

The Liturgy Transfigures the Prayer of the Church

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“And when you pray” (Mt 6:5). As is well known, for the evangelist Matthew the reference to prayer and to the manner in which it is practiced appears within the *Sermon on the Mount*, together with the themes of fasting and almsgiving. This fact has a normative value, because it belongs to that teaching of the Lord which sets forth the “new law” to which believers in him are bound. Having overcome the ancient law made up of “commandments and decrees” (Eph 2:15), the Beatitudes stand before the believer as the horizon of meaning toward which the disciple’s new existence is directed, following the new life received at the baptismal font. The three indications given regarding prayer—namely, not to be hypocrites in order to be seen by others; to enter one’s room, close the door, and remain in intimacy; and not to waste words by multiplying them unnecessarily (cf. Mt 6:5–8)—while presenting themselves as fundamental criteria to be observed, take nothing away from the initial premise. This remains with its enduring power of provocation, which has always touched every believer: “when you pray.”

A look at the historical condition of our time, which reveals a sincere search for spirituality, invites us to strengthen the need for prayer in all its forms. We cannot forget that especially in our day it has become almost necessary to return to a “school of prayer” in order to grasp its importance, its necessity, and above all its truth for personal and communal existence. For this reason, the disciple’s request to the Master remains unchanged to this day: “Teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1). A believer can never presume to know how to pray truly when standing before God. The Apostle was well aware of this when he wrote to the Christians in Rome, warning them not to harbor illusions in this regard: “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rm 8:26). For this reason, the assistance of the Holy Spirit is required, who “itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Rm 8:26). Nevertheless, one must not overlook the context in which the disciple’s request to the Lord takes place. The evangelist notes that “He was praying in a certain place” (Lk 11:1); only when he had finished did the disciple make his request. We know that Jesus would usually withdraw to deserted places, alone, to pray. In this case, however, it must be inferred that the disciples were with him and observed his manner of prayer. The request for prayer, therefore, arises from seeing Jesus pray. Christian prayer, consequently, can never be separated from this

condition: if we pray, it is because Jesus prayed. Prayer can only have a fully Christological character, since it is the privileged and unique place of revelation. The prayer made by Jesus thus lays claim to being the summit of all prayer, and he reveals himself at the same time as both teacher and model of Christian prayer.

When You Pray

It is necessary, however, to return to the beginning of our reflection with Jesus' words of instruction: "when you pray." First of all, a question arises that is by no means obvious: when do we truly pray? That is, when do we have certainty of our prayer? That "when" does not refer solely to the instructions that follow, but also demands that we examine the temporal dimension in its various meanings. When do I pray? This question calls for reflections that require the theologian to broaden the horizon of inquiry without taking anything for granted. After all, none of us can deny that daily life is marked by a constant pressure to act, which creates conditions of fatigue, confusion, indifference, and more—placing in parentheses, if not altogether nullifying, the need for prayer. Prayer often remains as a hidden desire to find a space of serenity and tranquility, of authenticity and true rest. And when this need is perceived at certain particular moments of life, a sense of inadequacy is immediately felt. One returns to the traditional prayers learned in childhood and to the multiplication of words. One intuits the need to find another language that, unfortunately, one does not know and for which the means of access are often lacking. Prayer, in short, becomes more of a stammering—something one is ashamed of—because one is aware of having lost something essential and necessary. It is as though, in prayer, we fall into the absurdity of trying to express ourselves in a foreign language that we suppose we know, but instead babble without being understood by the native speaker.

Thus we return nostalgically to Jesus' words when, after the labor of evangelization, he said to his disciples: "'Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place" (Mk 6:31-32). Despite this invitation, the evangelist appears to be unrelenting, immediately adding: "People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them." (Mk 6:33). It seems, therefore, that not even the need for silence and prayer, together with well-deserved rest, can compete with the demands of evangelization. Mark's conclusion is well known: "When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mk 6:34). Faced with these

accounts, the first reaction is to think that there is no way out between the desire and need to pray and the relentless pressure of daily commitments.

Does the question of “when” we pray therefore remain unanswered? Are we trapped in a labyrinth without any possibility of a positive solution?

Being in the Presence of God

Fortunately for us, no. The most immediate response is both simple and demanding: one prays when one is in the presence of God. We are all convinced that our prayer cannot be limited to something external, in which certain things are said and requested—things that, moreover, God already knows (cf. Mt 6:8). Prayer is not a tribute rendered to God by servants who remember morning and evening to give thanks or to supplicate according to their needs. The words of the *Preface* come to mind: “you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift,”¹ Prayer, above all, means being aware of standing in the presence of God.

This affirmation is decisive, because it establishes a relationship that goes beyond one’s own needs and feelings. When one is in the presence of God, the first reaction is not to speak, but rather to remain in silence. This is the beginning of what constitutes the highest expression of prayer, commonly called “contemplative.” With good reason Hans Urs von Balthasar could write: “The better a man learns to pray, the more deeply he finds that all his stammering is only an answer to God’s speaking to him; this in turn implies that any understanding between God and man must be on the basis of God’s language.”²

In prayer, therefore, one must first be convinced of standing before a God who has spoken first; it is necessarily our task to listen and to receive the gift offered. Listening requires silence, without which the word does not reach us, leaving us incapable of entering into a coherent and authentic relationship with God. From listening to his word arises our capacity to respond in prayer that ascends to the Father. Unfortunately, we are often presumptuous enough to believe that this Word is no longer adequate for our time, worn out to the point that it can no longer be listened to or proposed to our interlocutors—hiding behind the excuse that they do not understand it³. Liturgical prayer finds its *raison d’être* in supporting the proclamation of the Gospel. The primacy of evangelization, however, has entered into crisis due to an excessive focus on the sacramentalization

¹ Roman Missal, *Common Preface IV*.

² H. U. von Balthasar, *Prayer*, San Francisco 1982, The Act of Contemplation.

³ It appears as though we are the first to forget what is written in *Sacrosanctum concilium*: “While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvelously strengthens their power to preach Christ” (SC 2).

of pastoral action, resulting in an imbalance that reveals the effects of a crisis of faith still ongoing and incapable of being overcome.

Prayer, therefore, is not extraneous to evangelization, which remains the first and indispensable action of the Church; on the contrary, it belongs fully to it and sustains its work. One cannot forget what Saint Paul VI wrote in this regard: “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection” (EN 14). This profound unity is found intact in the first community: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Prayer and the breaking of bread belong together, highlighting their mutual complementarity. Moreover, the New Testament texts abound in references to the prayers of the community, as Paul urges: “addressing one another [in] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph 5:19-20).

The Word that God addresses in prayer so that it may become our own expression of prayer is much closer than one might think. The Apostle recalls this by citing Deuteronomy: “For this command which I am giving you today is not too wondrous or remote for you. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to the heavens to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?’. Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may do it?’ No, it is something very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it” (Deut 30:11-14; cf. Rom 10:6-8). It is therefore necessary to rediscover that fundamental balance of the act of faith which knows how to hold together—without one eclipsing the other—the *lex credendi* and the *lex orandi* in view of evangelization.

From this perspective, the teaching of Pope Paul VI retains its full relevance and driving force: “We say to all of them: our evangelizing zeal must spring from true holiness of life, and... preaching must in its turn make the preacher grow in holiness, which is nourished by prayer and above all by love for the Eucharist” (EN 76). In short, a program of life in which evangelization, prayer, liturgy, charity, and holiness of life form a single whole, giving meaning to existence and making the Gospel credible to our contemporaries.

The Certainty of Presence in Beauty

Being in the presence of God also requires certainty of his presence, so that prayer does not become a chimera or a personal illusion ⁴. Believers must be offered a certainty that reassures them. Who can guarantee this certainty? The question is ancient. It was first posed by the anonymous author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. His argument runs throughout the entire text and ultimately resolves itself in this very question: How can one gain access to God? How can one enter into relationship with a transcendent and thrice-holy God? How can a person be certain of being in a true relationship with God? In short, is prayer as a relationship with God possible and real, or is it subject to the illusion each person creates in order to give space to what transcends reason?

In past decades, Hans Urs von Balthasar also gave authoritative voice to this question when he wrote: “If we are sick, we go to the doctor; if making a will, we go to a lawyer—in short, to an expert. But is there an expert for God’s relationship with me?... In my relationship to God, which must be guided by God’s relationship to me, I am alone; no one else has insight, can explain or mediate. Just as each of us dies alone, so too he ultimately prays alone, must enter his “chamber” before his Father in heaven, must seek to understand and follow God’s will for him and him alone... Jesus, the Word of God for me, comes to meet me in the Church, which preserves his Word as ever alive today in proclamation and sacrament... In the Church, within whose communion I am to receive the assurance that God’s Word will ring out to me, not from the far-distant past, but as close and engaging and unequivocal as my presence here and now is concrete... But which Church? Who in the Church can help me?... Can the demands I am making actually be satisfied by any man? He would have to mediate on my behalf in my unique relationship with God, without, however, dissolving this relationship in inner-worldly generalities. He would therefore have to know, from his own unique relationship with God, what this uniqueness actually is and at the same time be equipped with the mission and the authority to be able to know this, in the Holy Spirit, for others, also, and to give them the appropriate guidance” ⁵.

As we can see, here we enter the great chapter of liturgical prayer, which must be regarded as the prototype of the Church’s prayer. According to the teaching of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, the priest is called to be, for those who participate in the Eucharistic banquet, a guarantee of being in the presence of God. There is no alternative. For the author, Christ fully embodies the characteristics of the supreme and eternal High Priest. Thus another simple question emerges, one that will traverse two thousand years of history: what is required for there to be a priest? The sacred author’s answer is immediate: a priest must be pleasing to God and admitted to his presence in

⁴ As *Sacrosanctum concilium* reminds us: “The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father, in secret; yet more, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he should pray without ceasing” (SC 12).

⁵ H. U. von Balthasar, “The Priest I Seek” in *Priestly Spirituality*, San Francisco 2013, 53-56.

order to offer the sacrifice. His primary role consists precisely in intervening before the Father and being accredited before human beings as one who is truly in relationship with God. Christ's priesthood, however, is not like that of the old covenant, determined by birth into a priestly family, but is conferred exclusively through divine election. It is God who chooses someone to stand before him and communicate on his behalf with humanity. Two adjectives characterize the manner of his service: *mercy* and *faithfulness*. To be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek means not only being able to offer "bread and wine," but above all being "faithful and merciful." Faithfulness means believing God's word and transmitting it as it is received; mercy expresses the very action of the Father, who desires that no one perish but that all be saved.

In the celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, the priest is called to give certainty of being in the presence of God. Everything that distracts from this purpose detracts from the liturgy—that is, from the Church's prayer in its highest expression. There is therefore a need to give voice to beauty in the liturgy: the beauty of the mystery illuminated by the mystery of beauty. Beauty has always been foundational to our liturgy in order to evoke in every believer the supreme reality of encounter with the mystery of God. Beauty withstands the wear of time and prevents both the one who proclaims the Gospel and the one who prays from retreating into stereotyped and obsolete forms, because it provokes the search for ever-new languages capable of making the mystery of salvation living and present. In short: "Beauty is not the effect of human art, but the reflection of divine glory that reveals itself, and which human beings must first perceive before they can artistically represent it"⁶. Where beauty is lacking, love is lacking as well, and with it the meaning of life, the capacity to generate, and the effectiveness of prayer. Everything becomes insipid and devoid of meaning.

The liturgy would be greatly enriched if the way of beauty were to inspire ever more deeply its evocation of the mystery and the visibility of salvation present and at work. The beauty of the church building, of music and song, of liturgical vestments, of the priest's gestures, of sacramental signs, of the icon, of silence—all of this is not primarily aimed at communicating doctrine, but at evoking the presence of God. Beauty does not fade, but it needs people capable of renewing its face each day, conscious of the responsibility to proclaim even today, with the same enthusiasm, the beauty of the face of Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man, the ultimate answer to the question of meaning.

In Conclusion

⁶ C. Valenziano, *Scritti di estetica e di poetica*, Bologna 1999, 9.

“When you pray.” We began with an exhortation, and the conclusion cannot help but return to the starting point. The fundamental question remains in all its dramatic force, because it involves each of us as believers. Prayer, therefore, must be lived. Its effectiveness comes from being inserted *into* Christ, the Son, who gathers into himself the Word of God and the words of human beings, making of them a single offering pleasing to the Father. This prayer allows us to look deeply within ourselves and discover that we are oriented toward God. The more God is found, the more we forget ourselves, in order to discover what he has planned for each of us. Prayer is essential to faith. Every prayer is permeated by faith in the mystery of the Trinity: it is addressed to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and remains in its ecclesial dimension as an action of the Church, in the Church, and for the Church.

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