



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



PRAYER IN SAINT PAUL

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The Holy Father has given us Saint Paul as a theme to meditate on this year. Today I would like to draw out what Saint Paul says about prayer.

The most explicit thing he says is “pray unceasingly” (1 Thess 5:17), a whole verse two words long. It comes at the end of his first letter (written less than twenty-five years after Jesus’ death) in a series of seven brief exhortations in which he sums up how Christians should live as they wait for the second coming of the Lord Jesus. What could he have meant? Remember that the core of his preaching was that a human being, Jesus Christ, had risen from the dead and was now at the right hand of the Father in heaven. For Paul everything depended on that. This event completely transformed human nature. Since there was now one human being penetrated with the life of God so that he would live body and soul forever, it was possible for all humanity to share in the same divine life. It was now man’s destiny to be filled with divine life through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

How was this divine life to be passed on to men? They had to do only one thing: accept the good news that Jesus was risen from the dead. To accept that Jesus was the envoy of God sent to raise humanity from sin and death was to allow the risen Jesus to give us a share in his divine life. It was to accept God’s gift of himself to us. Christians are those who have accepted Jesus into their lives as Lord. They belong no longer to themselves but to him. Through baptism and faith, says Paul, he has made them members of his Body. They continue his life on earth. This is a mystical vision that we must absorb and live on day by day. We see this world as making sense only in the light of Christ, the God-man who is gathering us and all who accept him into himself.

This is a hidden reality that we don’t see and have constantly to remind ourselves of, otherwise we will be distracted by the visible world till we think that is all there is, or we relegate the real, vital, and dynamic spiritual world to a neglected corner of our lives. So you see why Paul could order: pray unceasingly. He meant first of all remain always aware of the risen Christ presiding over creation, present in everyone you meet, drawing people together into his kingdom. As firstborn of creation and firstborn from the dead, he holds all things together in himself (cf. Col 1:15-18). This is what is most true about us even though it is also what is most hidden. We need to remember who we are as members of his Body, rely on the strength he continually offers us, live not for ourselves but for him and for our brothers and sisters in him. That’s the first thing that is meant by “pray unceasingly”: remember the Lord Christ as your Lord.

Secondly to pray unceasingly is not merely to remember him as the



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“horizon” of your life but to invoke his help. Christ said we can do nothing without him. Every time we try to achieve something purely on our own strength we are building on sand. What we commend to him, on the other hand, wins his blessing.

So remember and ask; the third thing involved in praying unceasingly is to rely on this Lord that you keep before your eyes. When you have asked his help trust that he is working in you. Remember, invoke, rely.

How do we do this kind of prayer? Obviously it has to be learned. Most of our activities during the day require our full attention if they are to be done properly. How can we simultaneously have our gaze on heaven when we're coming to grips with a difficult task or relationship? We start by having little islands of time in the day where we do nothing but pray. We step back and remember the Lord, view the world in his perspective, and ask for help or commend our activities to him. Such islands would be at the beginning of the day, toward the end of the day, and perhaps small moments between tasks during the day. For me it was walking between buildings on our school campus or walking into a classroom to teach. It might be before and after a meeting or visit or meal or specific task. Those practices prepare us to encounter the business of the day in the light of Christ, perhaps to see others as Christ when we would otherwise see only the exterior of the person. Gradually we will develop the habit of seeing all our activity as part of the kingdom of Christ and praying unceasingly can begin to become natural and automatic.

A fourth aspect of unceasing prayer is intercession for others. I don't know that we can be doing this all the time, but remember this: Christ is continually offering himself to the Father in heaven to take away the sins of the world. He is continually interceding for us (Heb 7:25). When we intercede for others in need we are simply joining in the prayer that he is continually making, whether we are conscious of it or not. We are appropriating it, activating it for a special need. So we can at any time offer Jesus to the Father for those in need. As we say in the chaplet, “Eternal Father, I offer you the body and blood, soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world.”

Sometimes just the sacred name of “Jesus,” frequently repeated, is enough to call down his blessing on the one for whom we pray. Paul expressed the importance of the name of Jesus in daily life: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17). Sanctify everything by the holy name of Jesus. Call it down on the present moment with love and fervor and longing.

Paul goes on to say, “giving thanks to God the Father through him.” So it turns out that our unceasing prayer is also unceasing thanksgiving. That is what Paul says in the verse just after the one we started with. After telling the Thessalonians “pray unceasingly” he says, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” We may not be able explicitly to give



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thanks in the same moment we are petitioning for something, but our petition can always be tinged with thanksgiving and our thanksgiving and adoration with petition. We thank God for his great deeds in the past, for his salvation through Jesus, and we simultaneously ask for the full coming of his kingdom, the gathering of all people into him. We thank him for his love and ask that all may share in that love, for example the unborn child threatened with abortion, the starving, the AIDS victim, the terrorist, the victim of terrorists.

And so we are brought to the Eucharist, since eucharist is the Greek word Paul uses for thanksgiving. The Eucharist is the summation of our prayer, because it is Christ's offering of himself to the Father for the salvation of the world made present in bread and wine. Christ thanks the Father— "he gave you thanks and praise," says the Eucharistic Prayer, but he did it so that sins might be forgiven: his thanksgiving sacrifice was also an intercession. If we want to know how to pray we need only let ourselves be guided by the Eucharist. In it we hear the word of God and profess our faith in that word. With Christ we thank the Father for his loving plan and especially for our salvation in Christ. We offer ourselves to the Father with Christ and ask for the coming of the Father's kingdom. And having offered ourselves to him we are filled with the gift of his life, so that the Eucharist is a continual cycle of life: God gives life to us, we return thanks to him, he gives us new life.

Maybe all we need to do is allow the Son to pray in us, let him pray his Eucharistic prayer to the Father in us. And this is exactly what Saint Paul says: the Spirit of God that has made his home in us makes us cry out in the same word Christ used in the agony in the garden: "Abba, Father!" (Rom 8:9, 15). Paul is telling us that our prayer is Trinitarian. The Spirit of God produces in us the same prayer Jesus utters to his Father. We pray in Christ and with Christ, united to him and to the Father by their Holy Spirit. Everything we have to say in prayer is in this one word Father: love, trust, petition, longing, thanksgiving, repentance, obedience, dependence. All the petitions of the Our Father which Jesus taught us are just expressions of what is already contained in that one word Father that the Spirit of Jesus utters in us. And notice that we don't utter it alone, but pray Our Father because the spirit who unites us to Christ is uniting us to one another in his Body. We join together with each other in the one prayer of the only Son of God, whether we are physically alone or in a group.

Saint Paul is very clear about the supernatural origin of our prayer: it is not ultimately the product of our own effort but of God's Spirit: "The Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints (ourselves) expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God" (Rom 8:26-27). These "unutterable groanings" of the Spirit in us are above and beyond words. That's why one of the



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special gifts of the Spirit as described by Paul is the gift of tongues, praying to God in syllables that have no literal meaning but express the soul's praise of God beyond words. This gift is given to the Church again in our own days. It's not a gift given to everybody but one to be received gratefully by the one to whom it is offered.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a whole section on prayer. You know that the four sections of the Catechism are

- the Creed—what we believe,
- the liturgy and sacraments—what we celebrate,
- the moral life—how we are called to behave,
- and prayer—how we commune with God.

The Catechism makes clear that the deepest prayer, which it calls contemplative prayer, is not primarily something we do but something done in us by the three persons of God. It calls this prayer a “close sharing between friends” (No. 2709). I would like to quote two key paragraphs from the Catechism that deserve to be meditated on. First No. 2717: “Contemplative prayer is silence, the ‘symbol of the world to come’ or ‘silent love’ [in heaven we will be absorbed in the love of God]. Words in this kind of prayer are not speeches; they are like kindling that feeds the fire of love. In this silence, unbearable to the ‘outer’ man, the Father speaks to us his incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose; in this silence the Spirit of adoption enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus.” Silence is unbearable to the outer man: that means the part of us that is always looking for stimulation. To let God pray in us we have to be silent, let the noise and chatter of the world fall away till we can be present to the loving God within us. Then when we listen, what happens? “The Father speaks to us his Incarnate Word, who suffered, died, and rose.” The Father speaks Jesus to us: he does not just tell us about Jesus but utters Jesus into our hearts, makes Jesus present in us, so that our prayer blends with the prayer of Jesus, he joins us to Jesus. That's what Saint Paul said, “God by calling you has joined you to his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:9). Thus the Word of God becomes flesh in us. And finally the text says, in this silence the Spirit of adoption (the Holy Spirit, the third person of God) enables us to share in the prayer of Jesus. You see how Trinitarian our prayer is: it moves through the Son to the Father inspired by the Holy Spirit. You can see also how prayer is related to the first part of the Catechism, the Creed that tells us of the death and resurrection of the Son as the basis of our faith.

Then comes the next paragraph of the Catechism, No. 2718: “Contemplative prayer is a union with the prayer of Christ insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery [the Paschal mystery, his death and rising]. The mystery of Christ is celebrated by the Church in the Eucharist, and the Holy Spirit makes it come alive in contemplative prayer so that our charity will manifest it in our acts.” Another rich paragraph. It relates personal prayer to the Eucharist and so to the theme of the second part of the Catechism, the liturgy. You might say



that our personal prayer is rooted in the Eucharist and a prolongation of it. Finally the Catechism asserts that in prayer the Spirit is able to fill us with the charity of Christ which is the fulfillment of the commandments of Christ, the subject of the third part of the Catechism. With this we may seem to have strayed from Saint Paul, but the teaching of the Catechism and the whole Church is all rooted in the teaching of Paul about the Spirit of adoption making us sons of God in Christ.

Let's review what Saint Paul has said about prayer. First, we must pray unceasingly. Second, prayer consists of thanksgiving and petition. Third, our prayer is a participation in the prayer of the Son to his Father. Fourth, it is inspired in us by the Holy Spirit. Prayer is a gift to us, but we have to receive it, make room for it, work at it. It is our relationship with God. A Christian cannot do without it. It requires perseverance as Paul says in one final note on prayer.

He tells the Ephesians that they are engaged in a great battle against the "spiritual army of evil in the heavens," the devils, the "Sovereignities and Powers, who originate the darkness in this world" (Eph 6:12). They need to counteract these powers with the armor of God, namely truth and justice, eagerness to spread the gospel, faith, salvation and the word of God. Finally, the Christian must animate this armor and weaponry "with all prayer and supplication, praying at every moment in the spirit, and staying awake for this purpose in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints and for me" (Eph 6:18-19). Prayer and supplication are each mentioned twice in this verse and to them is added perseverance. Prayer is our greatest weapon against evil and temptation and since temptation is more or less continual, so must prayer be. Paul is one with Jesus in telling his disciples to be vigilant, continually calling down the divine power to be active in our lives against evil.

This was the teaching of the early monks who went out to the desert to do combat against the demons in their own hearts: their principal weapon was prayer. Here is Macarius the Great in a homily: "The sum total of all good actions, the highest of all our works, is perseverance in prayer [so little is prayer seen in opposition to works or action: it's the principal action or work], through which we can each day acquire all the virtues by asking God for them. Prayer wins for those who are judged worthy, communion with the holiness of God, with the energy of the Holy Spirit, and union of feeling with the mind of the Lord in ineffable love [note the Trinitarian formulation]. The man who daily makes the effort to persevere in prayer is consumed by the spiritual love of a divine 'elan' and burning desire for God, and receives the grace of sanctifying perfection" (Homily 40).

Prayer is therefore the principal means of holiness. In another homily Macarius writes, "As sticks are thrown into the fire and are unable to resist the power of the fire, but are burned up at once, so also the demons, seeking to wage war against the man who has received the Spirit, are burned up and consumed by the divine power of the fire, provided only that the man is always



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clinging to the Lord and has trust and hope in him. And even if the demons are strong as mighty mountains, they are burned up by prayer, like wax by fire” (Homily 43). So to my summary of four points made by St. Paul on prayer I need to add this fifth point of perseverance, persistence, not giving up, the theme of Our Lord’s parable we just heard and which was the gospel at yesterday’s Mass.

I would like to use part of the Holy Hour for a guided meditation on the psalm we read after the first reading, Psalm 63. Saint Paul wanted Christians to pray the psalms and gave an indication of how to do it. He tells the Ephesians, “Sing the words and tunes of the psalms and hymns when you are together, and go on singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts, so that always and everywhere you are giving thanks to God who is our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:19-20). Paul is telling Christians to pray the psalms of the Hebrew bible but to pray them “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is how Christians pray the psalms, not just as Old Testament prayers but as expressions of the prayer of Christ himself in whom our prayer is rooted. I would like to read Psalm 63 for you slowly and indicate a way that each verse can be related to Christ. As we listen to the psalm as the prayer of Christ in his Church, he will slowly draw our hearts into his own prayer to the Father.