

“Lord teach us to pray”

By Fr. Gonzalo Meza¹



In our busy world, we have lost the art of conversation, the art of connecting with others. It is a paradox, we cannot live disconnected but we disconnect with others, like family members, friends, coworkers, and God. Today's readings give us a beautiful teaching on how to connect with God. It is Jesus himself, who will be teach us how to reconnect to God and to others through prayer.

What is prayer?

St. Thérèse of Lisieux said, “Prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turn toward heaven.” Prayer is the response of faith to the love of God. An anonymous Christian mystic,

from the 14th century wrote a book on contemplative prayer, “The Cloud of Unknowing,” prayer, said “Mechthild of Magdeburg, brings together two lovers, God and the soul, in a narrow room where they speak much of love... Stop hesitating. Do this work until you feel the delight of it. In the trying is the desire.” He also adds “contemplation is like a cloud of unknowing. You won’t know what this is. You will only know that in your will, you feel a simple reaching out to God. You must also know that this darkness and this cloud will always be between you and your God”². Prayer is a conversation with God, in an “inner room” (the heart), where at times we will see nothing, except a cloud of unknowing.

Model of prayer in the Old Covenant, Abraham

In the first reading from the book of Genesis, Abraham will give us a first approach to prayer. His prayer is a dialogue with God. A conversation, which is humble, paused, and repeated. Abraham stands before God to intercede for his people, especially for his nephew Lot, who was living in Sodom. How did Abraham pray? After feeding his Three Divine Visitors, who were standing at his tent, Abraham starts conversing with one of them: “While the two men walked on farther toward Sodom, the Lord remained standing before Abraham” (Gn 18:22). This is the first foundation of prayer. We need to stand before God, in total humility. Only when we humbly acknowledge that we do not know how to pray, we are ready to receive freely the gift of prayer. Man is a beggar before God, said St. Augustine.

Then Abraham drew nearer to [the Lord] and said, ““will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city. Would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent people within it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty... The Lord replied ‘If I find fifty innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake’” (Gn 18:23-25). Standing before the Lord, Abraham talks to Him, in

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² Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, translation by Carmen Acevedo, Boston and London, 2011.

defense of the innocents. In this dialogue, we can see Abraham's goodness and compassion for others. The dialogue of Abraham with God continues. At a point, it seems that he bargains with God. What does he bargain for? For the forgiveness of the just. He wants to make sure that for the sake of few innocent people, God will spare the sinful city from destruction, "what if there are five less than fifty?" "What if only forty," "what if only thirty". "But he still persisted, 'Please let not my Lord grow angry if I speak up this last time. What if there are at least ten there?' 'For the sake of those ten', he replied, 'I will not destroy it'" (Gn 18:32). Abraham will teach us another important element of prayer: persistence. We shall persevere in prayer. When Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, he emphasizes the importance of perseverance.

Perfect model of prayer in the New Covenant, Jesus

In the Gospel, Luke 11 presents three episodes related to prayer. In the first one Jesus teaches his disciples the "Our Father;" the second one emphasizes the importance of persistence in prayer, and finally the third one talks about to the effectiveness of prayer.

Prayer is a relationship

Jesus will tell us that a basic component of our prayer is to recognize who we are. We are children of God. We were made so by the incarnation, passion, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven of Jesus. St Paul mentions in the Letter to the Colossians, "And even when you were dead in transgressions... he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:13-14).

As children of God, we can call God Father. "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed by your name." What an awesome fact, we are children of God! As such, we can establish a conversation with God. As children talking to their parents. Not in complicated languages, but in a simple one, "the language Jesus spoke with his Father. It is the language of heart and mind... the language of contemplation, used by men who are spiritual, because they realize they are children of God. This language is expressed in a thousand motions of our will, in the clear insights of our minds, in the affections of our heart, in our commitment to lead a virtuous life, in goodness, happiness and peace" (St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 13). In the New Covenant, prayer is communion, the living relationship of the children of God with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity. This is a training for the future, because Eternity is a perpetual conversation with God.

Perseverance in prayer

Prayer should be a habit, meaning we must be perseverant in our conversation with God. Persistence is another important component of our prayer. Jesus told us, "suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him,' and he says in reply from within, 'do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children and I are already in bed. I cannot get up to give you anything.' I tell you, if he does not get up to give the visitor the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence" (Lk 11:5-8).

Many people believe that they pray to God but he does not answer their pleas. That is wrong. We need to know that God is not a vending machine where we put certain amount of prayers to obtain the product

that we want. The fact that we are children of God, and that we are capable of conversing with him does not mean that He will meet our terms and standards. God is always there. He calls us to believe and accept so, even when we do not feel his presence, even when things do not go our way. Faith is not a sentiment or a feeling. Faith moves us to accept that God is there and that we will always receive something better than our own personal desires, we will receive the Holy Spirit. “And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds... If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Lk 11:9-13). St Cyril of Alexandria said, “We sometimes come near to God offering him petitions for various objects according to each one’s pleasure. Sometimes we pray without discernment or any careful examination of what truly is to our advantage... The will of God over all is that those on earth should live in holiness, piously, without blame, being washed from all impurity, and diligent in imitating the spiritual beauty of the spirits above in heaven” (Homilies 79 and 74). That is why we receive the Holy Spirit, to do God’s will, not our will.

What did we learn today about prayer? Abraham taught us that prayer is a conversation with God. A dialogue, which must be humble, paused, and consistent. Jesus, the perfect model of prayer reiterates that, adding that our conversation with God shall be like children talking to their Father. Jesus will invite us to persevere and be consistent in our dialogue with God, trusting that God hears our pleas: “Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me. I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with all my heart, for you have heard the words of my mouth; in the presence of the angels I will sing your praise; I will worship at your holy temple and give thanks to your name” (Psalm 138).

Blessed Pope Paul VI said that to learn how to pray we need to attend the school of prayer, the Holy Family of Nazareth, Jesus, Mary and Joseph: “Here we learn to observe, to listen, to meditate, and to penetrate the profound and mysterious meaning of that simple, humble, and lovely manifestation of the Son of God. And perhaps we learn almost imperceptibly to imitate Him” (Paul VI, Discourse at the Basilica of Annunciation in Nazareth, Jan. 5, 1964).

Resolutions

- To have a set time and place for prayer.
- To avoid distractions during that time.
- To recite the Rosary, and/or use the Bible and/or pray the Liturgy of the Hours during that time.

For further reference

- Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, translation by Carmen Acevedo, Boston and London, 2011. It is available as E-book.