

A Life of Prayer



Given by St. Josemaria Escriva.

Whenever we feel in our hearts a desire to improve, a desire to respond more generously to Our Lord, and we look for something to guide us, a north star to guide our lives as Christians, the Holy Spirit will remind us of the words of the Gospel that we 'ought to pray continually and never be discouraged'. Prayer is the foundation of any supernatural endeavour. With prayer we are all powerful; without it, if we were to neglect it, we would accomplish nothing.

I would like us, in our meditation today, to make up our minds once and for all that we need to aspire to become contemplative souls, in the street, in the midst of our work, by maintaining a constant conversation with our God and not breaking it off at any time of the day. If we really want to be loyal followers of our Master, this is the only way.

Let us turn our gaze to Jesus Christ, who is our model, the mirror in which we should see ourselves. How does he act, even in his outward behaviour, in the great moments of his life? What does the holy Gospel tell us about him? I am moved by Our Lord's habitual attitude of prayer, the way he turns to the Father before beginning his public life, retiring to the desert for forty days and forty nights, to pray.

Forgive me if I insist, but it is very important to note carefully what the Messiah did, because he came to show us the path that leads to the Father. With Our Lord we will discover how to give a supernatural dimension to all our actions, even those that seem least important. We will learn to live every moment of our lives with a lively awareness of eternity, and we will understand more deeply man's need for periods of intimate conversation with his God, so as to get to know him, to invoke him, to praise him, to break out into acts of thanksgiving, to listen to him or, quite simply, to be with him.

Many years ago, as I reflected upon Our Lord's way of doing things, I came to the conclusion that the apostolate, of whatever kind it be, must be an overflow of the interior life. This is why the passage which relates how Christ decided to choose the first twelve seems to me to be so natural and at the same time so supernatural. St Luke tells us that before choosing them 'he spent the whole night in prayer'. Think also of the events at Bethany. Before he raises Lazarus from the dead, after having wept over his friend, he lifts his eyes to heaven and says, 'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.' This is his message for us: if we wish to help others, if we really wish to encourage them to discover the true meaning of their life on earth, we must base everything on prayer.

There are so many Gospel scenes where Jesus talks to his Father that we cannot stop to consider them all. But I do feel we must pause to consider the intense hours preceding his Passion and Death, when Christ prepares himself to carry out the Sacrifice that will bring us back once more to God's Love. In the intimacy of the Upper Room the Heart of Jesus overflows with love; he turns to the Father in prayer, announces the coming of the Holy Spirit, and encourages his disciples to maintain the fervour of their charity and their faith.

Our Redeemer's mood of fervent recollection continues in the Garden of Gethsemani, as he perceives that his Passion is about to begin, with all its humiliation and suffering close at hand, the harsh Cross on which criminals are hanged and which he has longed for so ardently. 'Father, if it pleases thee, take away this chalice from before me.' And immediately he adds, 'Yet not my will but thine be done.' Later, nailed to the Cross, alone, with his arms opened wide in a gesture of an eternal priest, he continues his dialogue with his Father, 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit.'

Let us also contemplate his blessed Mother, who is our Mother too. We find her on Calvary, at the foot of the Cross, praying. This is nothing new for Mary. She has always acted like this, as she fulfilled her duties and looked after her home. As she went about the things of this earth she kept her attention on God. Christ, who is perfectus Deus, perfectus homo, wanted us also to have the example of his Mother, the most perfect of creatures, she who is full of grace, to strengthen our desire to lift our eyes up to the love of God at every moment. Remember the scene at the Annunciation? The Archangel comes down bearing a divine message — the announcement that Mary is to be the Mother of God — and he finds her withdrawn in prayer. When Gabriel greets her, she is totally absorbed in God. 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.' A few days later she breaks out into the joy of the Magnificat, a Marian hymn which the Holy Spirit has transmitted to us through the loving faithfulness of St Luke. It reveals Mary's constant and intimate conversation with God.

Our Mother had meditated deep and long on the words of the holy men and women of the Old Testament who awaited the Saviour, and on the events that they had taken part in. She must have marvelled at all the great things that God, in his boundless mercy, had done for his people, who were so often ungrateful. As she considers the tenderness shown time after time by God towards his people, Mary's immaculate Heart breaks out in loving words, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour, for he has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid.' The early Christians, children of this good Mother, learned from her; we can, and we ought to do likewise.

The Acts of the Apostles describe a scene I love to contemplate because it gives us a clear, abiding example of prayer: 'They persevered all of them in the apostles' teaching, in their fellowship in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.' We are told this time and again in the passage narrating the lives of the first followers of Christ. 'All these, with one mind, gave themselves up to prayer.' Again when Peter was imprisoned because he had boldly preached the truth, they decide to pray. 'There was a continual stream of prayer going up to God from the Church on his behalf.'

Prayer was then, as it is today, the only weapon, the most powerful means, for winning the battles of our interior struggle. 'Is one of you sad?' asks St James. 'Let him pray.' St Paul sums it up by saying, 'Pray without ceasing.' Never get tired of praying.

How should we pray? I would go as far as to say, without fear of being mistaken, that there are many, countless, ways of praying. But I would like all of us to pray genuinely, as God's children, not gabbling away like hypocrites who will hear from Jesus' lips 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord!" shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.' People who live by hypocrisy can perhaps achieve 'the sound of prayer', says St Augustine, 'but they cannot possess its voice, because there is no life in them'. They lack the desire to fulfil the Father's Will. When we cry 'Lord!' we must do so with an effective desire to put into practice the inspirations the Holy Spirit awakens in our soul.

We must strive to eliminate any shadow of deceit on our part. If we are to banish this evil, which is condemned so severely by Our Lord, we must first try to ensure that our dispositions, both habitual and actual, are those of a clear aversion to sin. Sincerely, in a manly way, we must develop, both in our heart and in our mind, a sense of horror for mortal sin. We must also cultivate a deep-seated hatred of deliberate venial sin, those negligences which while they don't deprive us of God's grace, do serve to obstruct the channels through which grace comes to us.

I have never tired of talking about prayer and with God's grace I never will. I remember back in the thirties, as a young priest, people of all kinds used to come to me looking for ways of getting closer to Our Lord. To all of them, university students and workers, healthy and sick, rich and poor, priests and laymen, I gave the same advice: 'Pray'. If any one replied, 'I don't even know how to begin', I would advise him to put himself in God's presence and tell Him of his desires and his anxiety, with that very same complaint: 'Lord, I don't know how to pray!' Often, humble admissions like that were the beginning of an intimate relationship with Christ, a lasting friendship with him.

Many years have gone by, and I still don't know of a better recipe. 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.' 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,' which are impossible to describe, for no words are adequate to express their depth.

What a great source of confidence the Word of God should be for us! When, throughout my priestly ministry, I have time and again counselled people to pray, I have not been inventing anything. It's all there in Holy Scripture. That is where I learned to say, 'Lord, I don't know how to talk to you! Lord, teach us how to pray!' When we pray thus, we receive all the loving assistance of the Holy Spirit — that light, fire and driving wind which sets the flame alight and makes it capable of enkindling a great fire of love.

We have already entered upon the ways of prayer. But how do we go forward? You must have noticed how many people, both men and women, appear to be talking just to themselves, listening complacently to their own voices. It is an almost continuous chatter of words, a monologue that goes on and on about the problems that worry them, while they do nothing to solve them. It would seem as if all they really wanted was the morbid satisfaction of getting others to feel sorry for them, or admire them. That's all they seem to be aiming for.

If we truly want to unburden our hearts, and are honest and sincere about it, we seek the advice of those who love and understand us: our father or mother, wife or husband, our brother or friend. Even though often what we want isn't so much to listen as to express our feelings and say what has happened to us, a dialogue has already begun. Let us begin to do the same with God; we can be quite sure he listens to us and answers us. Let us pay attention to him and open up our soul in humble conversation, telling him in confidence everything that is on our mind and in our heart: our joys, sorrows, hopes, annoyances, successes, failures, even the most trivial happenings in our day. We will discover that our Heavenly Father is interested in everything about us.

Overcome any sluggishness you may feel, and the false excuse that prayer can wait for later. Let us never put off this vital source of grace until tomorrow. Now is the right time. God, who is a loving spectator of everything we do, watches over our most intimate needs. You and I, I tell you once again, we need to confide in him as we might confide in a brother, a friend, a father. Tell him, as I am telling him now, that he is all greatness, all goodness, all mercy. Tell him also, 'This is why I want to fall in love with you, despite my rough manner and poor hands, soiled and ill-treated by the dust and grime of this earth.'

In this way, almost without realising it, we will go forward at God's pace, taking strong and vigorous strides. We will come to sense deep in our hearts that when we are close to Our Lord we are able to find joy in suffering, self-denial and sorrow. What a great source of strength it is for a son of God to know that he is so close to his Father! This is why, my Lord and Father, no matter what happens, I stand firm and secure with you, because you are my rock and my strength.

For some of you, all this may sound quite familiar; for others, it may be something new; for everybody, it is demanding. As for me, as long as I have strength to breathe, I will continue to preach that it is vitally necessary that we be souls of prayer at all times, at every opportunity and in the most varied of circumstances, because God never abandons us. It is not a proper Christian attitude to look upon friendship with God only as a last resort. Do we think it normal to ignore or neglect the people we love? Obviously not! Those we love figure constantly in our conversations, desires and thoughts. We hold them ever present. So it should be with God.

When we seek Our Lord in this way, our whole day becomes one intimate and trusting conversation with him. I have said and written this so many times, but I don't mind saying it again, because Our Lord has shown us by his example that this is exactly what we have to do: we have to pray at all times, from morning to night and from night to morning. When everything goes well: 'Thank you, my God!' If we are having a hard time, 'Lord, do not abandon me!' Then this God of ours, who is 'meek and humble of heart' will not ignore our petitions or remain indifferent. For he himself has told us, 'Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened for you.'

Let us try, therefore, never to lose our supernatural outlook. Let us see the hand of God in everything that happens to us: both in pleasant and unpleasant things, in times of consolation and in times of sorrow, as in the death of someone we love. Your first instinct always should be to talk to your Father God, whom we should seek in the depths of our souls. And we cannot consider this a trivial or unimportant matter. On the contrary, it is a clear sign of a deep interior life, of a true dialogue of love. Far from being psychologically deforming, constant prayer should be for a Christian as natural as the beating of his heart.

Upon this living fabric of our Christian faith are woven in the vocal prayers, like jewels. Some are of divine composition: 'Our Father...', 'Hail Mary...', 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit'. There is as well that crown of praise to God and to our Mother, the Holy Rosary, and then so many other acclamations, full of devotion, that fellow Christians, our brothers in the faith, have recited from the very earliest times.

St Augustine, quoting a verse from Psalm 85, 'Take pity on me, Lord, I have cried to you all day long', comments: 'Not "one day": understand "all day" to mean all the time, without ceasing... A single man reaches out to the end of the world; for it is the members of the one Christ who call out to God, some of them already resting in him, others invoking him now, and others who will come and implore him when we will have died, and still others who will follow them in prayer.' Are you not moved when you consider that you can share in this never ending homage to the Creator? How great is man when he acknowledges that he is a privileged creature of God and has recourse to Him tota die, at every moment of his journey on earth!

Each day without fail we should devote some time specially to God, raising our minds to him, without any need for the words to come to our lips, for they are being sung in our heart. Let us give enough time to this devout practice; at a fixed hour, if possible. Before the Tabernacle, close to him who has remained there out of Love. If this is not possible, we can pray anywhere because our God is ineffably present in the heart of every soul in grace. Still I would advise you to go to the oratory whenever you can. I make a point of calling it an oratory and not a chapel, to emphasise that it is not a place where you adopt a formal, ceremonial manner, but rather one where you can raise up your mind in an intimate and recollected way, to heaven, and you can be sure that Jesus sees us and hears us, that he is waiting for us and presides over us from the Tabernacle where he is truly present, hidden under the sacramental species.

Each one of you, if he wants, can find his own way to converse with God. I do not like to talk about methods or formulas, because I have never wished to straitjacket anyone. What I have always tried to do is to encourage everyone to come closer to Our Lord, respecting each soul as it is, each with its own characteristics. Ask him to introduce his ideas and plans into our lives: not only into our heads, but also into the depths of our hearts and into all our outward actions. I assure you that you will thus be spared many of the disappointments and sorrows of selfishness, and you will find you have the strength to do good to all around you. How many obstacles vanish when in our hearts we place ourselves next to this God of ours, who never abandons us! Jesus' love for his own, for the sick and for the lame, is renewed, expressed in different ways, 'What is the matter?' he asks, and we reply, 'It's my...' At once there is light, or at least the acceptance of his will, and inner peace.

When I encourage you to open your heart in confidence to the Master, I am referring

especially to your own difficulties, because most of the obstacles to our happiness come from our pride, which may be hidden to a greater or less degree. We had thought we were worth a great deal and had a lot of exceptional qualities; then, when others didn't agree, we felt humiliated. This is a good time to pray and to correct our mistaken attitude. We can be sure it is never too late to change our course. But it's wise to start changing it as soon as possible.

In prayer, with God's grace, pride can be transformed into humility. Then, true joy wells up in our heart, even though we feel that the wings of our soul are still clogged with the mud, the clay of our wretchedness which is now beginning to dry out. If we practise mortification the mud will fall off, allowing us to soar very high, because the wind of God's mercy will be blowing in our favour.

Look: Our Lord is anxious to guide us at a marvellous pace, both human and divine, and which leads to joyful abandonment, happiness in suffering and self-forgetfulness. 'If any man has a mind to come my way, let him renounce self.' This is a counsel we have all heard. Now we have to make a firm decision to put it into practice. May Our Lord be able to use us so that, placed as we are at all the cross-roads of the world — and at the same time placed in God — we become salt, leaven and light. Yes, you are to be in God, to enlighten, to give flavour, to produce growth and new life.

But don't forget that we are not the source of this light: we only reflect it. It is not we who save souls and move them to do good. We are quite simply instruments, some more some less worthy, for fulfilling God's plans for salvation. If at any time we were to think that we ourselves are the authors of the good we do, then our pride would return, more twisted than ever. The salt would lose its flavour, the leaven would rot and the light would turn to darkness.

During my thirty years as a priest I have constantly insisted that we need to pray, and that it is possible to convert our whole life into an unceasing clamour of prayer. Naturally, some people have asked me if this can really be done, all the time. It can. Union with Our Lord does not cut us off from the world we live in. It does not make us strange beings, out of touch with what is going on around us.

If it is true that God has created us, that he has redeemed us, that he loves us so much that he has given up his only-begotten Son for us, that he waits for us every day! — as eagerly as the father of the prodigal son did, how can we doubt that he wants us to respond to him with all our love? The strange thing would be not to talk to God, to draw away and forget him, and busy ourselves in activities which are closed to the constant promptings of his grace.

Besides, let me remind you that nobody escapes the tendency to imitate others. Even unconsciously we tend to imitate one another. Are we then going to refuse the invitation to imitate Jesus? Everyone strives to identify himself little by little with what he admires, with the model he has chosen for himself. Our way of acting is geared to the ideal we have set for ourselves. Our teacher is Christ, the Son of God and Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. If we imitate Christ, we will attain the marvellous possibility of sharing in that current of love, which is the mystery of God, One in Three.

If at times you don't feel strong enough to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, say a few loving words to those who knew him well during his life on earth. To Mary, first of all, for

she it was who brought him to us. Then to the Apostles. 'And there were certain Gentiles who approached Philip, the man from Bethsaida in Galilee, and made a request of him: Sir, they said, we desire to see Jesus. Philip came and told Andrew, and together Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.' Don't you find this scene encouraging? Those foreigners didn't dare to approach the Master directly, so they looked for a good intercessor.

Are you worried that your sins are so many that Our Lord will not listen to you? It is not so, because Jesus is full of mercy. But if despite this marvellous truth you still feel how wretched you are, go to him like the publican did, and say, 'Lord, here I am. It's up to you!' See, too, what St Matthew tells us when Jesus had a paralysed man brought before him. The sick man doesn't say a word. He is simply there, in the presence of God. And Christ, moved by the man's contrition, by the sorrow of one who knows he deserves nothing, responds immediately, as merciful as ever, 'Take courage, your sins are forgiven.'

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, realising certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands.

As a way of giving outlet to my prayer — this may be helpful for some of you as well — I often materialise even the most spiritual of things. It is a method that Our Lord used. He liked to teach through parables, using images from life around him: a shepherd and his flock, the vine and its branches, boats and nets, seed scattered by the sower...

The seed of God's Word has been sown in our hearts. What kind of ground have we prepared for him? Are there many stones? Is it full of thorns? Are we letting petty and exclusively human cares trample all over it? Lord, make my plot of ground be good, fertile and generously exposed to sun and rain. Let your seed take root in it and produce a fine crop of good wheat.

'I am the vine, you are the branches.' September comes and the vines are rich with long, lissom branches, flexibly intertwining and bending under the weight of the grapes now ready for the harvest. You see, the branches are full of fruit, because they share in the sap that comes from the stem. Otherwise, from the tiny buds we knew just a few months back, they could not have produced the sweet ripe fruit that gladdens the eye and makes the heart rejoice. Here and there on the ground we may find some dry twigs, lying half-buried in the soil. Once they too were branches of the vine; now they lie there withered and dead, a perfect image of barrenness: 'separated from me, you can do nothing.'

Then there is the treasure. You can imagine the immense joy of the lucky man who finds it. The hard times, the suffering are over. He sells everything he has and buys the field. His whole heart is there, where his treasure lies hidden. Our treasure is Christ. We shouldn't mind having to throw overboard everything that impedes our following him. Our boat, once freed of its useless cargo, will sail directly to the safe harbour of God's Love.

There are countless ways of praying, as I have already told you. We children of God don't need a method, an artificial system, to talk with our Father. Love is inventive, full of initiative. If we truly love, we will discover our own intimate paths to lead us to a continuous conversation with Our Lord.

May God grant that what we have contemplated today will not pass over our souls like a summer downpour — a few drops of rain, then once again the baking sun and the fields are as dry as before. The water of God's grace needs to settle, to seep through to the roots and bear fruit in virtues. If we let it do this, our years on earth — made up of days of work and prayer — will be spent in the presence of Our Father. If we falter, let us turn to Holy Mary who loves us and teaches us how to pray; and to St Joseph, our Father and Lord, whom we venerate so much. In this world he was the one who was closest to the Mother of God and, after Mary, to her Divine Son. Together they will bring our weakness to Jesus, so that he may turn it into strength.