



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 14 March 1979

1. During Lent, the words: prayer, fasting, almsdeeds, which I already mentioned on Ash Wednesday, often reach our ears. We are accustomed to think of them as pious and good works, which every Christian must carry out particularly in this period. This way of thinking is correct, but not complete. Prayer, almsdeeds and fasting need to be understood more deeply, if we want to integrate them more thoroughly into our lives and not to consider them just as passing practices which demand only something momentary from us or deprive us of something only momentarily. With this way of thinking we would not yet arrive at the real meaning and the real power that prayer, fasting, and almsdeeds have in the process of conversion to God and of our *spiritual development*. One keeps pace with the other: we mature spiritually by being converted to God, and conversion takes place by means of prayer, as also by means of fasting and almsdeeds, adequately understood.

It should perhaps be said at once that it is not a question here only of momentary "practices", but of constant attitudes which give our conversion to God a lasting form. Lent, as liturgical time, lasts only forty days a year: we must, on the other hand, strain always towards God; this means that it is necessary to be continually converted. Lent must leave a strong and lasting mark on our lives. It must renew in us awareness of our union with Jesus Christ, who makes us see the necessity of conversion and indicates to us the ways to reach it. Prayer, fasting, and almsdeeds are precisely the ways that Christ indicated to us.

In the meditations that follow, we will try to glimpse how deeply these ways penetrate into man: what they mean for him. The Christian must understand the real meaning of these ways if he wants to follow them.

2. First, then, *the way of prayer*. I say "first", because I wish to speak of it before the others. But saying "first" I want to add today that in the complete work of our conversion, that is, of our spiritual development, prayer is not isolated from the other two ways which the Church defines with the evangelical term of "fasting and almsdeeds". The way of prayer is perhaps more familiar to us. We understand more easily, perhaps, that, without it, it is not possible to be converted to God, to remain in union with him, in that communion which makes us mature spiritually. There are certainly among you, who are now listening to me, a great many who have their own experience of prayer, who know its various aspects, and can make others share it. We learn to pray, in fact, by praying. The Lord Jesus taught us to pray first of all by himself praying: "all night he continued in prayer" (Lk 6:12); another day, as St Matthew writes, "he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone" (Mt 14: 23). Before his passion and death he went to the Mount of Olives and encouraged the Apostles to pray, and he himself knelt down and prayed. A prey to anguish, he prayed more intensely (cf. Lk 22:39-46). Only once, when requested by the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1), he gave them the simplest and the deepest content of his prayer: the "Our Father".

Since it is impossible to include in a short speech all that can be said or that has been written on the subject of prayer, I would like to stress only one thing today. All of us, when we pray, *are disciples of Christ*, not because we repeat the words that he once taught us—sublime words, the complete content of prayer—we are disciples of Christ even when we do not use these words. We are his disciples only because we pray: "Listen to the Master praying; learn to pray. He prayed, in fact, for this reason, to teach people to pray", St Augustine affirms (*Enarrationes in Ps. 56, 5*). And a modern author writes: "Since the end of the way of prayer is lost in God, and no one knows the way but the One who comes from God, Jesus Christ, it is necessary (...) to fix our eyes on him only. He is the way, the truth and the life. Only he has travelled along the way in both directions. We must put our hand in his and start out." (Y. Raguin, *Chemins de La contemplation*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1969, p. 179). To pray means speaking to God—I would venture to say even more—to pray means finding oneself again in that One eternal Word through which the Father speaks, and which speaks to the Father. This Word became flesh, so that it would be easier for us to find ourselves again in him even with our human word of prayer. This word may sometimes be very imperfect, sometimes we may even lack it, but this incapacity of our human words is continually completed in the Word that became flesh in order to speak to the Father with the fullness of that mystical union which every man who prays forms with him, which all those who pray form with him. In this particular union with the Word lies the greatness of prayer, its dignity and, in some way, its definition.

It is necessary, above all, to understand clearly the fundamental greatness and dignity of prayer. The prayer of every man. And also of the whole praying Church. The Church reaches, so to speak, as far as prayer: wherever there is a man who prays.

3. It is necessary to pray taking this essential concept of prayer as our basis. When the disciples

asked the Lord Jesus: "Teach us to pray", he replied with the words of the prayer Our Father, thus creating a concrete model that is at the same time universal. In fact, all that can and must be said to the Father is contained in those seven requests, which we all know by heart. There is such a simplicity in them, that even a child can learn them, and also such a depth that a whole life can be spent meditating on the meaning of each of them. Is this not so? Does not each of them speak to us, one after the other, of what is essential for our existence, directed completely to God, to the Father? Does it not speak to us of our "daily bread", of "forgiveness of our trespasses as we also forgive them", and at the same time of "preservation from temptation" and "deliverance from evil"?

When, in answer to the request of the disciples "teach us to pray", Christ utters the words of his prayer, he teaches not only the words, but he teaches that in our talk with the Father there must be complete sincerity and full openness. Prayer must embrace everything that is part of our life. It cannot be something additional or marginal. Everything must find in it its true voice. Even everything that burdens us; things of which we are ashamed; what by its very nature separates us from God. This above all. It is prayer that always, first of all and essentially, demolishes the barrier which sin and evil may have raised between us and God.

Through prayer the whole world must find its rightful reference: that is, reference to God: my interior world and also the objective world, the one in which we live, and as we know it. If we are converted to God, everything in us is directed to him. Prayer is precisely the expression of this being directed to God; and that is, at the same time, our continual conversion: our life.

Holy Scripture says:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Is 55:10-11).

Prayer is the way of the Word which embraces everything. The way of the eternal Word which goes through the depths of so many hearts; which brings back to the Father everything that has its origin in him.

Prayer is the sacrifice of our lips (cf. Heb 13:15). It is, as St Ignatius of Antioch writes, "spring water that murmurs within us and says: come to the Father" (cf. *Letter to the Romans*, VII, 2).

With my Apostolic Blessing.

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