

# Lectio Divina. Sunday of the Seventeenth Week in Ordinary Time.

Learn to pray / Spirituality

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## 1. Opening prayer

Father of all mercies,  
in the Name of Christ your Son, we implore you,  
send us the Gift,  
pour into us your Spirit!  
Spirit, Paraclete,  
teach us to pray in truth  
in the new Temple  
who is the Christ.  
Spirit, faithful to the Father and to us,  
as the dove has its nest,  
plead within us incessantly with the Father,  
because we do not know how to pray.  
Spirit of Christ,  
first gift to us believers,  
pray within us tirelessly to the Father,  
as the Son taught us. Amen.

## 2. Reading

a) To help us understand the passage:

The Gospel passage is divided into three sections:

- vv. 1-4: the prayer that Jesus taught
  - vv. 5-8: the parable of the insistent friend
  - vv. 9-13: the teaching on the efficacy of prayer.
- Luke 11: 1-13

b) The text:

1 He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." 2 And he said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread; 4 and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'"

5 And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything? 8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 9 And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

## 3. A moment of prayerful silence

- Like the disciples, we too come together around Jesus who prays alone. We gather around Him and in Him all our energies, every thought, every commitment and preoccupation, our hopes and pains...
- Today it is we who are those disciples who see the Master praying and allow themselves to be involved in his prayer, which, evidently, was quite special.
- Today his words are addressed to us, the invitation to trust in the love of the Father is addressed to us, We are so taken up with material things, so much seeking "all and immediately", so spellbound by a thousand things, that then (and only "then", after some event that shakes us) we discover that they are all really superfluous...
- Today it is up to us to give voice to the prayer of the Master: Father, hallowed be your name...

## 4. Some questions

Let us use this occasion to examine our way of praying:

\* What does praying mean for me: An obligation? A pause in the search of myself? Presenting God with a list of requests? A pause in the

company of the Father? A simple and trusting dialogue with the One who loves me?

\* How much time do I give to prayer: some every day? Or once a week or once a month? Occasionally? Systematically? Do I wait until I "feel the need" to pray?

\* What is the starting point of my prayer: is it the Word of God? Is it the saint or the liturgical feast of the day? Is it devotion to our Lady? Is it an illustration or icon? Is it the events of my life or those of the history of the world?

\* Whom do I meet when I pray: looking deep into myself, when I pray do I speak to one whom I feel to be a judge or to a friend? Do I feel Him to be an "equal" or someone who is "holy", infinite or unattainable? Is He near to me or far and indifferent? Is He my Father or my master? Does He care for me or "is He busy with His own affairs"?

\* How do I pray: do I pray a little mechanically, using set formulae? Do I pray using passages from the Psalms or other Biblical texts? Liturgical texts? Do I choose to pray spontaneously? Do I look for texts using beautiful words or do I prefer to repeat a short phrase? How do I use "the Lord's prayer"? Do I more often find myself invoking God for some need or to praise Him in the liturgy or to contemplate Him in silence? Am I able to pray while I am working or in any place or only when I am in church? Am I able to make liturgical prayer my own? What place does the Mother of God have in my prayer?

## 5. A key to the reading

This passage presents prayer as one of the fundamental requirements and a key point in the life of a disciple of Jesus and of the community of disciples.

vv. 1-4: Jesus, like other great religious masters of his time, teaches his followers a prayer that will define them: the "Our Father".

a) Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray": Jesus goes aside to pray. In Luke's Gospel he does this often (5: 16), above all just before important events: before choosing the Twelve (6: 12-13), before soliciting Peter's confession of faith (9: 18-20), before the transfiguration (9: 28-29) and, finally, before the passion (22: 40-45).

As Jesus prays, he arouses in his disciples the desire to pray like him. Clearly, it is a prayer that shows itself externally in a very special way and that certainly affects his preaching. The disciples understand that such a prayer is quite different from that taught by other spiritual masters in Israel or even by the precursor of Jesus. That is why they ask him to teach them to pray. Thus, the prayer that Jesus passes on to his disciples becomes the characteristic expression of their ideal and identity, of their way of relating to God and among themselves.

b) Father: The first thing that Jesus teaches on prayer is to call God "Father". Matthew, unlike Luke, does not add the adjective "our", stressing less the community aspect of the Christian prayer. On the other hand, the fact of invoking the Father, constitutes the best adhesive element of the community of disciples.

For a Jew of the first century, relationship with one's father was one of intimacy, but also a recognition of the father's authority over every member of the family. This is reflected in the Christian custom of calling God "Father", whereas there is no certain evidence that the Jews of the time used to call God with the intimate term of "abba". This term is none other than the emphatic form of the Aramaic " 'ab", the familiar and respectful term used for earthly fathers.

The fact that Jesus used to turn to God and called him abba, shows the new kind of relationship that He, and therefore his disciples, establish with God: a relationship of closeness, familiarity and trust.

In the classical scheme of Biblical prayer, the first part of the "our Father" deals directly with God, whereas the second part refers to the needs of humankind in its earthly existence.

c) Father, hallowed be your name: in the message of the prophets of Israel, it is God who "sanctifies His own Name" (that is, himself: "the name is the person") intervening with power in human history, notwithstanding that Israel and the other peoples have dishonoured Him.. In Ezekiel we read: "But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that men said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.' But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel caused to be profaned among the nations to which they came. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land." (36: 20-24). On the same subject we may also read: Dt 32: 51; Is 29: 22; Ez 28: 22. 25).

The subject of the verb "to hallow", in Lk 11: 2, is God Himself: we are faced with a "theological passive". This means that the first petition of this prayer does not concern human beings and their unquestionable duty to honour and respect God, but God the Father Himself who must make Himself known as such to all. Thus, we petition God to reveal Himself in His sovereign greatness: this is an invocation with eschatological connotations, closely connected with the following petition.

d) Your Kingdom come: the great event proclaimed by Jesus is the definitive coming of the Kingdom of God among us: "Be sure of this: the kingdom of God is very near" (Lk 10:11; cfr also Mt 10: 7). The prayer of Jesus and of the Christian, then, is in close harmony with this proclamation. Asking in this prayer that this Kingdom be ever more visibly present, has, in fact, two effects: the person praying has to come face to face with the eschatological design of God, but also with the obligation of a radical willingness to serve His will of salvation. Thus, if it is true that we may and must present our needs to God the Father, it is also true that Christian prayer never has man and woman for its end, it is never a selfish petition, but its ultimate end is to glorify God, implore his full closeness, his complete manifestation: "Set your hearts on his kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well" (Lk 12: 31).

e) Give us this day our daily bread: we have come to the second part of the Lord's prayer. The person praying has now put into place the correct and intimate relationship with God, and now lives in the logic of closeness to God who is Father and his/her petitions flow from this way of life.

In Jesus' time as in ours (almost!), bread is the most necessary food, the primary nourishment. In this case, however, "bread" stands for food in general and, more, all kinds of material needs of the disciples.

The English term "bread" is a translation of the Greek "epiousion", found also in Matthew but not in any other Greek biblical or profane text. This makes it difficult to give a really reliable version, so much so that we are constrained to translate it according to the context.

What is clear, however, is that the disciple who is praying in this way, is aware of not having much material security for the future, not even for his/her daily food: he/she has really "left everything behind" to follow Christ (cfr Lk 5: 11). Here we are dealing with a situation characteristic of the early generations of Christians. This is not to say that the prayer for "bread" may not be very useful for Christians of today: we are all called to receive all things from Providence, as a free gift from God, even if these things come from the labour of our hands. The Eucharistic offertory reminds us of this all the time: we offer to God that which we know well we have received from Him so that we may receive it back from His hands. This also means that the Christian of every age must not be preoccupied with his/her material situation, because the Father will take care of him/: "That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. For life means more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Lk 12: 22-23).

f) Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us: The Christian, immersed in the salvation given by the Father with the coming of His kingdom, know that all his/her sins are already forgiven. This places him/her in the condition and obligation of having to forgive others, thus allowing God to render definitive the pardon of the Christian capable of pardoning (cfr Mt18: 23-35).

We are always hovering between the kingdom "already" present and kingdom "not yet" attained. A Christian who behaved contrary to the salvation already received from God in Christ, renders useless the forgiveness he/she has already received. That is why Luke says: "for we ourselves forgive": Luke does not wish to place us humans on the same level as God, but only to make us aware that we can frustrate the saving work of God, within which the Father has willed to include us as an active element, to extend His every free pardon to all.

vv. 5-8: more than a parable, this is a similitude, because it illustrates a typical behaviour that arouses in listeners a univocal and

spontaneous reply. In this case, it would be difficult to find anyone who would spontaneously reply “no one!” to the question “Which of you... ?” (v. 5) Thus, this passage wishes to show us how God acts through the filter of human behaviour, which is a poor copy of the behaviour of the Father.

The scene takes place in a Palestinian situation. Usually, anyone going on a journey would start at sunset in order to avoid the very high temperatures of daytime. In Palestinian houses at that time, there was only one room and the whole family used it for all the activities during the day as well as for sleeping at night by just spreading straw mats on the floor.

The request of the man who suddenly has to receive an unexpected guest in the middle of the night, reflects a typical sense of hospitality in ancient peoples, and the explanation of the request for “three loaves” (v. 5) is that this was the normal meal for an adult.

The man who has recourse to his friend at night is the image of a disciple of Christ, called to pray to God always and everywhere, full of trust that he/she will be heard, not because he/she has worn Him out, but because He is a merciful Father who is faithful to His promises. Thus the parable shows us how a disciple should pray the “our Father”: with complete trust in God, loving and just Father, a trust that goes even to cheekiness, that is to “disturbing Him” at any time and to insist with Him in every way, certain of being answered.

Prayer, as a basic attitude of every Christian who wishes to really be a disciple of Jesus, is well expressed by the apostle Paul: «Pray always, in all things give thanks; this indeed is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you» (1Ts 5: 17-18) ; «Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion. Never get tired of staying awake to pray for all the saints» (Ef 6: 18).

vv. 9-13: the last part of our Gospel is that properly called didactic. It resumes the theme of the previous verses, emphasising the trust that must characterise Christian prayer, founded on the solid rock of faith. It is the faith of the praying person that opens wide the doors of the Father's heart, and it is the very identity of the Father who loves to carry in his arms his children and to console them with the tenderness of a mother (cfr Is 66: 12-13) that which must nourish the faith of Christians.

God is a Father who loves to receive requests from his children, because this shows that they put their trust in Him, for to ask they have to approach Him with open hearts, for asking urges them to look at His kind and loving face, for by asking (even indirectly) they show that they believe that He is really the Lord of history and of the world, and, above all, because their asking allows Him to show openly His delicate, attentive and free love, solely directed for the good of His children. What displeases the Father is not the insistence or indiscretion of His children in asking, but that they do not ask sufficiently, remaining silent and almost indifferent to Him, that they stay away with a thousand respectful excuses, such as “He already knows everything”, etc. God is certainly a Father who provides all thing and takes care of the daily life of His children, but, at the same time, He also knows what is best for them, even better than they do. That is why He pours out on Christians so many good things and, above all, the gift par excellence: the Spirit, the only truly indispensable gift for their life, the gift who, if allowed to act, will make them authentic children in the Son.

## 6. A time of prayer: Psalm 104

To the merciful and provident God, who created the marvellous harmony of the cosmos and who placed in it humankind as His “vicar”, let us sing the psalm:

Bless Yahweh, my soul, Yahweh, my God,  
how great you are!  
Clothed in majesty and splendour,  
wearing the light as a robe!  
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,  
build your palace on the waters above,  
making the clouds your chariot,  
gliding on the wings of the wind,  
appointing the winds your messengers,  
flames of fire your servants.  
You fixed the earth on its foundations,  
for ever and ever it shall not be shaken;  
you covered it with the deep like a garment,  
the waters overtopping the mountains.  
At your reproof the waters fled,  
at the voice of your thunder they sped away,  
flowing over mountains, down valleys,  
to the place you had fixed for them;  
you made a limit they were not to cross,  
they were not to return and cover the earth.  
In the ravines you opened up springs,  
running down between the mountains,  
supplying water for all the wild beasts;  
the wild asses quench their thirst,  
on their banks the birds of the air make their nests,  
they sing among the leaves.  
From your high halls you water the mountains,  
satisfying the earth with the fruit of your works:  
for cattle you make the grass grow,  
and for people the plants they need,  
to bring forth food from the earth,  
and wine to cheer people's hearts,  
oil to make their faces glow,  
food to make them sturdy of heart.  
The trees of Yahweh drink their fill,  
the cedars of Lebanon which he sowed;  
there the birds build their nests,  
on the highest branches the stork makes its home;  
for the wild goats there are the mountains,  
in the crags the coneys find refuge.  
He made the moon to mark the seasons,  
the sun knows when to set.  
You bring on darkness, and night falls,  
when all the forest beasts roam around;  
young lions roar for their prey,  
asking God for their food.

The sun rises and away they steal,  
back to their lairs to lie down,  
and man goes out to work,  
to labour till evening falls.  
How countless are your works, Yahweh,  
all of them made so wisely!  
The earth is full of your creatures.  
Then there is the sea,  
with its vast expanses teeming with countless creatures,  
creatures both great and small;  
there ships pass to and fro,  
and Leviathan whom you made to sport with.  
They all depend upon you,  
to feed them when they need it.  
You provide the food they gather,  
your open hand gives them their fill.  
Turn away your face and they panic;  
take back their breath and they die and revert to dust.  
Send out your breath and life begins;  
you renew the face of the earth.  
Glory to Yahweh for ever!  
May Yahweh find joy in his creatures!  
At his glance the earth trembles,  
at his touch the mountains pour forth smoke.  
I shall sing to Yahweh all my life,  
make music for my God as long as I live.  
May my musings be pleasing to him,  
for Yahweh gives me joy.  
May sinners vanish from the earth,  
and the wicked exist no more!  
Bless Yahweh, my soul.

#### 7. Closing prayer

Good and holy Father, your love makes us brothers and sisters and urges us to come together in your holy Church to celebrate with life the mystery of communion. You call us to share the one bread, living and eternal, given to us from heaven. Help us also to know how to break, in the love of Christ, our earthly bread, so that our bodily and spiritual hunger may be satisfied. Amen.