

will be for all of us a spur to joyfully bring forward the mission God has entrusted to us.

We go to Mary, the Mother who

“teaches us what love is and where it comes from,”³ through the intercession of St. Josemaría, asking for a fruitful 2006-2007 academic year, which we hereby declare inaugurated...

Articles

Madrid October-December 2006

“On Prayer,” in *Magnificat*

I

St. Josemaría Escrivá holds a special place among teachers of spirituality in the Church's history for a number of reasons. Above all, because he is a saint of our own times (canonized by John Paul II in 2002), who spread the universal call to holiness, through a specific path, among thousands upon thousands of Catholics. To attain holiness, one has to stay in habitual contact with God, or in other words, to pray. But prayer consists not only in saying vocal prayers. It means talking to God, making use of all one's human capacities: soul and body, head and heart, intellect and feelings. To be a saint means to become like Jesus. The more we imitate him, the more we try to be like him, developing through grace and our own efforts the sacramental identification we received in baptism, the greater is the holiness and identification with the Master that we will attain. Hence

the importance of “habitual conversation” with him. “Sanctity without prayer?” asked St. Josemaría in one of his most widely read books. And he answers concisely: “I don't believe in such sanctity” (*The Way*, no. 107).

God granted the founder of Opus Dei the gift of teaching in a practical way how men and women who are fully involved in earthly activities—in one's work and family, in the most varied and upright professional and social environments—can and should aspire to holiness, without neglecting their temporal duties. On the contrary, they have to make use of those very things to seek God, find him and love him. It was for this reason that the Holy See referred to him as “a traveling contemplative” in the decree recognizing that he practiced the Christian virtues to a heroic degree, one of the required stages prior to canonization.

This summary of St. Josemaría's own life has very important consequences. In first place, it shows that every path in life, if not opposed to God's law, can be sanctified; that no one is denied the grace to truly become a contemplative; that it is pos-

3. *Ibid.*, no. 42.

sible to be in God's presence amid the most absorbing tasks, to stay close to him amid the clamor of the world, without abandoning the place that each one occupies in society. In short, being a man or woman of prayer is not reserved only to those who, following a special call, take up the priestly or religious life. The contemplative life, precisely because it is a requirement of the path to holiness, is presented to us as a path within everyone's reach. St. Josemaría Escrivá was called by God, not only to proclaim this message, but to teach people how to live it, without lowering any of its demands. His example, the teachings that he transmitted in his writings and, above all, the reality of innumerable persons inspired by his spirit to seek holiness in the midst of earthly concerns, constitute a clear expression of the validity of what was afterwards proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council regarding the universal call to holiness. They also reflect a specific way of putting into practice the call of John Paul II, facing the new millennium, when he exhorted Christians to enter more deeply into the "art of prayer," to aspire to a "high level" of sanctity in their daily life.

Before looking at some of the fundamental points of his teachings on prayer, I want to cite here the first paragraph of his homily entitled "Life of Prayer." St. Josemaría wrote: "Whenever we feel in our hearts a desire to improve, a desire to respond more generously to our Lord, and we look for something to guide us, a north star to guide our lives as Christians, the Holy Spirit will re-

mind us of the words of the Gospel that we 'ought always to pray and not lose heart' (Lk 18:1). Prayer is the foundation of any supernatural endeavor. With prayer we are all powerful; without it, if we were to neglect it, we would accomplish nothing" (*Friends of God*, no. 238).

II

One of the "passions" of St. Josemaría was his love for freedom. He was a staunch defender of personal freedom, with its consequent personal responsibility, in all spheres of life. In the spiritual domain, his constant teaching was that there are many paths to holiness, because "each single soul is a masterpiece of God's making" (*Friends of God*, no. 83), with a very personal path to become identified with Christ. Therefore, without belittling the teaching of other saints, he was not a partisan of rigid methods for teaching people how to pray. His own experience and that of the many souls he had assisted in their interior life, reinforced in him the opinion that each person has to make an effort, guided by the Holy Spirit and the advice received in personal spiritual direction, to find his own path. "Let each traveler follow his own path," he used to say (*cada caminante siga su camino*), a path that varied according to the needs and circumstances of each soul.

To seek, find, and love Christ

At the same time, within this great variety of personal situations, as far back as the thirties he used to point out several broad stages, valid

for everyone, that one has to follow to become a soul of prayer: "May you seek Christ: may you find Christ: may you love Christ. —Three perfectly clear stages. Have you tried, at least, to live the first?" (*The Way*, no. 382). It is not a question, as the founder of Opus Dei himself pointed out, of clearly marked steps, nor does the fact of having gone through one lead automatically to the beginning of the next. On other occasions, he highlighted four "steps" for reaching identification with Christ: "seeking him, finding him, getting to know him, loving him." And he added: "It may seem clear to you that you are only at the first stage. Seek him then, hungrily; seek him within yourself, with all your strength. If you act with determination, I am ready to guarantee that you have already found him, and have begun to get to know him and to love him, and to hold your conversation in heaven" (*Friends of God*, no. 300).

In short, the path of prayer is not something that one acquires once and for all: one is always beginning and beginning again, with a human and supernatural eagerness to deepen one's conversation with God. In this endeavor, it is important to always consider oneself a student and never a master. This attitude, aside from being a strong counterweight to the possible temptation to spiritual pride, helps us not to become discouraged, to never abandon the practice of prayer because we seem to be making little progress. In the course of mental prayer or meditation, the most important thing is to attain a personal conversation with Jesus. All the rest,

such as reading a Gospel passage or some pious book, reflecting on what one has read, seeing one's own life in its light, etc., even though it may be very useful and even necessary, is directed to moving the will, which should break out into affections: acts of love or sorrow, acts of thanksgiving, petitions, resolutions, which constitute the proper fruit of true prayer. It is a matter of decisions to love God and neighbor more, specified perhaps in very small points, but which leave in the soul an aftertaste, not necessarily a matter of feelings, expressed in interior peace and calm, in order to confront, with new energy and with the joy of the sons and daughters of God, the duties and occupations inherent to one's particular situation in life. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the practice of prayer requires a true spiritual "battle" (no. 2725). The founder of Opus Dei used the same words in this context, and he added that this struggle, although it requires effort, is not sad or unpleasant, but has the joy and youthfulness of a sport. It is a "battle" in which we always have in view the "reward," God himself, who gives himself intimately to anyone who perseveres in seeking him, getting to know him and loving him.

III

"You write: 'To pray is to talk with God. But about what?' About what? About him, about yourself: joys, sorrows, successes and failures, noble ambitions, daily worries, weaknesses! And acts of thanksgiving and petitions: and Love and reparation. —In a word: to get to know him and to get to know your-

self: 'to get acquainted!'" (*The Way*, no. 91).

These words sum up very well the content of the prayer of the sons and daughters of God. A good child, especially if still young, speaks openly with its father or mother on any topic. It has an unwavering trust in them, for it knows they are deeply interested in all its concerns. And if in human, Christian dealings, it is good to take into account the circumstances of each person, in our dealings with God this criterion has to be applied with absolute confidence. What matters is not so much what we say or how we express ourselves, but above all our desire to speak with the One who loves us immensely and who seeks only our good.

*Suggestions regarding
how to pray*

"You say that you don't know how to pray? Put yourself in the presence of God, and once you have said, 'Lord, I don't know how to pray!' rest assured that you have begun to do so" (*The Way*, no. 90). Those who are beginning usually need some special help, some external supports. St. Josemaría called them "crutches," because they serve as points of reference to begin one's dialogue with our Lord: the consideration of a Gospel passage, or of other sacred books or a liturgical text; the attentive meditation on the words of a vocal prayer, such as the Our Father or the Hail Mary; the reading of a book that has themes for prayer.... Over time one can leave aside those "crutches," although it is never good to abandon them en-

tirely. It is not unusual, in fact, that they are needed again after a few years, or from time to time. They can be used as a hand rail to help overcome difficulties that sooner or later may crop up: distractions, interior dryness, worries that try to get the upper hand, physical or intellectual exhaustion.

It is useful to recall that prayer can be seen as a battle in which one must never give up. For among the excuses used to abandon the daily time of prayer, one of the most frequent is discouragement. Upon failing to see clear progress, the temptation can arise to limit oneself to vocal prayers, or even to stop praying altogether. What a great error that would be! This is a "business" that cannot be measured by specific results, which are impossible to calculate in a supernatural activity. The important thing is to continue right to the end of the time dedicated to mental prayer, striving diligently to overcome any difficulties.

Practical advice that St. Josemaría gave in this regard included the time and place chosen for mental prayer: find a place that facilitates interior recollection (in front of a tabernacle whenever possible), and hold to a schedule, always trying to advance the time for prayer rather than postponing it when one foresees a problem. He also advised people to ask for help from our allies, the guardian angels, and to try to turn even distractions into subject matter for one's dialogue with God. This is of maximum importance, since praying is holding a conversation with our Lord, not with ourselves. He often advised people to "put them-

selves" into the Gospel scenes. "My advice," he said, "is that, in your prayer, you actually take part in the different scenes of the Gospel, as one more among the people present. First of all, imagine the scene or mystery you have chosen to help you recollect your thoughts and meditate. Next apply your mind, concentrating on the particular aspect of the Master's life you are considering—his merciful Heart, his humility, his purity, the way he fulfills his Father's Will. Then tell him what happens to you in these matters, how things are with you, what is going on in your soul. Be attentive, because he may want to point something out to you, and you will experience suggestions deep in your soul, realizing certain things and feeling his gentle reprimands" (*Friends of God*, no. 253). It is also good to have recourse to our Lady, teacher of prayer, and to St. Joseph, when beginning and ending our times of prayer. "Together they will bring our weakness to Jesus, so that he may turn it into strength" (*Ibid.*, no. 255).

IV

If a Christian is faithful and persevering in conversing with God, his prayer will not be confined only to the moments especially dedicated to speaking with him. It will be prolonged throughout one's whole day, both day and night, so that one's work and rest, joy and sorrow, serenity and concerns, one's entire life is turned into prayer. Thus, almost without noticing it, a Christian who is consistent with his vocation as a child of God is becoming "a traveling contemplative," a soul of prayer.

Life of prayer

"In recommending this unbroken union with God, am I not presenting an ideal so sublime that it is unattainable by the majority of Christians? Certainly the goal is high, but it is not unattainable. The path that leads to holiness is the path of prayer; and prayer ought to take root and grow in the soul little by little, like the tiny seed which later develops into a tree with many branches" (*Friends of God*, no. 295). In the homily "Towards Sanctity," St. Josemaría describes in broad outlines the itinerary of his own spiritual path, and offers what might be considered the guidelines for turning one's whole life into prayer. "We start with vocal prayers which many of us have been saying since we were children. They are made up of simple, ardent phrases addressed to God and to his Mother, who is our Mother as well...Is this not, in some way, a beginning of contemplation, an evident expression of trusting self-abandonment?...First one brief aspiration, then another, and another... till our fervor seems insufficient, because words are too poor...then this gives way to intimacy with God, looking at God without needing rest or feeling tired. We begin to live as captives, as prisoners. And while we carry out as perfectly as we can (with all our mistakes and limitations) the tasks allotted to us by our situation and duties, our soul longs to escape. It is drawn towards God like iron drawn by a magnet. One begins to love Jesus, in a more effective way, with the sweet and gentle surprise of his encounter" (*Friends of God*, no. 296).

An important step along this path is the “discovery” of Christ’s Most Holy Humanity, which is always the only path to reach the Blessed Trinity. “To follow Christ—that is the secret. We must accompany him so closely that we come to live with him, like the first Twelve did; so closely, that we become identified with him. Soon we will be able to say, provided we haven’t put obstacles in the way of grace, that we have put on, have clothed ourselves with our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Friends of God*, no. 299). A distinguishing mark of Christ’s disciple is the encounter with the Cross. One should neither flee from it, nor seek it out recklessly in spectacular ways. The Holy Spirit ordinarily points us towards it in daily happenings, granting us at the same time the grace to love it. Then the Cross is not heavy; Jesus himself, the good Cyrenean, carries it on his own shoulders. One begins to walk along the path of contemplation and discovers our Lord at every step.

Moments of suffering alternate with periods of calm, but interior joy, which is compatible with suffering, is never lacking: here we discover the clearest sign that we are walking alongside the Master. Thus, in corresponding to grace, we learn to find, to get to know and to love the Blessed Trinity. “We have run ‘like

the deer, longing for flowing streams’ (Ps 41:2); thirsting, our lips parched and dry. We want to drink at this source of living water. All day long, without doing anything strange, we move in this abundant, clear spring of fresh waters that leap up to eternal life (cf. Jn 4:14). Words are not needed, because the tongue cannot express itself. The intellect grows calm. One does not reason; one looks! And the soul breaks out once more into song, a new song, because it feels and knows it is under the loving gaze of God, all day long.

“I am not talking about extraordinary situations. These are, they may very well be, ordinary happenings within our soul: a loving craziness which, without any fuss or extravagance, teaches us how to suffer and how to live, because God grants us his wisdom...Either way, it is a gift of God’s mercy. If you try to meditate, our Lord will not deny you his assistance. Faith and deeds of faith are what matter: deeds, because...God demands more from us each day. This is already contemplation and union. This is the way many Christians should live, each one forging ahead along his own spiritual path (there are countless paths) in the midst of the cares of the world, even though he may not even realize what is happening to him” (*Friends of God*, nos. 307 and 308).