

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Christmas and the Feast of the Holy Family

30th December 2023

The feasts of Christmas and the Holy Family help us to marvel at the incarnation, and God's choice of Mary and Joseph to provide human nurture and love for the Son of God. We can only be filled with wonder as we ponder these great events, these great mysteries. On 5th May 2021 Pope Francis, in his catechesis on prayer, turns our focus on the prayer of meditation, seeking meaning, through prayer of these, and all mysteries of our salvation.

The meditation

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

Today we will talk about the form of prayer called *meditation*. For a Christian, to "meditate" is to seek meaning: it implies placing oneself before the immense page of Revelation to try to make it our own, assuming it completely. And the Christian, after having welcomed the Word of God, does not keep it closed up within him or herself, because that Word must be met with "another book", which the *Catechism* calls "the book of life" (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2706). This is what we try to do every time we meditate on the Word.

The practice of meditation has received a great deal of attention in recent years. It is not only Christians who talk about it: the practice of meditation exists in almost all the world's religions. But it is also a widespread activity among people who do not have a religious view of life. We all need to meditate, to reflect, to discover ourselves, it is a human dynamic. Especially in the voracious western world, people seek meditation because it represents a barrier raised against the daily stress and emptiness that is rife everywhere. Here, then, is the image of young people and adults sitting in recollection, in silence, with eyes half closed... But what are these people doing, we might ask? They are meditating. It is a phenomenon to be looked on favourably. Indeed, we are not made for rushing all the time, we have an inner life that cannot always be trampled on. Meditating is therefore a need for everyone. Meditating, so to speak, is like stopping and taking a breath in life.

But we realise that this word, once accepted in a Christian context, takes on a uniqueness that must not be eradicated. Meditating is a necessary human dimension, but meditating in the Christian context goes further: it is a dimension that must not be eradicated. The great door through which the prayer of a baptised person passes — let us remind ourselves once again — is Jesus Christ. For the Christian, meditation enters through the door of Jesus Christ. The practice of meditation also follows this path. And when Christians pray, they do not aspire to full self-transparency, they do not seek the deepest centre of the ego. This is legitimate, but the Christian seeks something else. The prayer of the Christian is first of all an encounter with the Other, with a capital "O": the transcendent encounter with God. If an experience of prayer gives us inner peace, or self-mastery, or clarity about the path to take, these results are, so to speak, side effects of the grace of Christian prayer, which is the encounter with Jesus. That is, meditating means going to the encounter with Jesus, guided by a phrase or a word from Holy Scripture.

Throughout history, the term "meditation" has had various meanings. Even within Christianity it refers to different spiritual experiences. Nevertheless, some common lines can be traced, and in this we are helped again by the *Catechism*, which says the following: "There are as many and varied methods of meditation

as there are spiritual masters... But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus" (n. 2707). And here, a travelling companion is indicated, one who guides us: the Holy Spirit. Christian meditation is not possible without the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us to the encounter with Jesus. Jesus said to us, "I will send you the Holy Spirit. He will teach you and explain to you. He will teach you and explain to you". And in meditation too, the Holy Spirit is the guide to going forward in our encounter with Jesus Christ.

Thus, there are many methods of Christian meditation: some are very simple, others more detailed; some highlight the intellectual dimension of the person, others the affective and emotional one instead. They are methods. They are all important and all worthy of practice, inasmuch as they can help the experience of faith to become an integral act of the person: one does not only pray with the mind; the entire person prays, the person in his or her entirety, just as one does not pray only with one's feelings. The ancients used to say that the organ of prayer is the heart, and thus they explained that the whole person, starting from the centre — the heart — enters into a relationship with God, not just a few faculties. We must thus always remember that the method is a path, not a goal: any method of prayer, if it is to be Christian, is part of that *Sequela Christi* that is the essence of our faith. The methods of meditation are paths to travel in order to arrive at the encounter with Jesus, but if you stop on the road, and just look at the path, you will never find Jesus. You will make a "god" out of the path. However, the path is a means to bring you to Jesus. The *Catechism* specifies: "Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilisation of the faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ" (n. 2708).

Here, then, is the grace of Christian prayer: Christ is not far away, but is always in a relationship with us. There is no aspect of his divine-human person that cannot become a place of salvation and happiness for us. Every moment of Jesus' earthly life, through the grace of prayer, can become immediate to us, thanks to the Holy Spirit, the guide. But, you know, one cannot pray without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is he who guides us! And thanks to the Holy Spirit, we too are present at the River Jordan when Jesus immerses himself to receive baptism. We too are guests at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus gives the best wine for the happiness of the couple, that is, it is the Holy Spirit who connects us with these mysteries of the life of Christ because in contemplation of Jesus we experience prayer, to join us more closely to him. We too are astonished onlookers of the thousands of healings performed by the Master. We take the Gospel, and meditate on those mysteries in the Gospel, and the Spirit guides us to being present there. And in prayer — when we pray — we are all like the cleansed leper, the blind Bartimaeus who regains his sight, Lazarus who comes out of the tomb... We too are healed by prayer just as the blind Bartimaeus was healed, the other one, the leper... We too rose again, as Lazarus rose again, because prayer of meditation guided by the Holy Spirit leads us to relive these mysteries of the life of Christ and to encounter Christ, and to say, with the blind man, "Lord, have pity on me! Have pity on me!" — "And what do you want?" — "To see, to enter into that dialogue". And Christian meditation, led by the Spirit, leads us to this dialogue with Jesus. There is no page of the Gospel in which there is no place for us. For us Christians, meditating is a way to encounter Jesus. And in this way, only in this way, we rediscover ourselves. And this is not a withdrawal into ourselves, no: going to Jesus, and from Jesus, discovering ourselves, healed, risen, strong by the grace of Jesus. And encountering Jesus, the Saviour of all, myself included. And this, thanks to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank you.