

## TO KNOW HIM AND TO KNOW YOURSELF (IX): Fear Not, I Am With You

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."<sup>1</sup> This fear can arise not only when faced with these singular actions of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2573.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 301.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Boylan, *Difficulties in Mental Prayer*.

## **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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 295.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 90.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 65.

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

As is only natural, we are also affected by physical fatigue: “Work tires you out and leaves you unable to pray.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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

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<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2705.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 670.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 895.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 449.

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2725.

<sup>13</sup> Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 20.

you? ”<sup>14</sup> 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 than, 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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).”<sup>16</sup> 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*

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 253.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 303.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 305.