done unto me” (cf. *Lk* 1:38).

Finally, in our Lady’s life we see another state of mind when she prays. We see Mary and her husband Joseph praying also in moments of anxiousness. One day, while returning from their annual pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, they realize that their twelve year old Son is missing, and they decide to go back to search for Him. When they finally find Him in the Temple conversing with the teachers of the Law, Mary asks: *Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously* (*Lk* 2:48).

Often we too can feel anxious when we sense our inadequacy in fulfilling our duties, or think that we are in the wrong place. It might even seem to us then that our entire world is out of kilter: our life, vocation, family, work... We could even think that our path in life is not what we had hoped for. All our plans and dreams now seem naïve to us. Mary and Joseph too had to go through moments of anxiousness, and when they ask their Son why He has done this they fail to receive a clear answer: *“How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”* And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them (*Lk* 2:49-50).

Praying when we are anxious gives no guarantee that we will find quick and easy solutions. Then what should we do? Our Lady shows us the best solution: remaining faithful to our path in life, rediscovering in our daily life God’s will even when we don’t fully understand it. And also, like Mary, we can keep all these mysterious and at times obscure events in our heart and meditate on them, that is, reflect on them with a prayerful attitude. Then little by little we will sense God’s presence again, and we will see Jesus “growing” in us and once again becoming visible (cf. *Lk* 2:51-52).

Biographies for our own lives

Mary is a privileged witness to the closeness with God that we long for, but so are the saints, each in their own personal and specific way: “Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of

God,” Benedict XVI said. “We can think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his search for truth and in his discernment of spirits; Saint John Bosco in his passion for the education of the young; Saint John Mary Vianney in his awareness of the grandeur of the priesthood as gift and task; Saint Pius of Pietrelcina in his serving as an instrument of divine mercy; Saint Josemaria Escrivá in his preaching of the universal call to holiness; Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, the missionary of God’s charity towards the poorest of the poor.”[4]

Humanly speaking, it’s only natural to feel sympathy for certain ways of being , for people whose efforts we find more attractive or who speak directly to our heart and mind. Getting to know the life and experiences of the saints and reading their writings is an excellent way to foster a true friendship with them. Hence if we stress only the extraordinary events in the life and prayer of the saints, we run the risk of making their example more distant and difficult to follow.

“Don’t you remember Peter, Augustine, Francis? I have never liked biographies of saints which naively—but also with a lack of sound doctrine—present their deeds as if they had been confirmed in grace from birth,” said Saint Josemaria, who always insisted on the importance of never idealizing people, not even the saints canonized by the Church, as though they were perfect. “No. The true life stories of Christian heroes resemble our own experience: they fought and won; they fought and lost. And then, repentant, they returned to the fray.”[5] This realistic outlook helps make the testimony of the saints much more credible, since we see in them people like us. Among the saints, Pope Francis says, we may find “our own mothers, grandmothers or other loved ones (cf. 2 Tim 1:5). Their lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord.”[6]

Our understanding of prayer can be deepened when we see it incarnated in the lives of specific people. For example, we can draw new light for our life of prayer by knowing that Psalm 91 brought great consolation to Saint Thomas More during his long months in prison. *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust” ... For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up.*[7] The example of a martyr facing death and the suffering of his loved ones can offer us a path of prayer amid the great and small setbacks we encounter in our own life.

Amazed at God's loving look

Familiarity with the saints can help us too to discover God in our daily life. Saint John Mary Vianney, the Cure of Ars, noticed that one of his parishioners, an illiterate peasant, was spending a long time in front of the tabernacle. One day he asked the man: "What are you praying about?" And he replied with simplicity: "I look at Him and He looks at me." The Cure of Ars never forgot this lesson. Contemplative prayer is "a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus,"^[8] the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, citing this humble peasant as an example. I look at Him and, much more importantly, He looks at me. God is always looking at us, but He does so in a special way when we raise our eyes to Him and return his look of love.

Something similar happened to Saint Josemaria, who often repeated this story. As a young priest, during one of his first pastoral assignments, he used to stay all morning in the confessional waiting for penitents. There he would often hear the sound of the door opening and cans clanging together, which puzzled and intrigued him. One day his curiosity got the better of him and he hid behind the door to find out the cause of this noise. And he saw a man enter the church carrying cans of milk, who from the doorway looked at the tabernacle and said, "Lord, here is John the milkman," and then left. This humble man gave the young priest an example of trusting prayer that led him to often exclaim: "Lord, here is Josemaria, who doesn't know how to love you like John the milkman."^[9]

Saints from very different backgrounds and epochs show us that God is looking at us lovingly, wherever we are and just as we are. We can believe them because they themselves discovered this with amazement in their own life.

Both when asleep and awake

The saints are also an example for us when we see them tired and without strength. "Yesterday I couldn't even pray two Hail Marys attentively," Saint Josemaria confided, near the end of his life. "You can't imagine how I suffered! But, as always, although it cost me effort and I didn't know how to, I continued praying. I told Him: Lord, help me! You have to be the one who brings forward the great things you have entrusted to me, because you see how I am unable to carry out even the smallest things: as always, I place myself in your hands."^[10]

Benedict XVI relates that Saint Philip Neri, “the very moment when he awoke in the morning, said to God: ‘Lord, keep Thy hands over Philip this day; for if not, Philip will betray Thee.’”^[11] And Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri acknowledged in one of her letters that her prayer was sometimes devoid of sensible consolations: “Deep down God is there; but above all in the times of prayer I almost never have a sensible feeling of this during these days...”^[12] And Saint Therese of Lisieux wrote: “In truth I am no saint, as this frame of mind well shows. I ought not to rejoice in my dryness of soul, but rather attribute it to my want of fervor and fidelity. That I fall asleep so often during meditation, and thanksgiving after Communion, should distress me. Well, I am not distressed. I reflect that little children are equally dear to their parents whether they are asleep or awake; that, in order to perform operations, doctors put their patients to sleep.”^[13]

We need the witness and company of the saints to convince us each day that we can strengthen our friendship with God, abandoning ourselves in his hands: “Truly we are all capable, we are all called to open ourselves up to this friendship with God, to not leave God’s hands, to never stop turning and returning to the Lord, speaking with Him as one speaks with a friend.”^[14]

Carlo de Marchi

^[1] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 104.

^[2] Words of Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz in Covadonga, 13 July 2018.

^[3] Benedict XVI, Homily, 18 December 2005.

^[4] Benedict XVI, Apost. Exhort. *Verbum Domini*, no. 48.

^[5] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 76.

^[6] Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 3.

^[7] *Ps* 91:1-2, 11-12. Cf. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*. The third chapter is an extended commentary on the verses of Psalm 91.

^[8] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2715.

[9] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, ch. 5.

[10] Saint Josemaria, 26 November 1970, cited in Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del beato Josemaría*, p. 25.

[11] Cited by Benedict XVI in his general audience on 1 August 2012.

[12] Mercedes Montero, *En Vanguardia: Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, 1916-1975*, Rialp, Madrid 2019, p. 94

[13] Saint Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, ch. 8.

[14] Joseph Ratzinger, “[Letting God Work](#),” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 6 October 2002.

Learning How to Listen

Blessed Guadalupe wrote about her life of prayer: “Go deeper in that silence to arrive where God alone is: where not even the angels can enter without our permission.” A new article in the series on prayer.

The Lord chose Moses for a crucial mission: to guide his people in a new stage of salvation history. With his cooperation, Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt and led towards the Promised Land. Through his mediation, the Jewish people received the tablets of the Law and guidelines for their worship of God. How did Moses reach this point? How did he attain this close harmony with God that, over time, would make his life so fruitful for so many people: for the entire Jewish people and for all of us who would come afterwards?

Although Moses was chosen by God right from birth, as his providential escape from Pharaoh’s persecution shows, it is striking that he encountered the Lord only after many years. In his youth he seemed quite an ordinary person, although with a great concern for his fellow Jews (cf. *Ex* 2:15). Perhaps what best explains his transformation was his readiness to listen to God.^[1] We too, to attain what we are called to be, need to be transformed through our ability to listen. Certainly, it isn’t easy to reach the closeness with God that the book of Exodus describes for us: *the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Ex 33:11)*. This process usually takes years—our entire life—and often we need *to begin again to learn* how to pray, as though we were just starting out in our dialogue with God.

“Moses, Moses!”

Discovering our need for prayer means realizing that He “first loved us” (*1 Jn* 4:19), and likewise that He first spoke to us. *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them... (Gen 1:27-28).*^[2] God, who takes the initiative in creating us out of love and choosing us for a specific mission, also takes the first step in our life of prayer. In our dialogue with God, it is He who pronounces the first word.

This “first word” can already be found in the desire for God that He himself has sown in our heart and that is awakened by many

different experiences. The Lord's first apparition to Moses took place in Horeb, also called "the mountain of God." There *the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt"* (Ex 3:2-3). More than just curious about this amazing event, Moses senses that something transcendental, superior to himself, is taking place.

In our lives too we can be amazed by events that open up to us a deeper dimension of reality. This is often a deeply personal discovery of something we may have failed to appreciate. We sense God's presence in becoming aware of one of his gifts, or in seeing how setbacks and hardships have helped us mature and prepared us for confronting challenging circumstances or tasks. This could also be a discovery we make in the world around us: in our family, in our friends, or in the beauty of nature... In one way or another we discover the need to pray, to give thanks, to ask for help... and we turn to God. This is the first step.

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I" (Ex 3:4). The dialogue begins when we look at God, realizing that He is already looking at us. And our words, if needed, arise after we first listen to Him. If we try on our own, we will never be able to pray. Rather we need to turn our eyes to our Lord and recall his consoling promise: *I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:20).*

Hence a trusting faith in God is essential for any sincere prayer. Often the best way to begin to pray is to ask our Lord to teach us. This is what the apostles did and it is the path that Saint Josemaria encouraged us to follow: "If you think you're not quite ready to pray, go to Jesus as his disciples did and say to Him, 'Lord, teach us how to pray' (Lk 11:1). You will discover how the Holy Spirit 'comes to the aid of our weakness; when we do not know what prayer to offer, to pray as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with groans beyond all utterance' (Rom 8:26), which are impossible to describe, for no words are adequate to express their depth."[\[3\]](#)

"Put off your shoes from your feet"

At the end of several days of a spiritual retreat, Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri wrote to Saint Josemaria: "I've told you in other letters about how I draw close to God in my heart, about my prayer.

When I make a bit of an effort, our Lord makes it easy for me and I simply surrender myself entirely.”[4] The initiative to pray, and prayer itself, are a gift from God. But we can also ask ourselves: what is our role here? Dialogue with our Lord is a grace, and hence it is not merely passive, since to receive it we need to want to receive it.

Besides being eager to receive this grace, what more can we do to attain a life of intense prayer? A good starting point can be to realize who we are addressing, and to respond with an attitude of reverence and adoration. In the dialogue on Mount Horeb, God said to Moses: *“Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”* And he said, *“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”* And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God (Ex 3:5-6).

Taking off his shoes and covering his face was the reply of the people of Israel’s greatest prophet in his first encounter with the Lord. By doing so he gave expression to his deep awareness of being before the transcendent God. We can do likewise when we draw close to Jesus in the Tabernacle in an attitude of adoration. As Benedict XVI said in a prayer vigil with young people before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: *“Here in the Sacred Host he is present before us and in our midst. As at that time, so now he is mysteriously veiled in a sacred silence; as at that time, it is here that the true face of God is revealed. For us he became a grain of wheat that falls on the ground and dies and bears fruit until the end of the world (cf. Jn 12:24). He is present now as he was then in Bethlehem. He invites us to that inner pilgrimage which is called adoration. Let us set off on this pilgrimage of the spirit and let us ask him to be our guide.”*[5]

We express adoration in our prayer in various ways. Before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, for example, we kneel down, as a sign of our littleness before God. And when circumstances make it impossible for us to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we can do something equivalent such as fostering the awareness that God is truly in our soul and “kneeling down” interiorly, reciting calmly each word of the opening prayer or of another prayer that reminds us that we are in his presence.

“The cloud covered it”

When Moses received the tablets of the Law, his dialogue with God took place amid great manifestations of God’s glory, but also great

intimacy. *The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days; and on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights (Ex 24:16-18).*

The cloud manifests the glory of God and prefigures the presence of the Holy Spirit. But it also establishes an atmosphere of intimacy in the dialogue between the prophet and his Creator. Hence we learn that in order to pray we need to acquire some virtues that make intimacy with God easier: love for silence, both exterior and interior; constancy; and the ability to listen carefully, which enables us to hear his voice.

At times we find it hard to value silence, and if in our prayer we fail to hear anything, we may try to fill in the time with words, with reading, or even with images and audios. Although we do so with a good intention, we may find it hard then to listen to God. Perhaps we need a “conversion to silence,” which is more than merely keeping quiet. Saint Josemaria wrote down a reflection in the summer of 1932 that was later published in *The Way*, which gives graphic expression to how our dialogue with God will always have to take this path: “Silence is the door-keeper of the interior life.”^[6]

External noise and unruly passions disperse our attention, while silence restores unity to our heart and leads us to reflect on the direction of our life. Activism and loquacity in our prayer don’t draw us closer to God, nor do they allow us to act with true depth. When we are agitated we don’t have time to recollect our heart, to think, to live deeply, while silence, both interior and exterior, leads us to an encounter with God, to be amazed by Him. Hence prayer requires a silence that is not merely negative and empty, but that is *filled with God* and leads us to discover his presence. As Blessed Guadalupe wrote: “Go deeper in that silence to arrive where God alone is: where not even the angels can enter without our permission. To adore God, to praise Him and tell Him affectionate things.”^[7] This is the silence that enables us to listen to God.

It is a question, then, of centering our attention—our intellect, will and affections—on God, in order to let ourselves be challenged by Him. Hence we can ask ourselves, as Pope Francis suggests: “Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord’s

presence, when you calmly spend time with Him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let Him warm you more and more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. How will you then be able to set the hearts of others on fire by your words and witness?”[8]

Along with silence, equally important is constancy, since to pray requires determination. It requires time and effort, as happened to Moses, who spent six days covered by the cloud, and only on the seventh day received the Lord’s word. First of all, an *exterior* constancy to be faithful to a more or less set time for prayer and a specific duration. As Saint Josemaria always advised: “Your time of prayer should be for a fixed duration and at a fixed time. Otherwise we would be putting our own convenience first, which would be a lack of mortification. And prayer without mortification is not at all effective.”[9] If our motive is love, this constancy will be the doorway to a friendship with God expressed in conversation, since He never imposes himself. He only speaks to us if we want Him to. Constancy on our part is a way to show and foster our ardent desire to receive his words of affection.

Besides exterior constancy, we also need an *interior* constancy, as part of learning how to listen. We need to focus our intellect and fight against dispersion, spur our will to make acts of love, and nourish our affections, which at times are sparse. This effort can be tiring, especially if we have to do so frequently because of many distractions. Moreover, the determination to listen shouldn’t be confused with an excessive rigorism or method of concentration, since our prayer should flow freely. Above all, it flows where God allows it to—*the wind blows where it wills (Jn 3:8)*—but also in accord with our specific situation. A large part of our prayer can sometimes be simply thinking about the persons we love and asking God for them, which can already be a dialogue of love.

Some specific advice that can assist our determination to learn how to listen: fleeing any “multitasking” in order to stay focused and be present during the dialogue, not worrying about other concerns; fostering the disposition of someone who wants to learn, humbly acknowledging our nothingness and God’s perfection, perhaps by making use of aspirations or brief prayers; asking our Lord specific questions, and leaving space for Him to respond when He wants, or simply telling Him that we are ready to do whatever He asks of us; reflecting on his Love and letting our thoughts go wherever we are

led, while fighting against distractions; learning to keep our mind open in order to let ourselves be surprised by Him and to dream God's dreams, without trying to overly "control" our prayer. Thus we open our heart to both God's mystery and his "logic," and we can accept peacefully the fact that we aren't sure where He is leading us.

"Show me thy glory"

When beginning a time of prayer, we have the reasonable expectation that God will speak to us—as in fact often happens. Nevertheless, we may find it frustrating when we finish and we haven't heard anything, or very little. But no matter what happens, we need to be certain that *prayer is always fruitful*. On Mount Sinai, Moses said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen" (Ex 33:18-23). If Moses had felt frustrated at not seeing God's face, as he had hoped to do, he might have given up trying or lost his motivation for future encounters. But Moses let himself be led by God and thus became the one *whom the Lord knew face to face* (Deut 34:10).

The key to prayer is not in achieving tangible results, nor much less in keeping occupied for a set period of time. What we are seeking through our dialogue with God is not to see immediate results, but rather to reach a state, to put it in some way, where prayer is identified ever more fully with our own life: with our thoughts, affections, hopes and dreams... We want to be with God, to stay in his presence all day. In short, the principal fruit of prayer is *living in God*. Then prayer is seen as a *communication of life*: life received and life lived, life welcomed and life given. It doesn't matter if we don't have warm feelings or amazing lights. In a much more simple way, the theme of our prayer, as Saint Josemaria said,^[10] will be the theme of our life, and vice-versa. For our entire life will become authentic prayer, opening out "into a broad, smooth-flowing stream."^[11]

[1] Benedict XVI said in his catechesis on prayer: “As we read the Old Testament we note one figure who stands out from among the others: Moses, precisely as a man of prayer.” General Audience, 1 June 2011.

[2] The same happens in the second account of man’s creation: cf. *Gen 2:16*.

[3] *Friends of God*, no. 244.

[4] Letter, 12 December 1949, in *Letters to a Saint*, ch. 2.

[5] Benedict XVI, *Address*, 20 August 2005.

[6] *The Way*, 281.

[7] Mercedes Eguibar Galarza, *Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri*. Ares, Milan, 2019, p. 79.

[8] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 151.

[9] *Furrow*, no. 446.

[10] Cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 174.

[11] *Friends of God*, no. 306.

How God Speaks To Us

The language of prayer is mysterious. We cannot control it, but little by little by persevering in prayer we find that God changes our heart.

In the territory of Perea, in present day Jordan, on a hilltop 100 meters above the Dead Sea, stands the impressive fortress of Machaerus. There Herod Antipas has imprisoned John the Baptist (cf. *Mk* 6:17).^[1] In the cold and damp dungeon hewn from the rock, darkness and silence reign. John is troubled by a recurring thought: time is going by and Jesus has still not revealed Himself as clearly as John had hoped. He has received news of his mighty deeds (cf. *Mt* 11:2), but Jesus doesn't seem to refer to Himself as the Messiah. And when people ask Him directly, He remains silent. Is it possible that John was mistaken? But he saw it all so clearly! He saw the Spirit come down from heaven in the form of a dove and rest on Him (cf. *Jn* 1:32-43). So he sends some of his disciples to ask the Master: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (*Mt* 11:3).

Jesus responds in an unexpected way. Instead of giving a clear answer, He directs their attention to his deeds: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Although a bit enigmatic, his response is sufficiently clear for those who know the prophecies in Sacred Scripture pointing to the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom. "Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise!" (*Is* 26:19). "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (*Is* 35:5). Our Lord encourages John to trust Him: "And blessed he is who takes no offense at me" (*Mt* 11:6)

In this scene we can see a similarity to a person who finds it hard to discern God's voice in prayer. When we find ourselves in this situation, Jesus invites us to completely change our perspective, to abandon our eagerness for human certitudes and enter into the mysterious adventure of a God who speaks to us through his deeds and through Sacred Scripture. In Jesus' final words, "blessed he is who takes no offense at me," we discover a call to persevere with faith in our prayer, also when God sometimes doesn't seem to respond as clearly as we had hoped.

Gestures that can break the "silence"

A person who has begun to pray may often have to face the apparent “silence” of God. “I speak to Him, I tell Him about my concerns. I ask Him about what I should do, but He doesn’t answer me. He doesn’t tell me anything.” This was also Job’s complaint: “I cry to thee and thou dost not answer me; I stand, and thou dost not heed me” (*Job* 30:20). It is easy to become disconcerted then: “I have always heard that prayer is a dialogue but God never says anything to me. If God speaks to others... why not to me? What am I doing wrong?” These doubts of a person who prays can lead at times to a temptation against hope. “If God doesn’t answer me why should I pray?” And if this silence is interpreted as God’s absence, it can even become a temptation against faith: “If God doesn’t speak to me, then He doesn’t exist.”

What can we say in answer to all this? In the first place, to deny God’s existence because of his apparent silence makes no sense. God could choose to be silent for any number of reasons, and this would not affect his existence or non-existence, nor his love for us. Faith in God—and in his goodness—is what is decisive. In any case, this can be a good moment to beseech Him, filled with faith and trust: “O God, do not keep silence; do not hold thy peace or be still, O God!” (*Ps* 83:1)

But neither should we doubt our ability to hear God’s voice. The human heart has the necessary “resources,” with the help of grace, to hear God speaking to us, no matter how much this capacity has been obscured by original sin and our own personal sins. The first chapter of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is entitled “Man’s Capacity for God.” Saint John Paul II said in a general audience: “Man, as the tradition of Christian thought maintains, is *capax Dei*: capable of knowing God and of receiving the gift he makes of himself. Indeed, created in the image and likeness of God, he is able to live a personal relationship with Him.”^[2] It is a personal relationship that takes the form of a dialogue made up of words and actions.^[3] And at times, only actions, as happens also in human love.

For example, just as an exchange of looks between two persons can be a silent dialogue (there are looks that speak clearly), so too our trusting conversation with God can take on this form as well: “looking at God and realizing that He is looking at us. Like the way Jesus looked at John, which decided the course of his disciple’s life forever.”^[4] The Catechism says that “contemplation is a gaze of

faith.”[5] And often a look can be more important and more filled with meaning, with love and light for our lives, than a long string of words. Saint Josemaria, when speaking about the joy that comes from a contemplative life, said that “the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.”[6] As “God’s beggars,”[7] we humbly implore that we too, besides knowing it is true, might “feel” God’s loving look upon us always.

No man ever spoke like this man

Saint Teresa of Calcutta said that “in vocal prayer we speak to God; in mental prayer He speaks to us. It is then that God pours Himself into us.”[8] This is an attempt to explain what is ineffable. In reality, prayer entails a great mystery. This “mysterious encounter” between God and the person who prays takes place in many different ways. Some of these are hard to classify and cannot be fully understood or explained. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says regarding the mystery of prayer: “We must also face the fact that certain attitudes deriving from the *mentality* of ‘this present world’ can penetrate our lives if we are not vigilant. For example, some would have it that only that is true which can be verified by reason and science; yet prayer is a mystery that overflows both our conscious and unconscious lives.”[9] Like John the Baptist, we often anxiously seek to ground truth on evidence that is not always attainable in the supernatural realm.

The way God chooses to speak to our soul transcends our understanding, and we can never completely comprehend it. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach” (*Ps* 139:6). Our alphabet is not God’s alphabet, our language is not his language, our words are not his words. When God speaks He has no need for vocal cords, and He is heard not by our ears but by a more hidden and mysterious place in our being. At times we call that our heart; at times, our conscience.[10] God speaks to us from the reality of his Being and to the reality that we are. A star is related to other stars not through words, but through the force of gravity. God does not need to speak to us with words, although He can also do so. He speaks with his works and with the secret action of the Holy Spirit in our soul, moving our heart, stirring our emotions and giving light to our intellect in order to draw us gently to Himself. It could happen that at first we may not even be aware of it. But with the passing of time He will help us to recognize his action in us. Perhaps He will

have helped us to be more patient or more understanding, or to work better, or to give greater importance to friendship... In short, our love for God will grow ever stronger.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that for a person who prays the “transformation of the praying heart is the first response to our petition.”^[11] It is a transformation that is normally slow and gradual, and even at times imperceptible, but that nevertheless is completely certain and that we must learn to recognize and be grateful for. This is what Saint Josemaria did on August 7, 1931: “Today this diocese celebrates the feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. When making my Mass intentions, I noted the interior change that God has made in me during these years of residence in the ex-Court ... and that the change has come about in spite of myself—without my cooperation, I might say. I think I then renewed my resolve to dedicate my entire life to the fulfillment of God’s will.”^[12] This “interior change” recognized in prayer is one of the ways God speaks to us... and what a marvelous way! Then we come to understand what the Temple officers said to the chief priests about Jesus: “No man ever spoke like this man” (*Jn 7:46*). God speaks as no one else can speak: by changing our heart.

God’s word is “living and active” (cf. *Heb 4:12*). It changes us, and his action in our soul transcends our understanding. As Yahweh said through the prophet Isaiah: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (*Is 55:9-11*). This mysterious effectiveness is a call for us to grow in humility, which “is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought,’ are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer.”^[13] We are ready to open ourselves trustingly to God’s action.

God’s sublime freedom

God speaks when He wants to. We cannot put limits on the Holy Spirit. It is not in our hands to direct his action in our souls. Saint Josemaria once said that Christ, present in the tabernacle, “is a Lord who speak when He wants to, when one might least expect it, and He

says specific things. Then He is silent, because He wants the response of our faith and our loyalty.”[14] For we “enter into prayer” not through the door of our senses—seeing, hearing, feeling—but “by the narrow gate of faith,”[15] shown in the care and perseverance we put into our times of prayer. And even though we may not immediately realize it, our prayer always bear fruit.

This often happened to the Founder of Opus Dei. For example, on October 16, 1931, he tells us: “I wanted to pray, after Mass, in the quiet of my church. I didn’t succeed. On Atocha Street I bought a newspaper (*ABC*) and got on the streetcar. Up to this moment, when I’m writing this, I have not been able to read more than one paragraph of the paper. I felt flowing through me a prayer of copious and ardent affections. That’s how I was on the streetcar and all the way home.”[16] Saint Josemaria tried without success to pray in a quiet spot. And yet, a few minutes later, amid the hustle and bustle of a streetcar filled with people, as he began to read the newspaper he was caught up by God’s grace and experienced “the most sublime prayer” in his life, according to his own account.

Many other saints have given witness to God’s freedom in speaking to the soul when and where He wants to. Saint Teresa of Avila, for example, recounts in her *Life*: “I would laugh at myself and find it pleasant to realize how low a soul can sink when God is not forever working within it. In such a state, the soul sees clearly that it is not without God: this is not like the severe trials which I have said I sometimes experience. The soul collects wood and does all it can by itself, but finds no way of kindling the fire of the love of God. It is only by His great mercy that the smoke can be seen, which shows that the fire is not altogether dead. Then the Lord comes back and kindles it, for the soul is driving itself crazy with blowing on the fire and rearranging the wood, yet all its efforts only put out the fire more and more. I believe the best thing is for the soul to be completely resigned to the fact that of itself it can do nothing ...and learn by experience how little it can do of itself.”[17]

But, in fact, God has spoken to us many times. Or better said, He never stops speaking to us at every moment. In a way, to learn to pray is to learn to recognize God’s “voice” in his works, just as Jesus helped John the Baptist to do. The Holy Spirit never stops acting in our souls. As Saint Paul reminded the Corinthians: “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (*1 Cor 12:3*). This should fill us with peace. But whoever loses sight of this truth could easily

become discouraged. “Some people seek God by prayer but are quickly discouraged because they do not know that prayer comes also from the Holy Spirit and not from themselves alone.”^[18] In order to never become discouraged in prayer, we need to have great trust in the Holy Spirit and in his multiform and mysterious ways of acting in our soul: “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how”(Mk 4:26).

Jose Brage

[1] Cf. Flavius Joseph, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18, 5, 2.

[2] Saint John Paul II, *General Audience*, 26 July 1998.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2567.

[4] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken from a meditation, 9 January 1959; in *While He Spoke To Us On The Way*, p 87.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2715.

[6] Saint Josemaria, Homily “Towards Holiness,” in *Friends of God*, no. 307.

[7] Cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermon 56*, 6, 9.

[8] Saint Teresa of Calcutta, *No Greater Love*, New World Library, p. 5.

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2727.

[10] “His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths (GS 16),” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1776.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2739.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 217; in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, Scepter Publishers, 2001, pp. 287-288.

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

[14] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a family get together, 18 June 1972 (*Cronica*, 2000, p. 243).

[15] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2656.

[16] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 334; in Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, Scepter Publishers, 2001, p. 294.

[17] *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, trans. by E. Allison Peers, Image Book, Ch. XXXVII, pp. 216-217.

[18] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2726.

A Richer Language

God's language is much richer than ours. He can speak to us in many different ways, with words and also with deeds.

God speaks to us, constantly. He speaks with words and also with deeds. His language is much richer than ours. It is capable of unlocking secret resources in our heart by making use of the people and events around us. God speaks to us in Scripture, in the Liturgy, through the Church's Magisterium... Since He always looks upon us with love, He seeks a dialogue with us in each event, and always calls us to be holy. Hence, in order to hear this mysterious divine language, we try to always begin our prayer with a sincere act of faith.

From within...

God speaks to us by acting on our soul's faculties, which He can move from within: on our intellect, through inspirations; on our sentiments, through the emotions; on our will, through the resolutions we make. Thus, as Saint Josemaria taught us, when ending our prayer we can say: "I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have given to me in this time of prayer."

But a doubt could arise here: "How can I be sure that it is really He who is speaking to me? How can I know that these resolutions, affections and inspirations aren't merely my own desires and feelings?" It is not easy to answer this question. Prayer is an art that we learn with the passage of time and with the help of spiritual direction. But we can be sure that anything that leads us to love Him and our fellow men and women more, to fulfil his will, also when this entails sacrifice and generosity, comes from Him. Many people who pray frequently can say: "In my prayer I think about the same things that I think about throughout the day, but with this difference: I always end by saying in my heart, 'not my will but yours be done,' which doesn't happen to me at other moments."

God often speaks directly to our heart, whose language He knows better than anyone. He does so through the deep desires that He himself sows there. Therefore listening to God often means looking into our own heart and having the courage to place before Him our

longings, with the intention of trying to discern what leads us to fulfil his will and what doesn't. What do I really desire? Why? Where do these impulses come from? Where do they lead me? Am I deceiving myself, pretending they are not really there and refusing to face them? Pope Francis advises us that someone who seeks to lead a life of prayer naturally asks these questions: "If we are not to go astray, we need to ask: Do I know myself, beyond my superficial feelings? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart?"^[1]

Besides speaking to our heart and intellect, God also does so through our *internal senses*. He speaks to our imagination, by stirring up a scene or image; and also to our memory, through a remembrance or some words that can be a reply to our prayer or a sign of his wishes. This is what happened, for example, to Saint Josemaria on 8 September 1931. He was trying to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament in the church of the Foundation for the Sick, but he had trouble controlling his imagination. "I noticed that, without meaning to, I was repeating some Latin words which I had never paid any attention to and had no reason to recall. Even now, to remember them, I have to read them off the sheet of paper I always carry in my pocket for writing down whatever God wants. (Right there in the sanctuary, I jotted down that phrase instinctively on that sheet of paper, out of habit, without attaching any importance to it.) The words of Scripture that I 'found' on my lips were: *Et fui tecum in omnibus ubicumque ambulasti, firmans regnum tuum in aeternum* ['And I have been with you everywhere, wherever you went; your throne shall be established forever' (2 Sam 7:9,16)]. Repeating them slowly, I applied my mind to their meaning. And later, yesterday evening and again today, when I read them again (for—I repeat—as if God was taking pains to prove to me that they were his, I can't recall them from one moment to the next), I well understood that Christ Jesus was telling me, for our consolation, "The Work of God will be with Him everywhere, affirming the reign of Jesus Christ forever."^[2]

To speak to us God can also make use of the notes we jot down on a retreat or in a means of formation, especially when we reread them in our prayer and try to decipher their full meaning. There perhaps we will discover a guiding light or pattern that reveals what God wants to say to us.

An unceasing murmur

It is true that God may choose to speak clearly and in a supernatural way, but this is not usually the case. Ordinarily God speaks softly, and therefore we sometimes fail to appreciate the small gifts—resolutions, affections, inspirations—that He offers us in our simple prayer. What happened to the Syrian commander Naaman can also happen to us. When the prophet Elisha advised him to bathe seven times in the river in order to be cured of his leprosy, Naaman complained: *I thought that he would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper* (2 Kgs 5:11). Naaman went to the God of Israel to be cured, but he was expecting something spectacular that would attract everyone’s attention. Luckily, his servants urged him to reconsider: *if the prophet had commanded you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much rather, then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?* (2 Kgs 5:11). He did as the prophet had asked, something so seemingly ordinary, and thus he came into contact with the saving power of God. In our prayer, we need to appreciate these small lights regarding “what we already know,” the motions of the Holy Spirit about “what we always have before us,” the quiet affections and “easy” resolutions, and not overlook them because they are so ordinary, since all this can also be God’s way of speaking.

Replying to a question about prayer, Cardinal Ratzinger said that God doesn’t usually speak to us loudly: “He doesn’t speak to us, as I was saying, in a loud voice. Yet he does speak again and again. To be sure, it is also important for the receiver, so to speak, to be tuned to the broadcaster. And our average way of living and thinking causes too much interference that keeps the sound from coming through. Moreover, we are so alienated from his voice that we simply do not recognize it immediately as his. But I would say that everyone who is in some sense attentive can experience and sense for himself that now *He* is speaking to me. And it is a chance for me to get to know him. Precisely in catastrophic situations he can suddenly break in, if I am awake and if someone helps me decipher the message. Of course, he does not speak loudly, but he speaks through signs and through events in our life, through our fellowmen. A little bit of vigilance is certainly called for as well, and it is also necessary that we not get wholly caught up in what is superficial.”^[3] This capacity for vigilance is closely tied to interior recollection (at times also exterior), which is something we need to grow in. To grasp God’s voice we need to set aside some minutes from the daily hustle and

bustle and concentrate on spending time alone with Him. We need silence.

Certainly, God speaks to us in a thousand different ways. But it can happen that we become so accustomed to his gifts that we don't realize this and we fail to recognize Him, as we see in the reaction of Jesus' fellow townsmen: *Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brethren James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?* (Mt 13:55-56). We need to ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and ears, to purify our heart and illumine our conscience in order to recognize his unceasing "murmur" within us.

God has already spoken to us

When Jesus responds to the disciples of John the Baptist by listing the signs that apply to Himself—*the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them* (Mt 11:5)—He is announcing the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies in Sacred Scripture about the Messiah. For God has spoken to us and speaks to each one of us, in a special way, through Sacred Scripture: "For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them."^[4] Therefore "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue may be opened up between God and man; for 'we speak to Him when we pray, and we hear Him when we read the divine words' (Saint Ambrose, off. 1, 88)."^[5] The words of the Bible are not only inspired by God; they also give us inspirations *about* God.

We hear God's voice in a special way in the Gospels, which pass on to us the words and deeds of Our Lord Jesus Christ. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews said: *In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world* (Heb 1:1-2). Saint Augustine said that the Gospel is "Christ's mouth. He is seated in Heaven, but continues speaking on earth."^[6] Hence our prayer is nourished above all by the Gospel: reading, meditating, rereading and engraving it on our memory, going back over his words again and again. There God speaks to our heart.

Following the Church's tradition, Saint Josemaria frequently recommended that we listen to God's voice by meditating on the Gospels: "My advice is that, in your prayer, you actually take part in the different scenes of the Gospel, as one more among the people present. First of all, imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Master's life you are considering—his merciful Heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfils his Father's Will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because He may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands."^[7] Our effort in prayer is expressed in specific actions: *imagining* the scene, *taking part* in it, *considering* a specific aspect of the Master's life, *telling* Him what is happening to us... And God may choose to reply by *pointing out* something to us, *suggesting* something deep in our soul, *making us realize* something. Thus a dialogue is opened up with Him.

Saint Josemaria encouraged us to contemplate and imitate Christ in this way: "Take up the Gospel every day. Become one of the people there, in that divine story, and react accordingly. Contemplate Christ's miracles, hear the voices of the multitude around Him, exchange words of friendship with the first Twelve. Look our Lord in the eyes and fall in love with Him, so that you become another Christ."^[8] Contemplate, hear, exchange words of friendship, look.... These actions require employing our faculties and senses, our imagination and intellect. Each of us is present there, in each page of the Gospel. Each scene, each action of Jesus provides meaning and light for my life. His words are addressed to me and uphold my life.

José Brage

^[1] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, no. 285.

^[2] Saint Josemaria, *Intimate Notes*, no. 273; in Andrés Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, pp. 291-292.

^[3] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press 1997.

[4] Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 21. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2700.

[5] Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Const. *Dei Verbum*, no. 25. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2653.

[6] Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 85, 1.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 253.

[8] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a meditation, 12 October 1947; in *While He Spoke to Us on the Way*, pp. 25-26.

A Good Connection

We have “a direct line with God Our Lord. He is so good that He is always available for us.” A new article in the series on prayer.

One sometimes hears stories about the “red phone” that connected the leaders of two superpowers many thousands of miles apart. The idea of being able to speak immediately with someone so far away was quite surprising back then, with cell phones still hard to imagine. Saint Josemaria referred to this in 1972 when he said that we have “a direct line with God Our Lord, a much more direct one ... He is so good that He is always available for us, and never makes us wait.”^[1]

Our faith assures us that God is always at the other end of the line. And yet, how often we have encountered difficulties in trying to hear his voice or stick to our planned times of prayer! Some people express their frustration by saying they “can’t connect with God.” This painful experience can even lead to abandoning the attempt to pray. We too, despite great effort over years trying to pray, can feel that we don’t know how to speak with God. Although we are convinced we have a direct line with Him, we find it hard to escape our interior monologue and reach the intimate connection we long for.

Pope Francis encourages us “to stay connected to Jesus, to ‘remain online’ with him ... Just as you try not to lose your connection to the internet, make sure that you stay connected to the Lord. That means not cutting off dialogue, listening to him, sharing your life with him.”^[2] What can we do to make our prayer truly a dialogue between two persons? With the passing of the years, how can we continue growing in intimacy with God?

Watching from the shore

After the Resurrection, the disciples go to Galilee, as our Lord had instructed the holy women to tell them: *There they will see me* (Mt 28:10). Dawn is breaking. Peter and John, accompanied by five others, are rowing towards land after an unsuccessful night of fishing. Jesus is watching them from the shore (cf. Jn 21:4). Similarly, when we begin to pray we place ourselves in Jesus’ presence, with the assurance that He is waiting for us. He is watching us from the shore and wants to listen to us. It can help us in our

prayer to imagine our Lord looking at us. And we too want to look at Him: “That I may see you; this is the heart of prayer!”[3] Our dialogue with God starts when two people who love one another look at each other. “Looking at God and allowing yourself to be looked upon by God: this is prayer.”[4]

But we also want to listen to his words, to sense how much He loves us and know what He wants from us. The disciples hadn’t caught any fish, but Jesus speaks to them. He gives them instructions so they won’t return empty-handed: *Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some (Jn 21:6)*. Good conversations often begin by establishing harmony right from the first words. Likewise the first minutes of prayer are important because they set the tone for the rest of our prayer. Striving to begin the conversation well will help us to keep our dialogue alive.

Up to then, the faith of those in the boat was weak. When they see their nets fill with fish, when they realize that their brief dialogue with Jesus produces more fruit than an entire night of effort on their part, John says to Peter: *It is the Lord! (Jn 21:7)*. This certitude is already the beginning of prayer: the Lord is here, alongside us, whether we are in front of the Tabernacle or in some other place.

As the Holy Spirit permits

The disciples come ashore with their nets filled with fish. There they find a charcoal fire with an unexpected breakfast of bread and fish waiting for them. Sitting down around the fire, they begin eating in silence. No one *dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord (Jn 21:12)*. The thread of the conversation is left in Jesus’ hands. Certainly, the key to prayer is letting God act, rather than our own efforts. When someone asked John Paul II about how he prayed, he answered: “You would have to ask the Holy Spirit! The Pope prays *as the Holy Spirit permits him to pray.*”[5] In prayer, it is the Person we are speaking to who takes the initiative.

After placing ourselves in God’s presence we need to try to “shut out the noise” and foster interior silence, which requires effort on our part. Then it will be easier to hear the voice of Jesus, who asks us, *Children, have you any fish? (Jn 21:5)*, and who tells us lovingly, *Follow me (Jn 21:19)*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out the need to struggle to “disconnect in order to connect,” in order to be able to speak with God in the solitude of our heart.[6] The saints have often repeated this advice: “Leave aside, for a little while,

your occupations; hide yourself, for a time, from your disturbing thoughts. Cast aside, now, your burdensome cares, and put away your toilsome business ... Enter the inner chamber of your mind; shut out all thoughts save that of God, and such as can aid you in seeking him; close your door and seek him. Speak now, my whole heart! Speak now to God, saying, *I seek your face; your face, Lord, will I seek* (Ps 27:8). And come you now, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how it may seek you, where and how it may find you.”[7]

This is not always easy to do, since our daily tasks and concerns have a strong hold on our memory and imagination and can fill our interior world. There are no magic formulas to make these vanish, and distractions are usually inevitable. Saint Josemaria advised us to make them part of our conversation with our Lord, “by asking Him for what caused this distraction, for those persons, and letting our Lord act, who always draws what He wants from each flower.”[8] Our effort to avoid distractions can also be assisted by seeking out a good time and place for our prayer; although we can pray anywhere, not every circumstance is well suited for establishing a dialogue with God or for showing Him our sincere desire to pray.

The introductory prayer: connecting

To make it easier to “connect” with God, Saint Josemaria recommended an introductory prayer that he often used.[9] These words help us to begin our prayer with an act of faith and a humble heart: “I firmly believe that you are here;” “I adore you with profound reverence.” We are telling Jesus, “I’ve come to spend time with you. I want to speak with you and you to speak with me. I ardently desire that this encounter may help me to unite myself more fully to your will.” By saying “I firmly believe,” we are expressing a reality but also a desire; we are asking our Lord to increase our faith, since we know that “faith is what gives wings to prayer.”[10]

This act of faith leads us directly to adoration, by which we acknowledge God’s greatness and abandon ourselves in his hands. And it leads us to acknowledge our faults and ask Him for pardon and grace, since “humility is the foundation of prayer.”[11] We realize our littleness compared to his greatness, how lacking we are in strength. Prayer is a gratuitous gift that we need to beg for. As Saint Josemaria said: “Prayer is the humility of the person who acknowledges his profound wretchedness and the greatness of God.

He addresses and adores God as one who expects everything from Him and nothing from himself.”[12]

To believe, adore, ask for pardon, beg for help: four movements of our heart that open up for us a “good connection.” We may find it helpful to calmly repeat this introductory prayer, savoring each word. Perhaps it would be good to repeat it several times until our attention is centered on our Lord. We may also want to compose our own personal introductory prayer and use it when our heart is dry or distracted. If we find ourselves distracted or our mind empty, slowly repeating a vocal prayer (the Our Father or another prayer that moves our heart) can often focus our attention and calm our thoughts: once, twice, even three times, saying it slowly, dwelling on the words or changing one of them.

Enkindling the fire: dialogue

This initial connection leads into the core of our prayer: “a heart-to-heart dialogue with God, in which the whole soul takes part: intellect, imagination, memory and will.”[13] Let us return to that early morning scene of the disciples, still amazed at the miraculous catch of fish. Jesus builds a fire to cook breakfast for them. We can imagine Him seeking the right sticks to get the fire going. Similarly, if we view the prayer as a small fire that we want to see grow, we first need to find the right material to “enkindle” it.

The material that enkindles the fire of our prayer is usually the tasks we have in hand and our own personal circumstances. Our joys, sorrows and worries are the best summary of what we hold in our heart. With simple words, the thread of our conversation is closely tied to the events in our daily life, as we can imagine was the case in that Eastertide breakfast. Not infrequently, we will need to start by saying: “Lord, I don’t know how to pray!”[14] But the prayer of a Christian is not limited to opening our own intimate life to God, since we feed the fire in a special way with Christ’s own life. Our conversation with God is also about Him, about his life on earth, his longings for the redemption. Moreover, since we realize we are responsible for all our brothers and sisters, “a Christian does not leave the world outside the door of his room, but carries people and situations, problems, many things in his heart; I bring them all to prayer.”[15]

With this starting point, each person will seek the way of praying that works best. There are no fixed rules. But having a set method can

help us to know what to do until we sense that God is taking the initiative. Thus, for example, some people will find it helpful to have a fixed plan of prayer throughout the week. At times, writing down the words of our prayer offers many advantages to prevent distractions. Our prayer will take one path during times of intense work and another when things are more peaceful. It will also find inspiration in the liturgical time being observed in the Church. Many paths are open to us: immersing ourselves in contemplating our Lord's Holy Humanity in the Gospels or meditating on a topic with the help of a good book, realizing that reading can assist our examination of conscience. Some days we will find petition, praise or adoration easier. Calmly praying short aspirations is a good path to follow when our heart is agitated; at other times, we will keep quiet, sensing that Christ or Mary is looking at us lovingly. In the end, whatever path the Holy Spirit guides us along, everything will lead to "getting to know Him and to know yourself." [16]

Wind and wet leaves

Besides good "kindling material," we also need an awareness of the obstacles we may encounter for keeping the fire burning: the strong "wind" of our imagination that tries to put out the weak initial flame, and the "wet leaves" of the small miseries that we want to burn out.

Certainly, our imagination has an important role to play in our dialogue with God. We especially need to rely on it when contemplating our Lord's life. But as Saint Teresa of Avila said, it is also the "mad women in the attic" and can try to build up a fantasy world in our mind. Letting our imagination run free often leads to dispersion in our interior world. Hence we need to resist the strong wind that could put out the fire, and encourage the gentle breezes that enkindle it. One detail stands out in the encounter of the Risen Lord with his disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee. Only the one who has been present on Calvary, Saint John, recognizes our Lord. His contact with the Cross has purified his sight, making it more perceptive and quicker to grasp the truth. Suffering smooths out the path of prayer; interior mortification helps the imagination to enkindle the fire more fully, and prevents it from becoming a suffocating wind.

Finally, we need to confront the "wet leaves" of our wretchedness. Inside we harbor an entire "sub-world" of bad memories, small grudges, vulnerable points, envies, comparisons with others, sensuality and the desire to stand out, which center our attention on

ourselves. Our prayer should lead us precisely in the opposite direction: to forget about our own ego and center ourselves on Him. We need to “ventilate” these affective failings in our prayer, exposing this damp world to the light, to the sun of God’s purifying warmth, and tell Him: “Look at this, and this; what a disaster. I place it here before you, so that you may purify it.” And we will ask Him to help us learn how to forgive, to forget, to rejoice in other people’s good; to see the positive side of things, to reject temptations and be grateful for humiliations. Then the sun will evaporate the dampness that could hinder our conversation with God.

A desire that continues

Connection, dialogue, calm. The final moments in our prayer are an opportunity to “store up” what we have been given, so that we will remember it. This led Saint Josemaria to consider the “resolutions, affections and inspirations” his prayer had led to.^[17] The natural result of our dialogue with God is the desire to improve, to fulfil his Will. This desire, Saint Augustine said, is already a good prayer: “as long as you continue desiring, you will continue praying.”^[18] These good intentions will often give rise to resolutions that are specific and practical. In any case, our time of prayer should help us to live in God’s presence the rest of that day. Affections may have been present with greater or lesser strength; they aren’t always important, but if our emotions are never involved in our prayer we should ask ourselves where we habitually place our heart. Naturally, these emotions don’t always have to be felt, since affections can also arise through the tranquil desires of our will, as when we “want to want to.”

Inspirations are lights from God that it is good to note down, since they can help us greatly in our future times of prayer. Over time, they can become good “kindling material” that awakens our heart when it is arid, when we find ourselves dull or apathetic. Although when these inspirations first strike our heart we may think we will never forget them, in fact time can often dull our memory. Hence it is good to jot them down when they are still vivid and can be captured in writing with special force and clarity. “Engrave on your memory those words which struck you while praying, and repeat them slowly many times throughout the day.”^[19]

We should never forget the help our allies in heaven offer us. When we feel weak we should have recourse to those who are closest to God. We can do so both when we begin and end our time of prayer,

and whenever we sense that the flame is dying down. We will be assured of the special presence of our Mother, her spouse Joseph and our guardian angel, who will bring us “holy inspirations.”[\[20\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 8 November 1972.

[\[2\]](#) Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit*, no. 158.

[\[3\]](#) Benedict XVI, General Audience, 4 May 2011.

[\[4\]](#) Francis, General Audience, 13 February 2019.

[\[5\]](#) Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Alfred A. Knopf 2005, p. 19.

[\[6\]](#) Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2725-2729.

[\[7\]](#) Saint Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 1.

[\[8\]](#) Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 21 February 1971.

[\[9\]](#) “My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here; that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I beg your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.”

[\[10\]](#) Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, no 28.

[\[11\]](#) *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2559.

[\[12\]](#) Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 259.

[\[13\]](#) Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 119.

[\[14\]](#) Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 244.

[\[15\]](#) Francis, General Audience, 13 February 2019.

[\[16\]](#) Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 91.

[\[17\]](#) Saint Josemaria recommended this closing prayer: “I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections and inspirations that you have given to me in this time of prayer. I ask your help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel intercede for me.”

[18] Cf. Saint Augustine, *Enarrat. in Ps.* 37, 14.

[19] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 103.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 567.

At the Right Time

“We need to remember the beautiful, great things that God has done for each of us, since a prayer of remembrance does a lot of good for a Christian heart.”

When Mary entered her home, Elizabeth saw that Mary was no longer the child she remembered. Elizabeth had probably been present at Mary’s birth and known her as a remarkable young girl. But for many years now they had lived apart. On seeing Mary once again, Elizabeth experienced a deep joy. The Evangelist tells us she was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed aloud: *And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* (Lk 1:43).

Elizabeth’s joy arose from a life enriched with prayer. Both she and Zechariah were considered holy—*righteous before God*—and many people held them in admiration (cf. Lk 1:6). But only the two of them knew everything that trying to live close to God for so many years had meant; their experiences contained much that couldn’t be communicated to others, as happens to all of us. Elizabeth’s joy arose from a past filled with sorrows and hopes, troubles and discoveries, but where everything had helped to deepen her relationship with God. Only she knew how hard it had been to accept not being able to be a mother, when this was the most longed for blessing in a Jewish woman. But the Lord had wanted to make her undergo that trial in order to raise her to a deeper intimacy with Him.

Your prayer has been heard

Our relationship with God, our prayer, also always has something unique and incommunicable about it, like Elizabeth’s. Our life can sometimes seem like that of the solitary bird in the Psalms (cf. Ps 102:7), but a bird, as Saint Josemaria said, that God wants to raise up like an eagle who soars so high it seems to touch the sun. Only He knows what the right times and moments are for each person. God wants us to attain a “divinizing intimacy” with Him much more than we can ever imagine.

But the fact that only He knows the right time—as He knew the right time for the birth of John the Baptist—is no obstacle to our desiring at every moment a greater intimacy with Him. Nor does it prevent us

from constantly beseeching God for this, seeking what is higher, standing on our toes in the crowd to see Jesus who is passing by, or even climbing a tree if necessary, like Zacchaeus, We can imagine how often Elizabeth raised her heart to God and urged her husband to do likewise, until Zechariah finally heard the words: *your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John (Lk 1:13)*.

Elizabeth's trusting prayer was forged in the purifying furnace of adversity and time. Her life was drawing to a close, and God's will continued to be a mystery for her. Why hadn't He listened to her prayer over the course of so many years? Why hadn't He given her a child? Was even her husband's priesthood insufficient to obtain their request? In her obvious need, in her prayer's ineffectiveness and God's apparent silence, her faith, hope and charity had gradually been purified. For not only did she persevere; she let herself be transformed each day, accepting always and in everything God's will. Perhaps this identification with the Cross—which Elizabeth in some way anticipated—is the best way to prove the authenticity of our prayer: *nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done (Lk 22:42)*. Like the just men and women of the Old Covenant who accepted the will of the Lord, and Jesus who directed his whole life to the Father's will, we Christians too are called to do the same. It is always the right time to pray: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work (Jn 4:34)*.

Time for remembering

Perhaps Elizabeth herself had kept the flame of prayer lit in the elderly Zechariah, until an angel finally appeared to her husband. The Lord is giving a son to her, who was called barren, for with God nothing is impossible (*Lk 1:36*). Thus by accepting the essential work of purification that He carries out in those who let Him, Elizabeth came to exclaim in prayer what, after so many years, we continue repeating daily: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb (Lk 1:42)*.

Knowing that our path towards God brings with it a deep identification with the Cross is essential to realizing how what at times seems stagnation is in reality an advance.

Thus, instead of waiting for better times, or for a prayer more in conformity with our tastes, we will gratefully accept the nourishment that God wishes to give us. "If we look around, we realize that there

are so many offers of food which do not come from the Lord and which appear to be more satisfying. Some nourish themselves with money, others with success and vanity, others with power and pride. But the food that truly nourishes and satiates us is only that which the Lord gives us! The food the Lord offers us is different from other food, and perhaps it doesn't seem as flavorful to us as certain other dishes the world offers us. So, we dream of other dishes, like the Hebrews in the desert, who longed for the meat and onions they ate in Egypt, but forgot that they had eaten those meals at the table of slavery. In those moments of temptation, they had a memory, but a sick memory, a selective memory. A slave memory, not a free one.”[1]

Hence we should ask ourselves: *where do I wish to eat from?* What is my memory like? The memory of the Lord who saves me, or that of the flesh, the garlic and onions of slavery? What memory do I satisfy my soul with? Do I want to eat solid food or nourish myself with milk? (cf. *1 Cor 3:2*).

As happened with the Israelites, the temptation can arise in life to look back and long for the garlic and onions of Egypt. The people of Israel came to grow tired of the nourishing manna, which at first they saw as a blessing and a sign of protection (cf. *Num 21:5*). This can happen to us too, especially when we grow cold because we neglect the basic requirements for prayer: striving to be recollected, caring for the small details of piety, choosing the best time, putting our heart into it... Then, with more reason than ever, it is the moment to recall, to stir up in our memory, to seek in our prayer and spiritual reading the solid nourishment that Saint Paul speaks of, which broadens our horizons and raises our sight.

As though drawn by a magnet

To recall in our prayer all that God has done for us is much more than a simple memory. It is connected with the concept of “memorial” in the religion of Israel; that is, it is a salvific event that makes the work of redemption present. The “prayer of remembrance” that Pope Francis speaks of is a new dialogue about what is already known, a memory of past events that are perceived anew. We call to mind the key episodes in our relationship with God, and understand them and live them in a different way each time. This is perhaps what happened to Elizabeth when, aware of her recent maternity, she perceived in a new way God's plans for her.

With the passage of the years, at the pace of our dedication and our resistance, our Lord makes known to us his mysteries with new depth. He wants to raise us up very high, in a slowly ascending spiral as it were. It is true that we can fail to ascend and instead keep turning in horizontal circles; or we can even descend rapidly and go off on a tangent, abandoning the dialogue with our Creator. But He never gives up in his determination to carry out his will for us; his plans are of election and justification, of sanctification and glorification (cf. *Rom 8:28-30*).

Like many other spiritual authors, Saint Josemaria describes this process in a vivid and forceful way. The soul “is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet. One begins to love Jesus in a more effective way, with the sweet and gentle surprise of his encounter.”^[2] When we meditate on the mysteries of divine filiation, identification with Christ, love for the Father’s will, the eagerness to co-redeem... and we intuit that all of this is a gift of the Holy Spirit, we realize more clearly our debt to Him. And then gratitude grows impetuously within us. We become more aware of his motions, which are much more frequent than we think: “I am not talking about extraordinary situations. These are, they may very well be, ordinary happenings within our soul: a loving craziness which, without any fuss or extravagance, teaches us how to suffer and how to live.”^[3]

Then we are amazed to discover God’s immense love for us throughout our entire life: day after day, year after year—right from our mother’s womb! *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10)*. We are amazed to discover that our life has been guided by an enchanting and irresistible love. This is what happened to Elizabeth: *He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men (Lk 1:25)*. After years of darkness, she realized that she is loved infinitely by the One who is the Font of Love—in a way that is totally unmerited and that she can never grasp fully or repay. *Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Lk 1:43)*. How is it possible that God loves me so much? And also, with a certain shame and sorrow: How could I have failed to realize this before?

All sincere prayer prepares our heart to know how to ask (cf. *Rom 8:26*) and how to receive what we ask for. Putting love for God into every aspect of piety, whether great or small, facilitates this path: calling Jesus by his name, expressing our affection without any reserve... We need to insist and respond promptly to the little

touches of love. We need to “remember the beautiful, great things that God has done for each of us,” since a prayer of remembrance “does a lot of good for a Christian heart.”[4] As Saint Josemaria often recommended: “Let each of us meditate on what God has done for us.”[5]

God is all and that is enough

Elizabeth would so often have turned over in her memory all that God had done for her. How greatly he had transformed her life! And how bold she herself had become! From then on, all her behavior acquires a unique richness. She acquires greater clarity in following God’s plans: *Not so; he shall be called John (Lk 1:60)*; and she sees clearly the work of God in her cousin: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (Lk 1:45)*. Elizabeth now acts as one who speaks with God with her whole heart.

Likewise in our prayer there has to be love and struggle, praise and reparation, adoration and petition, affections and intellect. We need to be as daring as possible, because we now understand that it is not a question of fulfilling, but of loving with our whole heart. The practices of piety, the persons around us, the duties of each day are the same as before, but we no longer confront them in the same way. Our freedom of spirit grows, the “capacity and habitual attitude to act out of love, especially in the effort to follow what God is asking of us in each circumstance.”[6] What used to seem a heavy obligation now becomes an opportunity for an encounter with Love. Overcoming ourselves continues to require effort, but now this effort is filled with joy.

Faced with the infinity of God’s love and our poor human correspondence, our heart pours out a deep prayer of atonement and reparation. Sorrow on seeing our sins arises and spurs us to personal contrition. The conviction grows that “God is all, I am nothing. And that is enough.”[7] Thus we can rid ourselves of the many “shields” that hinder our contact with Him.

And a sincere and deep gratitude arises, which becomes adoration. “To adore God is to acknowledge Him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love.”[8] We need to employ all the keys of our heart. Then our prayer will be varied and enriching, and not run along the same tired channels. Both when our feelings respond and when they don’t,

because what we taste of God's goodness is still not God. He is always infinitely greater.

Rubén Herce

[1] Francis, Homily for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 19 June 2014.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 296

[3] *Ibid.*, no. 307.

[4] Francis, Homily in Santa Marta, 21 April 2016.

[5] *Friends of God*, no. 312.

[6] Monsignor Fernando Ocariz, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

[7] *Journal of a Soul: The Autobiography of Pope John XXIII*.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2096.

Fear Not, I Am With You

In our life of prayer, difficulties and moments of darkness may arise. But we should have the certainty that God is especially close to us then.

Six centuries before Christ's birth, the Jewish people were conquered by Babylon. Many of them were taken as prisoners to a foreign land. The old promises seemed to fade, and the temptation was strong to think it had all been a deception. In this context, prophetic writings appear about the future liberation of God's people—prophecies of great spiritual depth in which He makes clear his closeness to us at all times. "Fear not," the Lord repeats over and over again: *When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you (Is 43:1-2)*. And the prophetic words continue: *Fear not, for I am with you ... Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth (Is 43:5-6)*.

A constant refrain

In the New Testament, this call to trust in God's help in the midst of life's trials is even more clearly present. Sometimes He makes use of his angels, as with Zechariah, the husband of Saint Elizabeth, on the day he entered the sanctuary to offer incense. A couple already advanced in years, they had been unable to have any children. *Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer is heard (Lk 1:13)*, the angel tells him. God's messengers carried a similar announcement both to Saint Joseph when he was debating whether to receive Mary into his house (cf. *Mt 1:20*), and to the shepherds when they were frightened on realizing that God wanted them to be the first to adore the newborn Child (cf. *Lk 2:10*).

But the prophets and angels are not the only bearers of this message to not be afraid. When God himself became man, He personally continued repeating this refrain to those at his side. Jesus tells his followers not to fear those who can kill the body but not the soul: *Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Mt 10:30-31)*. He tells the ruler of the synagogue whose daughter has apparently just died: *Do not fear, only believe (Mk 5:36)*. He uses the same refrain to restore peace to his apostles when, caught in a storm on the lake at

night, they see Him walking towards them on the water (cf. *Jn* 6:19); and also to reassure Peter, John and James when they witness his glory on Tabor (cf. *Mt* 17:7).

One summer day in 1931, while celebrating Holy Mass, Saint Josemaría experienced a special divine intervention in his interior life. He was shown in a particularly clear way that men and women in the middle of the world would raise Christ's Cross at the summit of all human activities. "Ordinarily, when faced with something supernatural, I am afraid. Then comes the *ne timeas!*—fear not, it is I."^[1] This fear can arise not only when faced with these singular actions of divine grace. It can also occur, in various ways, in ordinary Christian life. For example, when God helps us to glimpse the greatness of his love and mercy, or when we understand a bit better the depth of his self-giving on the Cross and in the Eucharist, or when we sense the invitation to follow Him more closely, and we are unsettled about the consequences these graces can have for our lives.

Stronger than any doubt

Prayer, while here on earth, is a battle.^[2] The noblest desires of the human heart, including the longing to converse with our Creator, have been partially disfigured and distorted by sin. Our yearnings for friendship, love, beauty, truth, happiness and peace all entail the effort to overcome mistakes and to struggle against the resistance we all experience. And we encounter these limitations also in our relationship with God.

When starting to develop a life of piety, many people are frightened by the thought that they don't know how to pray, or are confused by the ups and downs and disorder that any effort can at first entail. One also begins to intuit that drawing close to our Lord means encountering the Cross, and that we shouldn't be surprised when suffering, loneliness and setbacks come.^[3] The fear may also arise, as the years go by, that our Lord will allow trials and dark times that demand more than we can give. Or we may become nervous on sensing that our prayer life could become routine, and we might have to settle for a mediocre relationship with God.

Those words "fear not," heard by Zechariah, Joseph, the shepherds, Peter, John, James and so many others, are also addressed to each of us throughout our life. They remind us that, in the life of grace, what is decisive is not what we do but what God does in us. "Prayer is the joint work of Christ and of each one of us."^[4] The main protagonist

in prayer is not we creatures, who strive to be attentive to God's action, but our Lord and his action in our soul. It is easy for us to understand this when God opens up new horizons for us, when He awakens feelings of gratitude or invites us to embark on the path of holiness. But that same trust should continue to be present when difficulties arise, when we sense our own smallness and darkness seems to be closing in around us.

“Fear not, it is I.” Just as Jesus understood the difficulties, confusions, fears and doubts of those trying to follow Him while on earth, so He continues to do so with each one of us. Our effort to live by his side is always less than his own effort to keep us close to Him. He is the one who is determined that we be happy, and He is strong enough to make this a reality, counting even on our frailties.

Mindsets that help us to pray

On our part, we need to do everything possible to learn how to pray. Although our ability to converse with others now seems something spontaneous and natural, in reality we learned how to speak—and discovered the basic requirements of dialogue—with the help of others, slowly over time. The same happens in our relationship with God. “Prayer needs to take root and grow in the soul little by little, like the tiny seed which later develops into a tree with many branches.”^[5] So we can understand why the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray (cf. *Lk* 12:1).

Key attitudes required for beginning a life of prayer are faith and trust, humility and sincerity. When we pray with a mistaken mindset (for example, when we don't want to face what is distancing us from God or when we aren't willing to give up our self-reliance), we run the risk of rendering our prayer sterile. It is true that often we aren't aware of these wrong attitudes. In addition, if we have a mistaken concept of what effective prayer means and seek results that we can see or feel (a mindset so common in today's culture), we might think that our relationship with our Lord is weak and, in the long run, become reluctant to find time to pray.

Among the deep attitudes needed for prayer, trust in God is especially important. Despite having good will, certain “gaps” in one's formation can lead more than a few people to live with a mistaken concept of God and of themselves. Some may view God as a stern judge, who demands perfect conduct from us; others may think that we should receive what we ask for in light of what we ourselves

consider good; or that our sins are an insurmountable barrier for a sincere relationship with God. Although it may seem obvious, we need to build our prayer life on the sure foundation of some core truths of the faith. For example, that God is a loving Father who rejoices in our effort to stay close to Him; that prayer is always effective because He heeds our petitions even if his ways are not ours; and that our offenses are actually a marvelous opportunity to draw closer to our Savior.

Giving God our difficulties

“You say that you don’t know how to pray? Put yourself in the presence of God, and once you have said, ‘Lord, I don’t know how to pray!’ rest assured that you have begun to do so.”^[6] As with the apostles, our Lord gradually teaches us to grow in these deep attitudes, as long as we don’t try to hide in an interior monologue or an anonymous prayer and refuse to face our real desires and worries.^[7]

And also like the apostles, our relationship with our Lord grows stronger amid our own failings. Lack of time, distractions, tiredness or routine are common difficulties in prayer, just as they also occur in our human relationships. Sometimes what is required is to look after order better and give priority to what is important over what is urgent. Other times it requires realism and refinement in adjusting the time dedicated to God, as a mother must do who cannot ignore her young children at any moment. We know that often “the required attentiveness is difficult to sustain.”^[8] Our attention is dispersed by worries, pending tasks, audio-visual stimuli. All of these distractions can easily stir up confusion in our inner world: the wounds of self-love, comparisons, dreams and fantasies, resentments or memories of all types. Despite knowing we are in God’s presence, we too may experience that “my affairs buzz around in my head at the most inopportune moments.”^[9]

As is only natural, we are also affected by physical fatigue: “Work tires you out and leaves you unable to pray.”^[10] We can find it consoling to recall that the apostles too were overcome by tiredness amid the glory of Tabor (*Lk* 9:32) and in the anguish of Gethsemane (*Lk* 22:45). Besides physical tiredness, a type of interior fatigue is common today arising from the anxiety to finish tasks, pressure at work and in social relationships, or uncertainty about the future. All this can make it difficult to pray calmly.

Our Lord understands very well—much better than we do—these difficulties. So even if they make us suffer because we would like to be more refined in our relationship with Him, often “it doesn’t matter if, despite your effort, you don’t manage to concentrate and be recollected.”^[11] We can even try to talk to Him about these concerns or memories that distract our imagination. God is interested in everything about us, no matter how trivial or insignificant it may seem. And often this will help us to view these persons or concerns in another way, with supernatural outlook, with charity. Like children in their mother’s arms, we can rest in Him, giving him our inner turmoil and taking refuge in his Heart to find peace.

An effort greater than ours

The most serious difficulties can often arise from “the wiles of the tempter, who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, from union with God.”^[12] Our Lord was tempted by the devil at the end of his forty days in the desert, when He felt hunger and weakness (*Mt* 4:3). The devil takes advantage of our distractions and sins to introduce distrust and despair in our soul, and turn us away from love. But as the Gospel constantly shows us, our weakness is actually a reason to draw closer to God. For “the more one advances in the interior life, the more clearly one sees one’s own faults.”^[13]

Under the pretext of humility, the devil can make us think we are unworthy of being close to God, that our desires for self-giving are insincere and rendered sterile by our hypocrisy and lack of determination. “Are you worried that your sins are so many that our Lord will not listen to you?”^[14] The awareness of our own unworthiness—so valuable in itself—can then cause us real but misguided suffering, far removed from true sorrow. Certainly lukewarmness and sin can be an obstacle to prayer, but not for this reason. God never stops loving us, however great our weaknesses may be. Our frailties don’t shock or surprise Him, and He never abandons his hope that we will achieve holiness. Even if we deliberately surrender to routine or lukewarmness, God will never stop waiting for us to return.

But the enemy of our soul can also tempt those who are ardently in love with God. “The devil knows that it’s more difficult for the soul to fall then, but he also knows that, if he can manage to get it to offend its Lord even in something small, he will be able to cast over its conscience the serious temptation of despair.”^[15] Then bitterness

and disappointment can come. To keep hope alive at all times, we need to be realistic and admit our smallness, realizing that the “ideal” of holiness we were aiming for—an unattainable perfection—was misguided. We need to grasp that the only important thing is to please God, and that what is really decisive is what He does in us through his powerful love, counting on our struggle and weakness.

Christian hope is not merely a human hope, based on our own strength. Hope is a gift that exceeds us, that the Holy Spirit infuses and constantly renews in us. In moments of discouragement, “the time has come to cry to him, ‘Remember, Lord, the promises you made, filling me with hope; they console me in my nothingness and fill my life with strength’ (Ps 118:49-50).”^[16] God is the One who has called us. And He is more determined than we are to bring us into union with Him, and has the power to achieve it.

As in all lasting relationships, our Lord leads us to an ever deeper understanding of who He is, and also to a better understanding of ourselves. Peter’s conversation with Jesus in their first meeting near the Jordan, is quite different from their dialogue, after Christ’s death and resurrection, along the shore of Lake Gennesaret. This also happens to us. We shouldn’t be surprised when our Lord leads us along divine paths that aren’t the ones we had expected. Sometimes He hides from us, even though we are looking for Him with sincere piety. But if we keep trusting in Him, over time we will discover that this darkness was filled with light. Christ himself was close beside us, lovingly telling us *ne timeas*, “fear not.” He is always close beside us, forging our heart to the measure of His.

Jon Borobia

[1] Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, *Una vida para Dios. Reflexiones en torno a la figura de Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Rialp, Madrid, 1992, pp. 163-164.

[2] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2573.

[3] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 301.

[4] Eugene Boylan, *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*.

[5] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 295.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 90.

[7] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 65.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2705.

- [9] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 670.
- [10] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 895.
- [11] Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 449.
- [12] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2725.
- [13] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 20.
- [14] *Ibid.*, no. 253.
- [15] *Ibid.*, no. 303.
- [16] *Ibid.*, no. 305.

How Close Jesus Is

Saint Josemaría spoke about the ‘quid divinum’, the “divine element” that we can discover around us and in everything we do. Then a new dimension opens up in which we share every corner of our life with God.

“Every day I see more clearly *how close Jesus is to me at every moment*. I could tell you about small, constant incidents that no longer even surprise me—I thank Him for them and look out for them all the time.”^[1] Blessed Guadalupe’s letter to Saint Josemaria from which this quote is taken must have caused him great joy. Although Guadalupe had only been in Opus Dei for six years, it testifies in its simplicity to how the life of piety she had undertaken was helping her attain a continuous presence of God, to make her ordinary life “a continuous prayer.”^[2]

We find this teaching clearly expressed in the Gospels. Jesus told his disciples that *they ought always to pray and not lose heart* (Lk 18:1). We often see Him address his Father throughout the day, such as at the tomb of Lazarus (cf. *Jn* 11:41-42) or when the Apostles return from their first mission filled with joy (cf. *Mt* 11:25-26). After rising from the dead, our Lord draws close to his disciples amid a wide variety of circumstances: when they are walking filled with sadness to Emmaus; when they are huddling out of fear in the Upper Room; when they go back to their work on the Sea of Galilee... And moments before returning to his Father, Jesus assures them: *I am with you always, to the close of the age* (*Mt* 28:20).

The early Christians were well aware of how close our Lord was to them. They learned to do everything for the glory of God, as Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: *If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s* (*Rom* 14:8-10; cf. *1 Cor* 10:31). In a world so fast-paced as ours, with so many things to do and so many deadlines, so much noise and rushing around, how can we too “get to know Him and to love Him, and to hold our conversation in heaven”?^[3]

For the right reason

Some conversations are silent. For example, two friends who are walking together, or lovers who are looking into each other’s eyes. Words aren’t needed to share what is in their hearts. But no

conversation can take place without paying attention to the person in front of us.

The dialogue with God to which we are called also requires paying attention to Him. It is an attention that is not exclusive, since we can discover God in many circumstances and activities that on the surface seem to have little to do with Him. Something similar happened with those stonemasons in the past who saw behind the stones they were cutting things as diverse as the servitude of manual labor, the food their family needed, or the splendor of the cathedral they were helping to build.

Saint Josemaría stressed the need “to exercise the theological and cardinal virtues in the world, and in this way to become contemplative souls.”^[4] It is not simply a matter of acting in the right way, but also of acting *for the right reason*, which in this case is to seek, love and serve God. This is what makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to be present in our soul and vivify it with the theological virtues. Thus, in the many different choices that we make each day, we can be attentive to God and keep our conversation with Him alive.

When going to work in the morning or heading to school; when taking the children to a doctor’s appointment or serving a client, we can ask ourselves: *What am I doing this for? Why am I trying to do it well?* The answer may vary and be more or less profound, but it can be a good opportunity to add: *Thank you, Lord, for counting on me. I would like to serve you with this activity, and help make your light and joy present in this world.* Then our work will truly be born of love; it will manifest love and be ordered to love.^[5]

Looking with God’s eyes

“There are so many problems one could list now that must be solved, but none of them can be solved unless God is put at the center, if God does not become once again visible to the world, if He does not become the determining factor in our lives and also enters the world in a decisive way through us.”^[6] Being contemplatives in the middle of the world means that God occupies the center of our existence, on which everything else hinges. In other words, He needs to be the treasure on which our heart is always set, because everything else interests us only if it unites us to Him (cf. *Mt 6:21*).

Thus our work will become prayer, because we will learn to see in it the task God has entrusted to us in order to care for and beautify his

creation, and to serve other men and women. Our family life will become prayer, because we will see in our spouse and children (or in our parents) a gift that God has given us in order to give ourselves to them, always reminding them of their own infinite value and helping them to grow. After all, that is exactly what Jesus would have done in Nazareth. How would He have looked upon his daily work in Joseph's workshop? What hidden meaning would He find in his everyday tasks? And in the many small occupations of his home life? And in everything He did together with his neighbors?

Looking at events with eyes of faith, discovering God's love in our lives, doesn't mean that adversities no longer affect us: fatigue, setbacks, a headache, the shabby treatment we may sometimes receive from others... No, that is not all going to disappear. But if we live centered on God, we will know how to unite all these realities to the Cross of Christ, where they find their true meaning in the service of the Redemption. A humiliation can be a prayer if it helps us unite ourselves to Jesus, and thus becomes an opportunity for purification. The same is true of an illness or a professional failure. In everything we can find God, who is the Lord of history. In everything we can have the assurance that God always opens up possibilities for the future, because *in everything God works for good with those who love him (Rom 8:28)*. Even a small setback like a traffic jam on the way home can become prayer, if we use it to place our time in God's hands... and to ask Him for those sharing in our own "bad luck."

To attain contemplation in ordinary life, we don't need to do anything extraordinary. "We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves."^[7] A faith-filled outlook transforms, through charity, our entire life into a continuous conversation with God. And it enables us to live with a deep realism, since it reveals to us the "fourth dimension" of the *quid divinum* – the "divine element" – present in every reality.

The boiler and the connection

"When a person is entirely caught up in their own world, with material things, with what they can do, with all that is feasible and brings them success ... then their capacity to perceive God weakens. The organ for seeing God deteriorates; it becomes unable to perceive and sense. It no longer perceives the Divine, because the

corresponding inner organ has withered, it has stopped developing.”[8] The reverse is also true: the ability to look at reality with eyes of faith can be strengthened. First of all, by asking for light, like the apostles: *Increase our faith!* (Lk 17:5). And also by pausing throughout the day to open our heart to God. Although our whole day can be a time for prayer, “our life of prayer should also be based on some moments that are dedicated exclusively to our conversation with God.”[9] To keep our attention habitually fixed on God, we need to dedicate some time *exclusively* to Him.

Saint Josemaría once explained this need by using the example of a boiler heating a house: “If we have a radiator, it means there will be heat. But the room will only heat up if the boiler is on. So we need both the radiator and the boiler for heat. Right? The times for prayer, well done, are the boiler. And we also need the radiator at every moment, in every room, in every place, in every job: the presence of God.”[10] We need both the radiators and the boiler. For God’s warmth to fill our entire day, we need to take time to kindle and feed the fire of his love in our heart.

Another image that can be helpful is that of the internet connection. People often try to ensure that their cell phones will connect when they are spending time in the country. And we may worry about the Wi-Fi connection on our cell phone, hoping that it will work as soon as it detects a known network. The simple fact that our phone is open to receiving a signal doesn’t mean that it will automatically do so. The signal reaches us when we are close enough to a network, and messages come in when someone sends them. We do our part by activating our phone and then we wait for messages to arrive.

Similarly, by dedicating specific times to prayer we activate the “Wi-Fi” of our soul. We say to God: *Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening* (1 Sam 3:9). Sometimes He will speak to us during those moments; other times we will recognize his voice in a thousand and one small things in our daily life. In any case, these times of prayer are a good opportunity to place in his hands everything we have done or are planning to do, although perhaps at the very moment of doing it we have not raised our eyes to God. Furthermore, dedicating time exclusively to God is the best proof that we truly have the desire to listen to Him.

Unlike what happens with the cell phone, opening our heart is not something that we can take for granted, that once it is done it will remain that way forever. We need to prepare our heart to listen to

God every day, because “it is in the present that we encounter Him, not yesterday nor tomorrow, but today: *O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts (Ps 95:7-8).*”^[11] If we keep up this daily commitment, God will grant us a wonderful facility to live day by day in his presence. At times it will be more difficult for us. But in any case, from those moments we will draw abundant strength and hope to joyfully continue our daily struggle, our daily effort to enkindle the fire, to open the “connection.”

In everything that happens to us

Saint Josemaría’s words in his “campus homily” are well-known: “Your daily encounter with Christ takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.”^[12] And he added: “He waits for us every day, in the laboratory, in the operating theatre, in the army barracks, in the university chair, in the factory, in the workshop, in the fields, in the home and in all the immense panorama of work.”^[13] In the many different activities that fill our daily life, God awaits us. He wants to hold a marvelous conversation with us so we can help Him carry out his mission in the world. But how can we understand this? And how can we live it?

God waits for us every day in order to converse calmly with us about what is happening in our life, just like a father or a mother who listens to their young child’s detailed account of the exciting events that day. Young children talk about what has happened at school almost the moment they get home. It seems as though they want to take full advantage of their wonderful ability to remember and express what they have just experienced, recounting even the smallest events in great detail. And their parents listen closely, and ask how this took place, and what that other child said...

Similarly, God is interested in everything that happens to us, with the difference that, unlike parents on this earth, He never tires of listening to us. He never gets used to our talking with Him. Rather we are the ones who sometimes get tired of addressing Him, of seeking out his presence. But if we keep striving to do so, “everything – people, events, tasks – offers us the opportunity and topic for a continuous conversation with our Lord.”^[14] We can share everything in our life, absolutely everything, with Him.

God awaits us in our work so that we continue carrying out the work of redemption in the world, helping to bring the world closer to Him. This isn't a question of adding on "pious activities" to our daily work, but of trying to lead towards God every sector of our world: the family, politics, culture, sports... God wants us to put him into every noble activity. To do so, we first need to discover his presence there. In the end, it is about seeing our work as a gift from God, as the specific way in which we carry out his mandate to care for and cultivate the world, announcing the good news that God loves us and offers us his love. From the moment of that discovery, we will strive to turn all our actions into service to others, with a love like that which Jesus shows us and gives us every day at Holy Mass. By living in this way, uniting all our actions to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, we help carry out effectively the mission that our Lord communicated to us before returning to his Father (cf. *Jn* 20:21).

In an interview shortly before the beatification of Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, the Prelate of Opus Dei was asked what her "formula for sanctity" had been. He summed it up with these words: "Holiness is not about becoming perfect by the end of one's life, like an angel, but rather about reaching the fullness of love. As Saint Josemaría said, it is the struggle to transform work, ordinary life, into an encounter with Christ and a way of serving others."^[15] The formula for sanctity then is to strive in everything we do to act with the same intention, with the same goal: to live with Christ in the middle of the world, bringing the world with Him to the Father. And this is possible because Jesus is very close to us.

Lucas Buch

[1] Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, Letter to Saint Josemaría, 1 April 1946.

[2] Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 March 1930.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 300.

[4] Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 8 December 1949, no. 26

[5] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

[6] Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 November 2006.

[7] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 14.

[8] Benedict XVI, Homily, 7 November 2006. He makes use here of an image borrowed from Saint Gregory the Great.

[9] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 119.

[10] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from his preaching, 28 September 1973.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2659.

[12] Saint Josemaría, “Passionately Loving the World,” in *Conversations*, no. 113.

[13] *Ibid.*, no. 114.

[14] Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 11 March 1940, no. 15.

[15] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Interview, 13 May 2019.

A Letter from Christ

“Jesus doesn’t want our prayer to be an isolated element in the midst of our other activities, with little power to transform our lives.”

Near the end of 57 AD, Saint Paul wrote a letter to the Christians living in Corinth. The Apostle realizes that some of the people there do not know him personally and may even have heard false rumors about him. So one of his main concerns in the letter is to make clear the characteristics that a bearer of Jesus’ gospel message should have.

In this context we find one of Paul’s most beautiful images. He wonders whether he needs to send a letter of recommendation so that the community may know more about him, in order to win their esteem anew. But filled with faith in God’s ability to transform hearts, he says that his true letter of recommendation is the heart of each of the Christians in Corinth. It is the Holy Spirit himself who writes in their souls, through the message Saint Paul has brought them: *you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor 3:3).*

How do we too become a “letter” from Christ? How does God transform our lives little by little? *We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18).* Saint Paul shows us here the “method” the Holy Spirit uses in transforming us. We become more and more like Christ with the passage of time, and reflect his glory as in a mirror. This is the authentic “dynamic” of our spiritual life.

To want what Jesus wants

Jesus doesn’t want our prayer to be an isolated element in the midst of our other activities, with little power to transform our lives. In the Sermon on the Mount He tells us: *Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you...’ (Mt 7:21-23).* These are hard words. It not enough to have followed Him, nor even

to have done great deeds in Christ's name. Something much deeper is required: learning to conform our lives to God's will.

The meaning of these words of our Lord shouldn't be hard for us to understand. Since prayer is the path and expression of a relationship of friendship, it should be marked by a characteristic the classical authors saw as proper to the love between friends: *idem velle, idem nolle*, to want the same things and to reject the same things. Prayer changes our lives because it brings us into harmony with the longings of the Heart of Christ, with his zeal for souls and his eagerness to please his heavenly Father. Otherwise, if our prayer failed to lead us towards the likeness of Christ's glory that Saint Paul speaks of, without realizing it could become merely a form of "self-help therapy," sought for the peace and solitude it provides. In that case, prayer would not fulfill its principal aim: to transform our life through an authentic friendship with Christ.

Hence the criterion for authentic prayer will never be merely the strong feelings and spiritual enjoyment it provides, or the number of resolutions we make or degree of concentration we attain. Rather our prayer should be evaluated in light of its power to transform our lives—how it helps us to overcome little by little the inconsistencies between what we believe and what, in the end, we actually do in our daily life.

An identification attained over time

Saint Paul himself, who received the grace of encountering the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, tells us that the first Christians were very aware that the goal of their prayer was identification with Christ. He exhorted the Christians in Philippi to have the same sentiments as Christ Jesus (cf. *Phil* 2:5), and he assured those at Corinth that "we have the mind of Christ" (*1 Cor* 2:16).

To have the same "sentiments" and the same "mind" as the Son of God incarnate is something we could never attain by our own efforts alone. It is the result, certainly, of our struggle to act as Jesus would have acted in seeking the good, but always in the context of the communion proper to the love of friendship. Thus, through grace, we open ourselves to being assimilated to Christ's way of being.

Since it is the result of a relationship of friendship, identification with Christ, the fruit of prayer, grows over time. Saint Josemaria said that God leads souls along an "inclined plane," transforming their hearts little by little and giving them the will and strength to

correspond ever more fully to his love. “In this adventure of love we should not be depressed by our falls, not even by serious falls, if we go to God in the sacrament of penance contrite and resolved to improve. A Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behavior reports. Jesus Christ our Lord was moved as much by Peter’s repentance after his fall as by John’s innocence and faithfulness. Jesus understands our weakness and draw us to himself on an inclined plane. He wants us to make an effort to climb a little each day.”^[1]

We are filled with hope when we realize that our miseries—even those that deeply humiliate us—are not an insurmountable obstacle to growing in God’s love and identifying ourselves ever more fully with Him. And we are also filled with astonishment: how is it possible for Saint Paul to exclaim so forcefully that nothing *will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8:39)?

Only in prayer do we come to understand that the truth of these words is grounded on God’s initiative. He is the one who first seeks us out and draws us to Himself. At the end of his life, the Apostle John was moved to exclaim: *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins* (1 Jn 4:10). In our prayer, therefore, we become aware that we are in God’s loving hands and that our love—always imperfect—is a response to God’s love, which precedes and accompanies us. By contemplating that love we are spurred to travel along the inclined plane of an ever deeper identification with Christ.

Always growing in love

Correspondence to the love of God that we seek in prayer is shown in the desire to improve, in the strong yearning to separate ourselves from whatever separates us from Christ. Perhaps with some frequency we have been encouraged to examine our life in our prayer, to ask for light to see whatever is unsuited to our condition as children of God. We have learned to formulate specific resolutions—counting always on the help of grace—to try to please our Lord, overcoming aspects in our lives that separate us, even if only slightly, from Him.

We are well aware that this examination and those resolutions are not meant to be the means to win out in the spiritual life on our own, but are a truly human way of loving. Whoever wishes to always

please the person they love strives to be the best person they can be. Knowing that God loves us as we are, we want to love Him as He deserves to be loved. Therefore we strive, with a healthy tension, to struggle a little each day. We don't want to fall into the temptation (which is so easy to do!) of justifying our weaknesses, forgetting that with His death and resurrection Christ has won for us all the grace needed to conquer our sins.[2]

When Saint Josemaria was still a young priest, many bishops asked him to preach days of recollection and retreats for priests. Some people accused him of preaching "retreats about life and not death." [3] They were accustomed to hearing reflections about their eternal destiny and were surprised when Saint Josemaria also spoke at length about how to live their own vocation consistently in daily life.

This reflects an important characteristic of Opus Dei's mission: to teach people to "materialize" their spiritual life, preventing prayer from becoming an independent and isolated dimension in their lives. As Saint Josemaria himself said, "I wanted to keep them from the temptation, so common then and now, of living a kind of double life. On one side, an interior life, a life of relation with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life, full of small earthly realities." [4]

Even though in our times of prayer we don't always tangibly experience God's love (although certainly sometimes we do), in reality He is always present there and acting in our soul. If we strive to respond to His love by struggling in the points our Lord shows us, our life—our thoughts, desires, intentions, deeds—will little by little be transformed. We will come to be for others *ipse Christ*, "Christ who is passing by" for them.

Loving Him in our neighbor

On one occasion, a Scribe asked Jesus: *Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?* And we remember very well the reply: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets (Mt 22:36-40).* In these succinct words, Jesus makes clear the unbreakable union between love for God and love for neighbor. After his resurrection, before ascending to Heaven, our

Lord wanted to insist again on this teaching. When He meets Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus responds to the promises of love from the one who would be the first Pope with the forceful words: *Feed my sheep* (cf. *Jn* 21:15-17).

The ultimate reason for the union of both commandments, and therefore for the need to learn to love Christ in others, is set forth by Jesus himself in his powerful description of the final judgment. There we see the deep union that exists between Himself and each person: *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink* (*Mt* 25:35). As Vatican II teaches: “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every person.”^[5] It is impossible to love Jesus without loving our neighbor as well, without learning to love Him *in* our neighbor.

When it is authentic, prayer leads us to be concerned about others, especially those closest to us and those who are suffering the most. It leads us to try to get along with everyone through small deeds of service, and to make room in our hearts even for those who don’t think as we do. In prayer we find the strength to forgive, and the light to see how to love others in an ever deeper and more practical way, overcoming our selfishness and comfort-seeking and being ready to complicate our lives in a holy way. As Pope Francis reminds us, “the best way to discern if our prayer is authentic is to judge to what extent our life is being transformed in the light of mercy.”^[6]

The goal of our life of prayer is to acquire a compassionate and merciful heart like that of Jesus—a perfect image of the heart of the Father. A heart that is an unmistakable sign of our identification with Christ.

Nicolás Álvarez de las Asturias

[1] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.

[2] Cf. Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, nos. 102-103.

[3] Cf. Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. II, pp. 471-472.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 114.

[5] Vatican Council II, Pastoral const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

[6] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 105.

Souls of Liturgical Prayer

Saint Josemaría found in the words and actions of the Church's liturgy an abundant source for personal prayer.

In April 1936 social tensions are increasing in Spain. But the DYA Academy is trying to keep up its peaceful atmosphere of study. Amid these strange days, a resident writes his parents telling them that the day before, led by their teacher, they had practiced some liturgical songs in an atmosphere he remembers as being very joyful.^[1] We might wonder why 30 university students were spending Sunday night practicing songs for the liturgy.

The answer can be found in Saint Josemaría's decision, a few months earlier, to include in the Academy's plan of formation some classes on Gregorian chant. Although as a young parish priest in Perdiguera, Saint Josemaría regularly celebrated a sung Mass, that decision didn't reflect a personal interest. Nor was it due to a scholarly interest, a result of the development of the Liturgical Movement in Spain. Rather that decision was the result of his pastoral experience, motivated only by the desire to help those young people become "souls of prayer."

It is interesting to recall that the three publications Saint Josemaría was working on during those years were all aimed at facilitating dialogue with God. The first focused on personal meditation, the second fostered popular piety, while the third (which never saw the light of day) was meant to encourage readers to immerse themselves in liturgical prayer. The fruit of the first initiative was *Consideraciones espirituales*, which would later give rise to his well-known work *The Way*. The second initiative resulted in his short work *Holy Rosary*, while the third was to be entitled *Devociones litúrgicas [Liturgical Devotions]*. Although the publication of this last work was announced for 1939, for various reasons it never came to fruition. However the prologue, prepared by Bishop Felix Bilbao of Tortosa, is still preserved. Entitled *Pray and pray well!*, this unpublished text encourages readers to deepen in their love for the Church's liturgy, led by the author of the book, in order to attain an "effective, warm and solid prayer that unites them intimately with God."^[2]

Giving voice to the Church's prayer

For Saint Josemaría, the liturgy was not simply a set of rules aimed at giving solemnity to certain ceremonies. He suffered when the way of celebrating the sacraments and other liturgical actions was not truly at the service of the people's encounter with God and with the other members of the Church. Once, after attending a liturgical celebration, he wrote: "Lots of clergy: the Archbishop, the chapter of canons, the curates, cantors, servers and acolytes... Magnificent ornaments: silk, gold, silver, precious stones, lace and velvet... Music, choir, art... And... without people! Splendid rites, without people."^[3]

His concern for the *people* in the liturgy was deeply theological. In liturgical actions, the Trinity interacts with the entire Church and not just with one of its parts. It is not by chance that most of the reflections Saint Josemaría dedicated in *The Way* to the liturgy are found in the chapter entitled *The Church*. For the founder of Opus Dei, the liturgy is a privileged place to experience the ecclesial dimension of Christian prayer. There we sense that we are all united in addressing God. Liturgical prayer, always personal, opens up horizons that go beyond individual circumstances. If in personal meditation we are the speaking subject, in the liturgy the subject is the entire Church. If in our dialogue alone with God it is we who speak as members of the Church, in liturgical prayer it is the Church who speaks through us.

Thus learning to say the *we* of liturgical prayers is a great school to complement the various dimensions of our relationship with God. There we discover that we are a member of this great family that is the Church. Saint Josemaría advised us: "Your prayer should be liturgical. I would like to see you using the psalms and prayers from the missal, rather than private prayers of your own choice."^[4]

Learning to pray liturgically requires the humility to receive from others the words that we will say. It also requires a recollected heart that recognizes and values the relationships uniting all Christians. Hence it can be helpful to remember that we are praying together with those who are with us at that moment and also with those who are absent; with Christians from our own country, from neighboring countries, from the whole world... We are also united in our prayer with those who have gone before us and are being purified or are already enjoying the glory of heaven. Liturgical prayer is not an anonymous formula; it is "filled with faces and names."^[5] We unite ourselves with all those who are part of our life and who, like us, live

“in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” sharing in the life of the Trinity.

Embodying the Church’s prayer

We know that, for Saint Josemaría, the sanctification of work did not mean simply saying some prayers *during* our work, but above all turning into prayer the very action of doing our work for the glory of God, striving to do it as well as possible, knowing that our Heavenly Father is watching us with love. Similarly, liturgical prayer does not mean primarily saying prayers *during* the liturgical actions, but rather carrying out these ritual actions *digne, attente ac devote*, with the dignity, attention and devotion they deserve, being present in what is done. They are not just occasions for making individual acts of faith, hope and love, but actions *through which* the entire Church expresses its faith, hope and love.

Saint Josemaría gave great importance to *learning how to be present* in the various acts of worship, to the “good manners” of piety. The dignity liturgical prayer requires is closely connected with one’s bodily comportment, since what we want to carry out is to a certain extent first expressed there. The celebration of Holy Mass, going to Confession, Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, etc., involve various bodily actions, since they are prayer in action. Liturgical prayer, therefore, also involves praying with our body. Moreover, it means learning to embody, here and now, the prayer of the Church. And although often it is the priest who has the mission of lending his voice and hands to Christ the Head, it is the assembly that gives voice and visibility to the entire Mystical Body of Christ. The realization that the prayer of the saints and the souls in purgatory is seen and heard through us can encourage us to care for the “good manners” of piety.

Besides dignity, liturgical prayer requires that it be carried out attentively. Hence, in addition to concentrating on the words we are saying, it is important to “put ourselves into” the moment we are living in the deepest possible way. We need to clearly realize who we are with, and why and for what purpose. This clear awareness requires a previous formation, which can always be improved. Saint Josemaría said: “Slowly. Consider what you are saying, to whom it is being said and by whom. For that hurried talk, without time for reflection, is just empty noise. And with Saint Teresa, I will tell you that, however much you move your lips, I do not call it prayer.”^[6]

Encounter with each Person of the Trinity

Despite the inevitable distractions due to our fragility, in liturgical prayer we participate in the mysterious but real encounter of the whole Church with the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Therefore our prayer is enriched by learning to distinguish when we are addressing the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The liturgy usually places us face to face with God the Father, although He is often addressed simply as “God” or “Lord.” He is the origin of all the blessings the Trinity bestows on the world, and to Him return, through his Son, all the praises that creatures are capable of expressing.

What we say to the Father we say *through* Jesus, who is not so much *in front of* us as *with* us. The Word has become incarnate to bring us to the Father. And therefore discovering his presence at our side, as a brother who knows and is not ashamed of our weakness, fills us with consolation and daring. Moreover liturgical prayer, as the public prayer of the Church, is born from the prayer of Jesus. Not only is it a continuation of his prayer when He was on this earth, but it is an expression, today and now, of his intercession for us in heaven (cf. *Heb 7:25*). Sometimes we also address prayers directly to Jesus, seeing the Son as our Saviour. Hence liturgical prayer is a marvelous way to be in harmony with Christ’s priestly heart.

The prayer addressed to the Father through the Son is carried out in the Holy Spirit. Being aware in liturgical prayer of the presence of the third Person of the Trinity is a great gift from God. It is easy for us to overlook the “Great Unknown,” as Saint Josemaría sometimes would call Him, like the light or air around us. However we know that without light we would be unable to see and without air we couldn’t breathe. The Holy Spirit acts in a similar way in the liturgical dialogue. Although we usually don’t address Him directly, we know that He dwells in us and, with unspeakable groanings, moves us to address the Father with the words Jesus taught us. Hence his action is manifested indirectly. More than in the words we say, or to whom we say them, the Spirit manifests Himself in how we say them. He is present in the sighs that become a song and in the silences that allow God to work in our heart.

Just as the presence of the wind is perceived by the objects it sets in motion, so we can glimpse the presence of the Holy Spirit when we experience the effects of his action. For example, one of the first effects of his action is the awareness that we are praying as daughters

and sons of God in the Church. We also experience his action when He makes the Word of God resonate within us not as a human word but as the Word of the Father addressed to each of us. Above all, the Holy Spirit is manifested in the tenderness and generosity with which the Father and the Son pour themselves out on each of us when in the liturgical celebration they forgive us, enlighten us, strengthen us, or bestow on us a special gift.

Finally, the action of the Holy Spirit is so intimate and necessary that it is He who makes it possible for the liturgical action to be true *contemplation* of the Trinity. He enables us to see the entire Church and Jesus himself present, when our senses tell us otherwise. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us that the soul of liturgical prayer is not the formal fulfillment of a series of words or external movements, but the love with which we sincerely strive to serve and let ourselves be served. The Holy Spirit helps us to share in his personal mystery when we learn to rejoice in a God who lowers Himself to serve us, so that later we can serve others.

I have lived the Gospel

It shouldn't surprise us that one of the most frequently used terms in Scripture and Tradition to refer to liturgical actions is "service." Discovering this dimension of service in liturgical prayer has many consequences for our interior life. Not only because those who serve out of love do not put themselves at the center, but also because seeing the liturgy as service is the key to transforming it into life. Although it might seem paradoxical, in many liturgical prayers we find the exhortation to *imitate* in our ordinary life what we have just celebrated. This invitation doesn't mean we should extend liturgical language to our family and professional relationships. Rather it means turning into a "program" for our own life what the rite has enabled us to contemplate and live.[7] That is why Saint Josemaría, when contemplating God's action in his daily life, sometimes exclaimed: "Truly, I have lived the Gospel of the day." [8]

To *live* the liturgy of the day and thus transform our daily life into service, into a "Mass" that lasts twenty-four hours, we need to reflect on our personal circumstances in the light of what we have celebrated. Saint Josemaría used to take notes of the words or expressions that struck him during the celebration of Mass or in the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. So much so that one day he wrote: "I will not make a note of any psalm, since I would have to note all of them, as there is nothing but marvels in them, which the

soul sees when God is being served.”[9] It is true that liturgical prayer is a source of personal prayer, but it is equally true that without careful reflection it is very difficult to *personally assimilate* the riches of liturgical prayer.

It is in the silence of our personal prayer that the words of the liturgy take on an intimate and personal force for us. Mary’s example is very enlightening here. Our Lady teaches us that, in order to put into action the *fiat*, the “let it be done unto me” of the liturgy, to transform it into service, we need to dedicate time to personally pondering all these things in our heart (cf. *Lk 2:19*).

Juan Rego

[1] Cf. “Un estudiante en la Residencia DYA. Cartas de Emiliano Amann a su familia (1935-1936),” in *Studia et Documenta*, vol. 2, 2008, p. 343.

[2] General Archive of the Prelature, 77-5-3.

[3] *Intimate notes*, no. 1590, 26 October 1938; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 528, p. 695.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 86.

[5] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 274.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 85.

[7] Cf. Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 88.

[8] *Notebook IV*, no. 416, 26 November 1931; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 86, p. 280.

[9] *Notebook V*, no. 681, 3 April 1932; quoted in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*, Scepter (U.K.), commentary on no. 86, p. 279.

One doesn't reason; one looks!

Contemplative prayer develops in us a new way of looking at everything that happens around us, sharing in God's vision of the world.

During the first Christian centuries, the third most important city in the world from the political and economic point of view was Antioch. It was there that the term "Christians" was first used for Jesus' followers (cf. *Acts* 11:26). Its third bishop was Saint Ignatius. After being condemned to death during the reign of Trajan, he was taken by land to the coast of Seleucia (now in southern Turkey) and from there sent by sea to Rome. The ship stopped on the way at various ports. In each place Ignatius received Christians from the area and took advantage of the opportunity to send letters to the communities of Jesus' followers: "I am writing to all the churches, to let everyone know that I am dying for God of my own free will."^[1] Bishop Saint Ignatius was well aware that he would meet his death through the savage animals in the Flavian Amphitheater – now the Roman Coliseum. So he constantly asked people to pray that his courage would hold up. But several times he opens his heart to us and lets us look into the depths of his soul: "Earthly longings have been crucified and in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'."^[2]

A plant with roots in heaven

That inner murmur in Saint Ignatius of Antioch's heart – Come to the Father! – was a supernatural maturation of the natural desire that we all have for union with God. Already the ancient Greek philosophers had found in the depths of our being a longing for the divine, a hunger for our true homeland, as though we were "not an earthly but a heavenly plant."^[3] Benedict XVI, in his catechesis on prayer, stressed that all cultures down through the ages have borne witness to mankind's desire for God: "All men and women bear within a thirst for the infinite, a longing for eternity, a quest for beauty, a desire for love, a need for light and for truth which impel them towards the Absolute ... Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians in history, defines prayer as 'an expression of man's desire for God.' This attraction to God, which God himself has placed in us, is the soul of prayer."^[4]

One of the most common problems of our day and age is “inner fragmentation,” even though people are sometimes unaware of it. Often we find it difficult to focus our attention on a single task. We see diverse aspects in our life that fail to come together harmoniously. We find it hard to unite our past and our future, and don’t see any way to join together so many different ideas and feelings in our life. We may even have to confront over time multiple “versions” of ourselves. We yearn for a unity in our life that can’t be “manufactured” like so many other things are today.

At the beginning of our millennium Saint John Paul II said: “Is it not one of the signs of the times’ that in today’s world, despite widespread secularization, there is *a widespread demand for spirituality*, a demand which expresses itself in large part as *a renewed need for prayer?*”^[5] We see today many initiatives, also on the internet, aimed at strengthening our capacity for exterior and interior silence, our powers of listening and concentrating, in order to produce harmony between our body and our spirit. All this can, of course, provide a certain natural calm. But Christian prayer offers us a tranquility that is not only a transitory equilibrium, but a unified perception of life arising from an intimate relationship with God.

Prayer is a gift that develops in us a new, unified vision of reality. “It is an inner attitude before being a series of practices and formulas, a manner of being in God’s presence before performing acts of worship or speaking words.”^[6] Obviously this “inner attitude,” this “manner of being in God’s presence” does not come about overnight, nor does it come about without properly preparing ourselves so that God can give it to us; it is a gift, but also a task.

Seeing eternity with the eyes of the soul

In his homily *Towards Holiness*, preached in October 1967, Saint Josemaría briefly describes the path of a life of prayer.^[7] Speaking from his own experience, he says that we begin to pray with simple, short prayers, often learned by heart in our childhood. Over time our friendship with Jesus strengthens, and we learn to enter into his Passion, Death and Resurrection, and strive to ground our life on his example and teachings. Our heart begins to sense the need to distinguish and draw close to each of the three divine Persons. And the moment arrives, the founder of Opus Dei assures us, when we begin to lead a contemplative life: “All day long, without doing anything strange, we move in this abundant, clear spring of fresh waters that leap up to eternal life. Words are not needed, because the

tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One doesn't reason; one looks!"[8]

Wherever we may find ourselves on this path of prayer, we can ask ourselves: what relationship does my prayer have with my hope for eternal life? What does it mean to say that prayer becomes a matter of "looking" rather than of words?

Through our prayer we hope to come to see the created world, here and now, as God sees it. With his help, we grasp what is happening around us with a "*simple intuition*" that stems from love.[9] This is the greatest fruit of prayer, and transforms our entire life. Prayer doesn't just help us to change certain attitudes or overcome our defects. Christian prayer is directed, above all, to uniting ourselves with God, and thus to gradually learning to look at the world in the way He does, beginning already here on earth. God wants to heal our vision, our way of looking at the world and the people around us, with his own light. The loving relationship with God that we attain through Jesus is not simply something that we *do*, but rather it changes who *we are*.

By developing with God's help this supernatural "way of looking," we learn to uncover the good hidden in every created reality, even where it seems to be absent. For nothing escapes God's loving plan, which is always stronger than any evil. And thus we learn to value the freedom of others in a new way, to let go of the temptation to decide for them, as though the destiny of everything depended on our own actions. We also come to understand better that God's action has its own ways and times, which we neither should nor can control. Contemplative prayer helps us to not become obsessed with wanting to solve every problem immediately, and to discover more readily the light present in everything that happens around us, also in the wounds and weaknesses of our world.

Seeing with God's eyes frees us from a "violent" relationship with other people, since we want to help further in them his omnipotent love, rather than hinder it with our clumsy interventions. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that "contemplation will be perfect in the future life, when we see God face to face (*1 Cor* 13:12), making us perfectly happy." [10] The power of prayer is that we can share in this vision of God already here on earth, even if it is always "as in a mirror" (*1 Cor* 13:12).

In 1972, during a get-together in Portugal, someone asked Saint Josemaría how to confront daily problems in a Christian way. Among other things, the founder of Opus Dei pointed out that the life of prayer helps to look at things in a new way: “We acquire a different standard; we see things with the eyes of a soul that is thinking about eternity and God’s love, which is also eternal.”^[11] He often said that “happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth.”^[12] A Byzantine theologian of the fourteenth century said something similar: “Prayer not only prepares us for the true Life; we are enabled to live that Life and act in accord with it already now.”^[13]

Calmness. Peace. Intense life.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, when it turns to the topic of prayer, surprises us with a question that can serve as a permanent examination of conscience: “When we pray, do we speak from the height of our pride and will, or ‘out of the depths’ (*Ps* 130:1) of a humble and contrite heart?” This is the key attitude needed for prayer: “humility is the foundation of prayer.”^[14]

The “looking towards eternity” that contemplative prayer entails can only grow in the fertile ground of humility, in a climate of openness to God’s solutions, instead of our own. Sometimes an excessive confidence in our own intelligence and planning can lead, in practice, to living almost as though God didn’t exist. We always need to foster a new humility before people and events, which is the fertile soil for God’s action. Pope Francis, in his catechesis on prayer, pointed to the experience of King David: “The world that presents itself before his eyes is not a silent scene. His look captures, behind the development of things, a greater mystery. That is exactly where prayer arises: from the conviction that life is not something that slips by us without meaning, but an astonishing mystery.”^[15]

Then, by sharing in the “way of looking” that contemplation offers us in the middle of the world, we will quench, to the extent possible in this life, our longings for unity: with God, with others, within ourselves. And we will be surprised to find ourselves working tirelessly for the good of the Church and other men and women, seeing our talents flourish “like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season” (*Ps* 1:3). We will have a foretaste of the harmony to which we are destined in eternity, and of the peace that the world can never provide: “Hurrying, hurrying! Working, working! Feverish activity, anxiety to be up and doing ... It is because

in their work they think only of ‘today;’ their vision is limited to what is ‘present.’ You must see things with the eyes of eternity, ‘keeping present’ what has passed and what is yet to come. Calmness. Peace. Intense life within you.”[16]

Andres Cardenas Matute

[1] Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, no. 4.

[2] Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, no. 7.

[3] Plato, *Timaeus*, 90a.

[4] Benedict XVI, Audience, 11 May 2011.

[5] Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* , no. 33.

[6] Benedict XVI, Audience, 11 May 2011.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 306.

[8] *Ibid.*, no. 307.

[9] Saint Thomas Aquinas defines contemplation as an intuitive grasp of the truth that stems from love: “*simplex intuitus veritatis ex caritate procedens;*” see *S. Th.* II-II, q.180, a.3, ad 1 and *In III Sent.*, d.35, q.1, a.2, sol.1. In the recent book *Holiness Through Work* (edited by Maria Ferrari: Scepter Publishers), Monsignor Fernando Ocariz discusses this definition of contemplation in the context of the sanctification of work.

[10] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 180, a. 4.

[11] Saint Josemaria, Notes from a family get-together, 4 November 1972.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 1005.

[13] Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*.

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

[15] Pope Francis, Audience, 24 June 2020.

[16] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 837.