

## D Prayer and the life of prayer

Pilgrim friends,

You have left the city, the noise of the world and its heady rhythm to come on this pilgrimage. Each of you came for a particular reason, your own: a need to recharge your batteries, or simply because you were dragged along by a friend, because you are curious to discover the pilgrimage, eager to take up the physical challenge, hoping to meet new people, etc... whatever it may be, God has brought you here for a very specific reason: to meet him, find him again and consolidate your friendship with him during these three days.

So, now that we are well advanced in our walk, that penance is beginning to have its effect, that our hearts are freer and perhaps more attentive, it is time to talk about prayer; which Pope Benedict XVI called a question of life and death.

Just as the body needs air and food to stay alive, the soul needs prayer, it is its breathing, its condition for staying alive, that is to say quite simply to remain united to Christ and maintain the bond of friendship with him, which is the only necessity of our existence.

### 1- A condition of prayer: silence

Without silence we cannot pray. God speaks in silence and that is why we cannot normally hear him. Silence is His language and we must silence ourselves, externally and even more internally to be willing to listen to what God wants to tell us. Silence is a fundamental condition for prayer. It does not consist of creating an absolute void within us, as in yoga methods, but of putting aside distractions to grasp a presence, of finding in ourselves the place where God manifests himself in us. Dom Guillerand, a Carthusian, tells us that the void that the world leaves in the heart is the place of God. However, this emptiness can only manifest itself in silence. Trying to fill this void with the things of the world (social networks, video series, frenetic social activity) makes it even deeper and hidden.

### 2- A definition of prayer?

There is no single definition of prayer. Because prayer consists of a relationship between us and God. Thus, as everyone has a unique relationship with God, some will place more emphasis on one aspect of prayer, while others will place more emphasis on another. However, there are common aspects found in all souls who pray. Here are some quotations from saints on prayer.

- Saint John Damascene (taken up by Saint Thomas Aquinas): *"Prayer is an elevation of the spirit towards God"*
- Saint Teresa of Avila: *"It is an exchange of friendship where we speak often and intimately with the one whom we know loves us. »*
- S. Thérèse of Lisieux: *"I do the same as children who cannot read, I simply tell the Good Lord what I want to say to Him without using beautiful sentences, and He always understands me... For me, prayer, it is an impulse of the heart, it is a simple look thrown towards Heaven, it is a cry of recognition and love in the heart of joy; finally it is something great, supernatural which expands the soul and unites me to Jesus."*
- Saint Charles de Foucauld: *"To pray is to think in God while loving him."*

### 3- The four purposes of prayer

A good way to approach prayer is to talk about the 4 purposes for which we pray. The simple fact of thinking about God invites me first (1st point) to adore him, that is to say, to recognize his greatness and my smallness, my complete dependence on him. So, seeing that the Creator is interested in me, that he loves me, I am (2nd point) in thanksgiving, I thank him for this love. At the same time I am sorry because I do not correspond enough to this love, it makes me sad to have offended him. So, with a humbled heart, I ask him for forgiveness (3rd point), and I also ask him (4th point) to heal me, to sanctify me, and all mine. I ask this with confidence knowing that God listens to those who love him. But also with great humility, knowing that God will not change to do our will. Rather, He will conform our will to His.

Here, then, are the 4 purposes of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, contrition (asking for forgiveness) and supplication (asking for graces).

### 4- An essential element: freely giving our time (back) to God

You see: praying is not primarily asking things for us. Certainly, that is part of it, but it is not the whole of prayer. Indeed, we do not pray for ourselves first! We pray for God! Prayer should not be a selfish desire that only awakens in a moment of material or spiritual distress.

As in any true friendship, the true friend gives himself freely to the other. The true friend is not a trader, a mercenary, but a donor, a benefactor. Thus, the true friend of God gives him his time, his life, and this for free. Prayer thus becomes time given for our great friend, Jesus himself.

The basis of prayer therefore consists first of all in giving time to God. This is perhaps the most difficult! Because we never have time, we always have things to do! We must therefore take time for God: offer it to him. A few minutes reserved for God in our day. It is the first act of love, of generosity, of prayer. This idea that prayer is a gift, a free act given to God, can help us avoid the pitfalls that often discourage us from prayer: *"I have the impression that it doesn't work... I don't feel anything when I pray ..."*. Thinking that prayer consists of feeling many things, some people despair when they no longer feel anything. As in all friendship, prayer is not about feeling a lot but rather about loving a lot: giving our time to God in the silence of his Presence. The Good Lord will give it back to us, one day or another. As Saint Catherine of Siena said: *"we must love the God of consolations rather than the consolations of God."* Let us not be discouraged if we feel nothing in prayer, it is sometimes a sign that it is purer than ever, it is a pure gift to God.

#### 5- **A method?**

There are several schools of prayer, such as that of the Carmelites with the great Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross or that of Saint Ignatius of Loyola described in his book of spiritual exercises. I invite you to resort to these great masters of spiritual life. In the meantime, here are some general tips.

1) Once I have found a suitable setting and I have made the external silence (turned off my mobile phone, etc.) I must always begin with an act of the presence of God, that is to say a of personal contact with God: to pray is to speak to God present with me (in my soul, in the tabernacle), and not to speak in the void or to a very distant being. We can help ourselves by making an act of worship (considering the greatness of God, my smallness before him), or by making an act of faith, hope, or charity.

2) We can try to extend this moment. But when we see that this no longer works and our mind begins to wander and become distracted, then one good idea is to read a short text, either from the gospels, or from a spiritual book that speaks to us, asking ourselves what God wants to tell us today. This is what Saint Charles de Foucault did: after experiencing the presence of God, he said to himself: *"Lord, what do you have to say to me?"* and he was reading a gospel text. The important thing here, the key point, is to let God speak to us through this text, or through a thought that passes through us, before speaking ourselves: it is politeness, and above all the best way so that prayer is not a simple monologue coming from us.

3) Once we have read the text carefully, slowly, we can move on to the next step, still with Charles de Foucault: *"Lord, what would I say to you now?"* This is our response: a response of intelligence first, which we call meditation (what does this text mean for me? how can I apply it in my life?), but also and above all a response from the heart. Praying is not simply understanding a text better, it is also and above all loving Jesus better, making a desire to grow closer to him grow within us. If we are a little lost here, we can slowly remember the four acts of prayer: the text read can lead us to adore God, to thank him, to ask him for forgiveness, to ask him for graces.

4) We must always end our prayer on a concrete note, so that it continues throughout the day. The ideal is to make a small concrete resolution based on our prayer: if we have meditated on the gentleness of Jesus with sinners, we can say to ourselves that today we will try to be good and patient with such a person who annoys us, to imitate Jesus.

#### **6- Conclusion**

The life of prayer is about living constantly in the presence of God. And this is a simple extension of the special time (at least 15 minutes - ideally half an hour or more - per day) that we devote to God in our morning prayer. To pray is to do everything under the gaze of God. It is doing his holy will in all places and at all times. But it is through this time that I devote only to God, and which we commonly call "prayer", that my friendship with Christ will grow and transform me. I therefore encourage you to get started, or to persevere in this beautiful practice of prayer, this time in silence before the good Lord, where I think only of him and where I give him all my love and he his: a true "exchange of friendship", as Saint Teresa of Avila said.