

Deepening Our Prayer

Introduction: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

“Lord, teach us to pray.” This request of the apostles resounds in our own life too. If we are humble, and if we want to know and love God more, we will want to improve in all aspects of our prayer ... that it be more personal, affectionate, and ever deeper.

Road Map

The first chapter of this little book provides a theoretical background. It shows our need for God and the value of prayer. The other three chapters offer more practical tips. Without the first chapter, this book would be a string of disconnected recommendations. (Without the other three, there would be no concrete strategy for teaching others how to pray, should we be asked) Theory is not enough for orienting our lives towards Our Lord. Daily advances (or setbacks) in prayer are eminently practical in nature.

No two souls are the same and the work of the Holy Spirit is different in the life of each person. That is why the ideas we offer are general, and must be applied with prudence and discernment. Still, there are general patterns that one learns by experience.

Each person’s prayer life should develop over time. These paths of prayer are long. Usually, after many years of praying, we do not come across anything particularly novel or original. But our path includes many small details. We discover new ways of understanding the eternal truths and of loving them more deeply.

The spiritual life is complex, and therefore, it is difficult to gauge the interior life and the action of the Holy Spirit by levels or stages. Any situation can arise at any age and in any style of prayer. What is more, the same person may grow closer to God in a totally unsuspected way, and soon afterwards find it very difficult to pray. Only the Holy Spirit knows and fosters each person’s interior life, and His ways often surprise us. But in every case, we must struggle against sin and imperfection, and foster contrition and trust in God our Father and in Jesus Christ our Savior.

The Big (and Little) Picture

As St. John Paul II said, all God’s graces, prayer included, are “a gift and a task.” They require a response from man. The quest is twofold: (1) discovering how great and beautiful it is to be open to God, to seek His friendship, which makes us happy both here and in the life to come; and (2) learning, with patience and tenacity, practical ways of moving forward in our path towards God.

The second point comes first, of course, in time. Broader vision comes after observing things on the small scale. Similarly, prayer helps us see our life within the

universal salvific will of God, in the big (and little) picture.

Recourse to the various ways of praying and to practical tips is necessary and helpful but not the most important thing: they are indispensable, but not the goal. The goal is not to have a good session of prayer, but rather to allow God to become one with us, and allowing ourselves be loved by Him, and learning to love Him with the help of His grace.

Prayer is the communication of life between God and the Christian: life received and life lived, life accepted and life offered.

Giving and Living Our Life

People who pray know that it affects their whole life. It is not simply an activity but a personal commitment, and it affects one's identity, relationships, and life story. Discovering who God is and who we are before him sparks this realization.

Prayer happens when we realize that our whole life flows from and back towards God. We discover this gradually. Grace increases the growth, but by our negligence prayer can also decline. The difference is not what we *do* when we pray, or how we address God, but getting to know Him and growing in His love (cf. 1 John 4:16). We recognize our own unworthiness, but we trustingly pursue Him because God takes the first step, not us.

St. Josemaría said that for a life of prayer to take hold, we have to cultivate hatred of sin. It is a grace that should go deep, and if we ask for it with all our heart, it will. Our work, our time, and our thoughts should all reflect this aversion from what displeases God.

Prayer is not simply the joint work of our faculties (intelligence, will, passions). It is something else. The personal and the intimate come to the fore, namely: knowledge of oneself and others, adoration of God, and gratitude. Concerning gratitude, Chesterton pointed out two ways that a man could respond to life: as a gift, which would foster this gratitude (the beginning of true prayer); or as a right, which could keep us dissatisfied with life's constant demands. Humility makes all the difference here.

To begin a life of prayer is to set about discovering one's own vulnerability and the wonder of God, and these two things go very much together.

No matter what the situation, my prayer, while varying in tone, has always been the same. I have said to him: 'Lord, You put me here. You entrusted me with this or that, and I put my trust in you. I know you are my Father, and I have seen that tiny children are always absolutely sure of their parents.' My priestly experience tells me that abandonment such as this in the hands of God stimulates souls to acquire a strong, deep and serene piety, which drives them to work constantly and with an upright intention.¹

In our life of prayer, there is a need for connection with God, for direction and guidance, so as to understand ourselves and God. We need to turn to masters in the art of prayer. The lives and writings of the saints are of tremendous help, as are people in our

¹ *Friends of God*, 143.

own lives. The writings of St. Josemaría are especially helpful in thinking about prayer, and so we will refer to them frequently in this book.

Prayer makes us aware of our relationship with God. We present ourselves to Him as we are and in whatever state we are in. We recognize his saving action and will. To pray is to live one's life fully trusting in that *Someone* –our Father God – who utterly transcends and surpasses us.

It is only by praying that we learn to pray.

Chapter I: Prayer as our Foundation

Living for God

In the book of Genesis we find many different words to describe creation: “*Let there be light,*” “*Let there be a firmament,*” “*Let there be bright stars.*” Then we find: “*Let us create man in our own likeness*” (Gen 1:26). God intervenes personally when creating man. He makes man in His image and likeness, “inspires” (Latin: *breathes into*) him with his own breath, and brings man to life by His own life (cf. Gen 2:7). God gives man a life based on the communion of the Trinity: the Lover, the Beloved and the Love. Man enters into the current of divine love, and lives *from* and *for* his relationship with God. What sustains him, what nourishes him spiritually and ontologically, is divine Life itself.

We especially see this in Christ, the Incarnate Word, perfect God and perfect man. He is a man who is God, a man whose existential food is the voice of the Father. He lives by the Father’s gaze, by his presence, by lovingly fulfilling His will. Everything in Jesus hearkens back to His Father.

Many passages of the Gospel describe how Christ constantly turns to his Father, particularly when He withdraws to pray. This relationship is His nourishment, His strength: “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me*” (John 4:34).

This same thing happens to us. Christ shows us our true calling.¹ We pray to the extent that we immerse ourselves in Christ’s prayer to the Father through the grace of the Holy Spirit. “The voices flowed into my ears, and the Truth dripped into my heart,” says St Augustine.² The Holy Spirit usually acts like a light breeze or a distant whisper. His grace is like water dripping little by little into the cracks of the heart, even when it is hard and rocky. The Spirit does not impose Himself and does not act aggressively.

Without a relationship and a dialogue with God our efforts are in vain. Prayer, on the other hand, *revivifies* us, because we come from God and move towards Him as our rest. Our journey is nothing but God’s attraction and our response. Without God, we cannot help but lose coherence and moral purpose.

Sharing in Life

Benedict XVI agreed with St Augustine: man’s reason always rests in a higher reason: “I can only know because I am known. I can only love because I am first loved. I can pardon because I am first pardoned.”³ “But how can we choose if we are not first chosen, and how can we love if another does not love us first? Hear the apostle John: we love God because He loved us first. Try to discover how man can possibly love God, and

¹ Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 2.20.

² Cf. *Confessions* IX. 6.14.

³ J. Ratzinger, *Creo en Dios todopoderoso, creador del cielo y de la tierra*, in “Yo Creo”, Madrid, 2010. p. 18.

you will find no other way than through God's prior love."⁴

In the gospel there is a parable of a king who returns from a journey and asks his stewards to render an account. One owed ten thousand talents, a debt he could not repay. He begs the king for mercy. "And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt" (*Matt 18:27*). But later, this servant is unwilling to forgive the miniscule debt of another servant. He does not realize that everything he owns is a forgiven debt.

If we forgive, it is because we are forgiven first. The same can be said of love, which is the bond of perfection of all the virtues: If I "have not love, I am nothing." (1 Cor 13:2). This first relationship is all-important: God loved us first, and that love of His is what sustains us.

Prayer is not about reading a spiritual text and applying it to our life, but recognizing and discovering who I am before God. We show Him our ideals, shortcomings, desires, horizons left unreached, wounds ... At the most fundamental level, prayer answers the basic question: who am I? As St. Josemaría said: "the topic of my prayer is the topic of my life."

"If, like Jesus, we entrust everything to the will of the Father [concerns, worries, requests ...], the object of our prayer takes a back seat, and what is truly important is manifested: our relationship with Him.

This is the effect of prayer: transform desire and shape it according to the will of God, aspiring above all to union with Him, who goes out to meet his children full of merciful love."⁵

Prayer blends together my personal story, my life and Life Himself. A plot arises which interweaves my story, that of God and of others. It is a tapestry which gathers together both joys and sorrows, dreams and disappointments, projects and desires. Everyone has a *personal* story in which we transcend the *individual* plane, because we go to God and participate in salvation history. We remember the love that God has shown in that history. It affects me because I am a part of it. Among other things, it leads me to discover that the Passover means something in my life. It is not simply an historical event. The Passover is a sign of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, which is the central event of my life.

The Redemption wrought by Christ – "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20) – speaks to us personally. It challenges us and opens up to us the *way* of salvation. We have been saved and united to Christ as members of his Body, as members of a people. This allows us to understand the community and social value of prayer, of the liturgy of the Church, of all vocal prayers.

Tradition and teachers present *opportunities* for learning how to pray: that is a special way to live the communion of saints. If we do not ignore the communal, ecclesial

⁴ St Augustine, *Sermon* 34, 1-3, 5-6; CCL 41, 424-426.

⁵ Pope Francis, General Audience, May 25th, 2016.

aspect of prayer, our personal prayer could quickly degenerate into *individualistic* prayer, which would be a misinterpretation of the Gospel. Jesus, as is evident in the gospels, addresses people individually; not in isolation.

Immersed in the Gospel, Living in Christ

We began these pages with that request, “Teach us to pray!” We know the Lord's answer well: “When you pray, say: Our Father...” To pray, nothing more is needed. The only thing necessary is to pay attention to the words of the Lord's Prayer and try to understand them. Despite the fact that we learned it as children, we will always be able to pray it better, up until our last breath. That is not an exaggeration: the Our Father is a little glimpse into the infinity of God.

Something deep calls out to us from the Lord's Prayer, as we will see. Yet the prayer is also simple and accessible to everyone. It hides the grandeur and simplicity of the Incarnation and of Christ's whole life, of the divine Person who comes down to live with men, becoming one of us in all things but sin (Heb 4:15).

The actions of Jesus – His teachings, His gaze, His gestures – touch the hearts of those who hear him and open their eyes to new horizons. Our thoughts go to Nathanael, Zacchaeus, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, the Good Thief, the disciples of Emmaus, and Paul. Jesus invites us to a new life, to a new way of looking at ourselves, at others, and at God. “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Luke 24:32).

My advice 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 fulfils 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.⁶

St. Josemaría encouraged people to pray with the Gospel as if they were "another character in the scene." He wanted people to get to know the heart of Jesus and their own hearts better. This does not mean seeing new things, but seeing things with new eyes: “*All Christians, when they pause to consider things in prayer, have to make their own the goal proposed by St Augustine: noverim te, noverim me (Soliloquies II, 1): to know God, to know oneself, and draw the obvious conclusions.*”⁷ To know him and to know myself: with Christ I discover myself. When I discover myself, I discover the face of Christ. St.

⁶ *Friends of God*, 253.

⁷ *While he spoke to us on the way*, p. 203.

Josemaría used the example of St. Joseph, and pointed out that for that just man, Jesus' life "was a recurring discovering of his own vocation."⁸

*"It is not a matter of just thinking about Jesus, of recalling some scenes of his life. We must be completely involved and play a part in his life. We should follow him as closely as Mary his Mother did, as closely as the first twelve, the holy women, the crowds that pressed about him. If we do this without holding back, Christ's words will enter deep into our soul and will really change us."*⁹

It is about finding our place in the Gospel: "You, in that house, are whatever you wish to be: a friend, a servant, an onlooker, a neighbor... –For the moment I don't dare to be anything. I hide behind you and, full of awe, I watch what is happening."¹⁰ One day we will be able to say, "I was there." Each scene, each act of Jesus can give meaning to our life. His words illuminate our existence, more than the light of the sun. Having *been there*, as one more character, His words and His gestures start to affect the meaning of our life, here and now. This scene, this mystery of Jesus' life becomes the foundation of *our* life. All this is only possible with the help of the Holy Spirit. "Christ enables us *to live in him* all that he himself lived, and *he lives it in us*."¹¹

Identification with Christ

Everything that He lived 2,000 years ago, we can live ourselves. Everything, each one of the mysteries, from His childhood to the Cross to the Resurrection: "We must carry on and even fulfil those mysteries of Jesus, and we have to frequently ask him to carry them to completion in us and in His church."¹²

Knowing myself to be a character in each scene of the gospel, I come to understand myself and weave together my identity. There comes a moment when my identity cannot be separated from the identity of Christ, because only in Christ is there fullness of true Life. And that fullness – that holiness – can be summed up, in the words of St. Paul, as having the same mind that Christ Jesus had (cf. Phil 2:5).

In a sincere and genuine person, words and gestures express who he is. Yet they are unable to fully reveal his identity because of his sins and imperfections. In Jesus there is perfect coherence. His words and deeds are coherent with His life. As we insert ourselves into the life of our Lord, that becomes our goal too.

Because of the Incarnation, the eternal life of the Word unfolds in a set time (1st century), in a set place (Jerusalem and surroundings), with a set people (the Jewish people), and with set gestures and languages (Hebrew and Aramaic). In the Gospel we find Christ in his entirety, and I can live out those moments with Him and in Him. Not only can

⁸ *Christ is Passing By*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107. Cf. also *Friends of God*, 216.

¹⁰ *Holy Rosary*, First Joyful Mystery.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 521.

¹² St John Eudes, *Le royaume de Jesús*, 3, 4; *Oevres Complètes*, v. 1. (Vannes 1905; p. 310-311).

*I pray as another character in the scene, but I really am another character in the scene. Furthermore, I am not another Christ but "Christ himself."*¹³

Every act of Christ's life is of relevance to me.¹⁴ Christ speaks to me in each of his mysteries. His every act challenges me, gives me meaning. All prayer should reflect that dialogue, which is life, where desires, affections, intentions, inspirations are born ... which will be effective if they are reflected in the reality of my life.

“By His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man.”¹⁵ All the acts of Jesus are redemptive and reach the whole of humanity, but also each man in a unique and unrepeatable way. The words he says to Bartimaeus, for example, are not said in the same way that he says them to me. They are eternal words, always alive, and they transcend time and space. They have their own strength. Bartimaeus welcomes them at the time and with his personal history. We can find in those words a dialogue that the Word establishes with each person in history and in our current time. In those words we find light to know who Christ is and who I am: “*Noverim me, noverim te.*”¹⁶

A heartfelt desire, a calling to Love

All creatures are *called into existence*, a call that, in man, is expressed in a radical *desire for meaning*. It is a *thirst* beyond intellectual curiosity, but it is a true *call to Love*: attraction to God wounds the human heart and directs it back to God. Faith tells us that God's radical love endows us with a deep desire for happiness and a real capacity to achieve it. And that capacity has a name: freedom. Our identity is woven into the dialogue between our attraction towards God and our free will.

We cannot give our own lives their full meaning. We cannot achieve happiness on our own. It is a gift that God gives us. We find it fully in the life of Christ, the God made flesh, whose story of Love and redemption is the foundation of the entire universe. That is why in the lives of people who do not pray the meaning of their lives is eclipsed, it unravels bit by bit. St. Josemaría used to say that only animals do not pray. Where there is no life there is no meaning, but where there is no meaning there is no life. The meaning of our life is to live in Love.

¹³ An expression coined by Saint Josemaría, a loose translation of: Gal 2:20.

¹⁴ The conviction that our life is fused with the mysteries of the life of Christ is unanimous in the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, although each of them tries to understand it and express it in the way that his philosophical and theological “tools” allows. Cf. among many examples, St Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, 12 (PG 26/1004); St Hilary, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 15 (PL 10/247) ss; St Cyril of Alexandria, *In Ioh.* I, 9 (PG 73/161); St Augustine, *In Ps.* 34/2, 5 (PL 36/336); *In Ps.* 21/2, 3 (PL 36/172). Cf. C. Ayxelà, *Et ibi nos eramus – et ibi nos oramus. L'Eucharistia come dimora nell'orazione di Gesù*, in *Il mistero di Cristo reso presente nella liturgia*, Juan José Silvestre (Ed.) 2016. 169-1-84.

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

¹⁶ St Augustine, *Soliloquy* II, 2.

Nature and grace: perfect God and perfect Man

A healthy spiritual life will not come from a faulty or deformed nature. We achieve holiness through our human nature, according to its expression in each person. Good wine (grace) should not be put into an old and broken wineskin (nature), because both the wine and the wineskin would be spoiled (Mk 2:22). It is no surprise that St. Josemaría stressed the cultivation and development of human virtues for personal sanctification.

*There are many Christians who follow Christ and are astonished by his divinity, but forget him as Man. And they fail in the practice of supernatural virtues, despite all the external paraphernalia of piety, because they do nothing to acquire human virtues.*¹⁷

In the incarnate Word we find harmony between nature and grace. Christ is born into a family and is raised in a particular time and place. His humanity gradually develops, which does not imply any lack of perfection.¹⁸ We grow up in a similar way. Everything human reaches its fullness in Him, who sanctified family life in the village of Nazareth.

*Joseph, caring for that Child as he had been commanded, made Jesus a craftsman, transmitting his craft to him. (...)What must Joseph have been, how grace must have worked in him, that he should be able to fulfil this task of the human upbringing of the Son of God! (...)In human life, Joseph was Jesus' master.*¹⁹

Some reflections from Cardinal Ratzinger on the topic are quite illuminating:

“Jesus, in so far as He is a child, comes not only from God, but also from other men. He has lived in the womb of a woman, from whom He has received flesh and blood, heartbeats, and his style of speech and gesture. He has received life from another human being. Anyone who receives from some other what is not his own is not a purely biological action. This means that Jesus received His ways of thinking and observing, the cast of His soul, from men who existed before Him, and ultimately, from His Mother.”²⁰

Grace acts in a heart open to truth, goodness, beauty, and everything noble in our nature; it fulfills what nature already began to teach us. Grace is not magic that goes against or above nature: it helps bring out nature's potential and achieve its own perfection. As Saint John Paul II said, the spiritual companion must be a teacher not only of prayer but also of humanity, and be a profound connoisseur of the human heart.²¹ “We must be very human, for otherwise we cannot be divine.”²²

¹⁷ *Furrow*, 652.

¹⁸ This idea is expressed in the mysterious words of *Luke 2:52*, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.”

¹⁹ *Christ is Passing By*, 55-56.

²⁰ J. Ratzinger, *Journey Towards Easter*.

²¹ “We need heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart ... but at the same time contemplatives who have fallen in love with God.” Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Europe, 11 October 1985.

²² *Christ is Passing By*, 166.

There is no other option. To ignore our humanity would make the interior life a veneer of piety incapable of transforming our lives. Christian life would become a list of boring and repetitive religious acts, a lukewarm mess teetering on spiritual collapse. Faith is either our whole life or it is nothing, and life is rooted in the truth of our nature, in each one's personality.

The Christian soul is like a flower that grows gradually. It needs water and light, which come from God. It needs good soil: an integrated, healthy, well-formed personality, capable of recognizing its faults with humility. God can act on and transform such a soul. This mature personality can sketch out its identity in the dialogue of prayer, a dialogue born of love. Open to emancipating truth, this dialogue ends up changing one's life. Life becomes prayer and prayer life, because both are interwoven in freedom and love for the truth: "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32).

A liberating truth

As we begin to improve in our prayer, the key is a love for the truth. Living in the truth leads to simplicity, without which we cannot know or improve ourselves. In fact, becoming *simpler* was how St. Josemaría defined spiritual formation. We get rid of the masks that disguise and disfigure our true selves, and prevent us from reaching that self. St. Josemaría used the image of the artichoke. The hard outer leaves are removed until we reach the heart. Becoming simpler usually involves painful purifications.

The truth requires burning away everything that is low-rate and false. We surround ourselves with so many shells to flee from fear and discomfort. But "conversion means accepting the sufferings truth brings with it."²³ The truth destroys those masks that we put on. By knowing ourselves and God better, the masks melt away before the truth of beauty and the beauty of truth. It is God who carries out this purifying action in us, to make us free (in human terms) and children of God (in supernatural terms). We no longer live under the fear of the law, but are brought to life by an open spirit of filiation, trust and freedom.

A transforming truth

Dismas, the repentant thief, talks to Jesus – prays to Jesus – and recognizes the great truth of his life: "*And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds.*" (Luke 23:41). He understands that he was in the wrong, that his entire existence has been a failure. However, this recognition does not end in a sad and useless lament. He turns his dirty and guilty gaze to the Lord to ask that He remember this thief in His kingdom.

Accepting his own misery leads to humility and opens his eyes to the truth. It is a conversion that is hidden from the other thief and the Roman soldiers. Beholding the crucified Lord, tortured and mocked, the good thief's gaze sees the sovereignty and beauty of the King of all creation. In his apparent ugliness, the good thief discovers Beauty made flesh, eternity contained in a man: the All in an almost lifeless fragment.

²³ J. Ratzinger, *Journey Towards Easter*.

How does he arrive at that humility, that truth? Why, faced with the knowledge of his utter misery, does he throw himself confidently into the arms of that mysterious man and understand the divine royalty of Christ? He himself gives the answer: "This man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). This is the key to the surprising and miraculous transformation of this criminal. Dismas, realizing his sin, sees innocence in Jesus.

And, in the face of that purity, the thief recognizes the treasure that his hungry heart has always sought: the innocent beauty that forgives and does not impose itself, that out of love allows itself to be scourged to death. "*Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*" (John 15:13). It is the opposite of his life and how he had always lived: dominating, imposing, possessing. Dismas, in that sublime moment, falls in love with the innocence of Jesus and asks Him for it. He implores Christ in his last weakness, and does not make demands. Unlike the other thief, he has learned, in his self-knowledge, the strength and beauty of seeing himself vulnerable. Before the innocent heart of Jesus, he discovers his own identity: miserable, but loved even unto death on the cross, by God made man. "*And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power."*" (Luke 23:42). Now that is prayer!

This is the first time in the Gospel that someone addresses the Master simply by His name. The thief trusts Jesus because he sees the Lord with new eyes. St. Josemaría suggests this as a path towards the contemplative life: *Lose that fear of calling the Lord by His name – Jesus – and of telling Him that you love Him.*²⁴ In the humiliation and degradation of Jesus' face, Dismas recognizes the king of the world, who looks on him tenderly, restores his dignity, and makes him feel loved once again: "*And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*" (Luke 23:43). That is prayer.

To pray is to discover the Risen Lord by saying, "Look, mother!" just like a child, just like the Child of Nazareth who talks with His mother Mary. To pray is to discover that *quid divinum* (divine something)²⁵ in the people and circumstances that surround us.

²⁴ *The Way*, 303.

²⁵ Cf. *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, 116.

Chapter II: Entering into the life of prayer

We have established the general framework of prayer. We will now focus on the practical first steps of praying.

The decision to pray and persevering in that decision have the same motivation. With a few tweaks, what we say here will apply just as well for the more advanced, just as basic algebra is the basis of more complex mathematical operations. To focus too much on *stages* or *degrees* of prayer can be a problem.

God is with us, or are we with God?

St Augustine famously said, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”¹ He shows the need for times exclusively dedicated to prayer. In 1935, when talking about what topics to bring up with young people in formation, St. Josemaría wrote: *Prayer. A lot about this subject, because if you do not form these boys into men of prayer, you have wasted your time.*”

The essentials of the faith come before prayer. Prayer implies a relationship with God the Creator and Redeemer and our absolute need for Him. These are truths for both mind and heart. Prayer establishes a *dialogue* with the Creator. We know that God is with us.

It is through prayer that we are *divinized*; we discover the extent to which God is with us. Awareness of my need for divine help, grants me in the proper perspective, because no one has ever seen God (cf. John 1:18) and on our own we are unable to pray. Even so, this *divinization* anchors us in the hope that prayer is possible, because God can come to us without words and the Holy Spirit works on our behalf.

*“Go to Jesus as his disciples did and say to him, Lord, teach us how to pray (Luke 11:1). You will discover how the Holy Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; when we do not know what prayer to offer, to pray as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with groans beyond all utterance (Rom 8:26), which are impossible to describe, for no words are adequate to express their depth.”*²

Do I experience that need? Do I recognize my nothingness before the wonders of God? Do I perceive the need for God like a castaway in the middle of the ocean? Do I cling to the supernatural means at my disposal? Have I cried out in my daily prayer? Have I accepted the mercy of God and the intercession of Mary our mother?

*‘Lord, I do not know how to talk to you! Lord, teach us how to pray!’
When we pray, thus, we receive all the loving assistance of the Holy Spirit – that light, fire, and driving wind which sets the flame alight and makes it capable of enkindling a great fire of love.*³

¹ *Confessions* 1:1, 1.

² *Friends of God*, 244.

³ *Ibid.*

Perhaps we do not think of it explicitly, but in practice we can act as if prayer depended on us. Then there is little chance of success. On the other hand, when we go to prayer asking God for help, many times our prayer will develop “into a broad, smooth-flowing stream.”⁴ It is like that Canaanite woman to whom necessity forced her to ask with faith and humility: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.*” (Matt 15:27)

Difficulties and solutions

Prayer is necessary, as we all know. But it is just as necessary to anchor ourselves in Jesus’ comforting promise: that of his assistance and his grace in the face of our daily difficulties. “*And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.*” (Matt 28:20). Confident faith in the Master is the basic ingredient of all sincere prayer.

Some difficulties are personal and others cultural. A cultural challenge, at least for us, is that we live in a highly visual society. We live on quick images that give us only superficial and quick information. We usually do not take time to reflect or go deeper because it requires a lot of effort. It is also hard for us to judge what the media offers us, especially because they transmit what we like to hear. Other cultural challenges are our habit of looking for instant gratification and our obsession with results. These things make it very difficult for us to engage in leisure. We feel pressed and tempted to bring work into our rest.

Our daily circumstances play a big role in our prayer life. Because of the aforementioned challenges, those beginning to pray often struggle to maintain recollection. Their energy is dissipated in technology, a great obstacle to a spirit of penance and apostolic zeal. We should not despair at the apparent vicious cycle of praying poorly (or not at all), of a lax interior life, of dropping our spiritual routine and starting it over, etc. This is all a call to form a *virtuous cycle*. In the face of prior disappointments, we need to have hope and trust in God to foster a lively, joyous and optimistic desire to really move forward in the spiritual life and overcome these difficulties. Jesus promised he would help us, and that should be our anchor.

Prayer: Willing and Able

The non-negotiables are God’s grace and our desire. From there, we can move on to three necessities: love of silence, exterior and interior; constancy; and a disciplined habit of listening, so we can hear God’s voice.

Many persons do not appreciate silence. They fill the time with talking, reading, or listening to music to relax. They neglect the role of listening in prayer. The truth is that it is a great gift to love silence, external and internal, for its own sake. If we see that, it will be easy to help others love it as well. It means a “conversion” to silence, which is more than just being quiet. To arrive at an encounter with oneself and with God, this is

⁴ *Ibid.*, 306.

indispensable. It is in silence, not in tumult or noise, that God enters the most intimate depths of our being.

Noise and our internal passions separate us from ourselves. Silence gives us serenity. It leads us to ask questions about how our life is going. We can be overly pro-active or chatty in prayer. That may not bring us closer to God or allow us to go deep. When there is agitation there is no space for recollection, for thinking, for living a deeper life. Interior and exterior silence leads us to encounter God, to wonder and go down on our knees before him. This silence is neither empty nor mere introspection. It is where we encounter a God's presence. This "substantial silence" enriches us because it allows us to listen to God. It opens the door to our prayers and petitions, and to meditating with Him about different topics.

Prayer is tough and demands time and effort. That is why besides silence, there is also need for constancy. There is exterior constancy – for example, maintaining a prayer schedule of a set length and at set times of the day. *To begin is for everyone; to persevere is for saints.*⁵ With perseverance comes habit and with habit comes friendship with God. We will be able to talk about anything with Him. That is, if we live out our prayer schedule out of love, and not as a checklist or for the sake of appearances.

Specific ways to listen to God better include: not multitasking and focusing on and being present to others in conversation, avoiding giving our attention to other things; enkindling a desire to learn; humbly recognizing our nothingness and His everything; asking the Lord open questions, leaving Him space to respond when He wants to; following the rhythm and direction of where considerations of his love may lead us, and promptly avoiding distractions that lead us down rabbit holes; learning to keep an open mind, letting ourselves be surprised, dreaming of the things of God, without always trying to control the prayer. All this will allow God to speak to us. It will keep the inspirations of the Holy Spirit flowing. The soul opens itself to the mystery and logic of God. This allows us to accept the unknown of where God may lead us. We will have faith and trust that God will give us his help and grace. He will help us in our prayer, if we really do want to have a dialogue with him.

How does God speak?

There is a question that is likely to arise for everyone. "How do I know that this idea is from Him and not from me?" It is a good question. The thought may occur to us when we see that God's inspirations might call us to make a sacrifice. For that reason, behind that thought may hide the desire of wanting to maintain some control. It would be better to clear this up and avoid any self-deceptions.

The first thing may be to go to the source, to sacred Scripture, where God has already spoken to us. "Have you never read the scriptures?" was a phrase often on our Lord's lips (e.g., Mt 21:42). Jesus Christ, as the living Word of God, personally guides us and calls us to listen.

⁵ *The Way*, 983.

Yet He also speaks in prayer. How? He speaks in many ways: in words that are often used to finish times of mental prayer, the answer might be found: “I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation.” That is, God speaks to my mind through inspirations, to my heart through affections, and to my will through resolutions. He speaks to the whole person, and for that reason we give thanks.

The three levels: resolutions, affections, and inspirations – blend together and mutually help each other like three cables wrapped together. When we begin to pray, our attitude improves, we move in a certain direction, and the presence of God increases throughout the day... until, maybe by some special grace, our whole life is illuminated by our prayer. There may be a new insight or a more audacious decision to follow Christ, help for understanding God more deeply, and a refinement of our conscience in the face of our imperfections and weaknesses, etc.

The levels are interlinked, but that does not stop us from distinguishing them. There are new insights in our understanding that allow us to grasp a certain truth or improve our ability to pray. There are emotional responses from the heart that push us to follow Christ with more dedication, or seek him out with more fervor. There are decisions of the will, more or less explicit, that lead us to put certain resolutions into effect. All and any of these are good if they help us get closer to God.

Here lies the importance not only of intelligence and will, but also of our feelings. No doubt God speaks softly, but he does not speak to tell me what I want to hear and to make me feel good. Yet a stimulating dialogue can emerge, an invitation to love, to serve with generosity, to forget about myself... all this expands my inner peace and fills me with joy. That is to say, there may be some positive feelings, even though they may demand more of me.

Where does God speak?

God has already spoken, and in Sacred Scripture we can read what he has said to us. He also talks to us about our own lives. He does that through affections, inspirations, and resolutions. It is especially in times of prayer that God speaks to us, but He also takes advantage of other moments. Maybe He will speak through a vocal prayer like the Our Father, recited slowly and with attention. He might speak through spiritual books, books that are themselves the fruit of prayer and dialogue with God, often written by saints. He might speak through preaching, even if the priest is not especially charismatic.

In their prayer, ordinary Christians should avoid odd or strange practices. Prayer should be natural, even if the conditions are sometimes less than ideal. The best can be the enemy of the good. Praying in the subway can be great, as long as it is not motivated by a lazy excuse, “It does not matter where I pray because God is everywhere.” *There is no other way. Either we learn to find God in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him.*⁶

⁶ *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, 114.

How do you make a time of prayer?

Besides the issue of “how do I know if God is really speaking to me?” there is also that of boredom and wasting time in prayer. This is common when first learning to pray. We should not reduce prayer to a training program, but it is worthwhile to offer a few methodical considerations: one can think of them as flexible tips to incorporate, until God “takes over the wheel.”

Connection

The first thing is to connect with God: that is the point of an opening prayer and starting our prayer on our knees. St. Josemaría, for example, used to use the following words to begin his times of mental prayer: “My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My immaculate Mother, Saint Joseph my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.”

The point is to attain *recollection* that brings us closer to God. Recollection disconnects us from things so as to connect us with the Lord. That is why we should look for good times and places to pray. Although we can pray anywhere, not every circumstance makes it easy to dialogue with God or expresses our sincere desires to pray.

One example might be to pray without disconnecting from our phone. We can obviously pray with our phone on, but when we really want to connect with someone, when having an interesting conversation, we do not want to be disturbed. We turn off the phone and focus our attention on the other person, avoiding any nuisance or interruption.

In the same way, it is better not to arrive juggling a hundred different issues, or trying to multitask while we talk. Maybe someone has asked us before, “Are you really paying attention?”, and we absent-mindedly respond, “Yeah, keep talking, I am listening!” Well, the same dynamic happens when we talk to God. Whatever we can do to focus better on God, is a great way to start our time of prayer.

To stay connected, it can be a great help to repeat the prayer we used to start our meditation, saying it slowly. We want to let it fill us and savor each word. When we find that we are distracted, unfocused, and absent-minded, that is the right time to repeat these or other prayers calmly, as many times as we need to focus on the Lord, attending to the rhythm, resting in the words, changing some of them to grab our attention. We will be conscious of what we “*are saying, who is saying it and to whom,*”⁷ and that way we will avoid the “tin-can rattling” that St. Teresa of Avila warned about.

⁷ *The Way*, 85.

Dialogue

Connection comes before dialogue, which is the soul of prayer. One possibility is to begin by showing our Lord what we bear in our heart. When we realize that we are distracted, we can read from a book, say aspirations or a vocal prayer. But rather than describing methods and tricks to keep alive the flame of prayer (most which are well known anyway), it may be preferable to focus now on what can make dialogue with God difficult. Take the metaphor of fire. It might be hard to keep it lit because of the “wind” of the imagination, because of a lack of fuel, or because the “wood” is damp (i.e., our sins that still need to be burned off).

The imagination travels through all sorts of alternative realities. Perhaps most of the day it is under control, but maybe not when we pray. If we do not control it, it can be a source of dissipation. Although we want it to be free to imagine the things of God, this failed desire is itself a source of dissipation. That is why it is important to mortify the imagination. We must reject the frivolous wanderings of the mind that snuff out the fire of love and foster thoughts that keep us focused on God. *Mortification is the drawbridge that enables us to enter the castle of prayer.*⁸

Our mind has its own world of memories, grudges, envy, sensuality, ambitions, etc. They focus our attention on ourselves and they separate us from God. Prayer has to move us in the opposite direction: forgetting about ourselves, and moving towards an encounter with God and others. For that to happen, God needs to intervene and purify our microcosm of affections. It is necessary for us to forgive, forget, rejoice in the good of other people, see the positive side of things, reject temptations quickly and give thanks for humiliations. This evaporates the dampness of the wood, which will burn right from the beginning and will help start the fire.

Once the fire is lit through connection with God, protected from the winds of the imagination and purified of the dampness that keeps it from being enkindled, it still needs fuel: thinking of God and others. The battle will be waged before, during and after the time of prayer on two fronts: purity of the heart and constancy in thinking about other people.

Purity of heart cleanses the soul from the remains of wounded pride, concupiscence, envy... our Lord’s promise will be fulfilled in us: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matt 5:8). The result will be a prayer that is full of God.

Thinking about other people means that while we pray and once we have finished, we pay more attention to other people’s needs and interests than to our own. It is essential that before, during, and after our times of prayer, we consider and take care of the spiritual and material needs of other people. For anyone aiming to cultivate dialogue with God, prayer must be “personal and communal; it concerns both those who are praying, and all men.”⁹ The result is a prayer filled with other people.

⁸ *Furrow*, 467.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2586.

The Final Assessment

At the end of the time of prayer, it may be good to make an assessment. This moment is classically called the “examination of prayer.” It is a moment to see all the things that God has communicated, and think about the take-away message. This may involve writing down the resolutions, affections, and inspirations, which may be of value later in spiritual direction, so we can better understand ourselves and help the director do the same. The purpose of spiritual direction is to second the initiative of the Holy Spirit. These initiatives are a great help in our quest to grow in prayer. The director will obviously be interested in what the other has learned in prayer, but without appearing to pry or control. The director’s only job is to help.

Writing down inspirations and insights will help us pray better in the future. They will be a source of new insights and move us to thank God. They will help us put into effect what we learned. These ideas can be reviewed later to fix them more deeply in the soul. They will probably help us be better witnesses to Christ and to pass on his teachings.

St. Josemaría constantly did all this. He called these insights “new Mediterraneans.” These “Mediterraneans” express how the Holy Spirit, with depth and simplicity, speaks to souls. St. Josemaría would take brief notes of these insights so that he would not forget them, and he would try to draw out practical points from them. He also tried to pass on these insights to others.

When we have such insights we may think, “I will never forget this!” We see them so clearly and with such depth. But that not true. Time wears away at our memory, including the memory of God’s inspirations. That is why it is good to write them down while they are fresh, to retain their life and vigor. When the soul is going through a dry spell, these notes play a key role. *“Those words, which struck you when you were at prayer, engrave them in your memory and recite them slowly many times during the day.”*¹⁰

Blessed Alvaro del Portillo used to say that when it comes to prayer, “what helped once helps always.” Going through texts and points that spoke to us on a certain occasion will also help us today, when we are perhaps less lucid than we were before, or less engaged or do not have anything in particular to pray about.

How well did you pray?

To measure the quality of your prayer, think about your desire to pray. A good gauge for how well our prayer life is going is how intense and how frequent is our desire to pray. Another area to assess is our “unity of life.” Prayer should not be judged by emotions, insights or decisions, all of which we have considered above. When God speaks to us, our lives have to be transformed in two different ways: first, in feeling a greater attraction to God, in having a greater thirst for Him; second, by uniting my life more to His through that attraction, thus improving in the way I live. As desire and thirst for God grow,

¹⁰ *The Way*, 103.

I identify myself more with Christ, abandon myself more to God the Father and make myself more docile to the movements of the Holy Spirit. We also learn more about our own life and we become more eager to spread the Gospel.

As we grow in humility, so also we grow in the desire to seek God and embrace his gifts. “*Humility is the foundation of prayer. (...) Humility is the necessary disposition to receive freely the gift of prayer: ‘Man is a beggar before God’ (cf. St Augustine, Sermon 56, 6, 9).*”¹¹ The point of prayer is not so much about whether or not we do something for God, but letting ourselves be loved by Him. God does not need anything we have: He only wants our heart. He wants us to love Him freely, to accept and value His love.

We will not have full trust in God unless we get rid of our self-sufficiency; unless we stop directing ourselves and abandon our own way of thinking. We need to anchor our security in Him. This is all to say: unless we become humble. Every bit of pride is an obstacle to our union with God, and that union is the goal of our prayer. On the other hand, the intertwining of trust, humility and simplicity will open us up to reach paths of prayer that we could not imagine: for example, *spiritual childhood*, a concept that St. Josemaría discovered and, without imposing it on anyone, habitually recommended.

*Have you witnessed the gratitude of little children? –Imitate them, saying, as they do, to Jesus, when things are favorable and when they aren’t: “How good you are! How good!...” These words, truly meant, are the way of childhood, which will lead you to peace, with balance and measure, in laughter and tears, but without balance and measure in Love.*¹²

Humility demands sincerity with oneself and with God, and therefore a spirit of lively examination. Do you want to improve the way you pray? Then make a better, more refined examination of conscience. It will lead you to understand, like St. Josemaría, that *I am worth nothing, can do nothing...* Our prayer will not be merely ‘talk’ but *the breath that kindles into a living flame the embers of virtue hidden among the ashes of your lukewarmness*,¹³ and it will become easier for us to pray.

Childlike trust and humility mark out a simple and effective path, by which we show God our own emptiness without hesitation, but with the spontaneity characteristic of the trust of innocent children.¹⁴ It is a way in which, little by little, we abandon our preconceptions about prayer and our personal uncertainties. Our prayer becomes bold and a sensation of instability sets in, as if we were walking along a tightrope or climbing a mountain with steep precipices on either side: unstable, but marvelously so, like a baby learning to walk. We come to see how dependent we are on God, and look to Him alone for support. Unsure of whether we are praying better or not is actually a good sign. It is a sign of vulnerability, and it is quite difficult to improve our prayer without that feeling, without recognizing that we cannot make it on our own. This sense of vulnerability is indispensable for having a true connection with the Lord.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2559.

¹² *The Way*, 894.

¹³ *The Way*, 492.

¹⁴ Cf. *The Way*, 894ff.

Chapter III: “We should pray always and not lose heart”

This chapter is for those who have had a regular prayer life for some time. There is a maturity that comes from living out our lives on a spiritual plane. There is a call, an aim, a goal that we embrace. The effects are only made when we embrace that call with cheerful determination – even if we have our defects, like anybody else. Mature prayer implies a harmony of faith, love and humility. They revolve around an axis, the action of the Holy Spirit in the soul. He is the only one capable of satisfying our desire for God.

This kind of prayer shows us the ultimate meaning of life. We see that we are *in statu viatoris* (wayfarers). Anything can happen in this stage of prayer, and it may last a long time.

The truth portrayed by the image of the solitary bird

The biblical image of the solitary bird¹⁵ portrays the increasingly personal and unrepeatable experience of someone who prays, which, somehow, cannot be communicated to others.

The image of this bird inspired St John of the Cross to write a commentary on Psalm 102:7 (Psalm 101 in the Vulgate): “*Vigilavi et factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto.*”

This means: *I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop.* That is, “I opened the eyes of my understanding and was raised up above all natural comprehension; lonely, without them, on the housetop, lifted up above all earthly considerations.” He says that he was “like a lonely sparrow,” because in this kind of contemplation, the spirit has the properties of the sparrow. These are five in number.

“First, it seeks the highest place; it must rise above passing things, paying no more heed to them than if they did not exist. Second, it withstands no company; it must be so fond of silence and solitude that it does not tolerate the company of another creature. Third, it holds its beak in the air; hold it in the air of the Holy Spirit, responding to His inspirations, that by so doing it may become worthy of His company. Fourth, it has no definitive color; desiring to do nothing definite other than the will of God. Fifth, it sings sweetly; in the company and love of its spouse.”¹⁶

The person embracing holiness as the meaning of his life already knows many of these truths. There is the “Christifying” action of the Holy Spirit, who leads us *per aspera ad astra* (“through scars to the stars” we might say). The Holy Spirit purifies those who allow Him entry. Sometimes He will eliminate an attachment: sometimes it will not be

¹⁵ Ps 102:7.

¹⁶ St John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, Stanza XV.

clear what He is doing, but it will always involve a deeper identification with the Cross. This will help us see progress in what otherwise looks like a stagnant spiritual life.

We gradually move in the direction that St Paul indicates: “*But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready.*” (1 Cor 3:1-2). ‘Solid food’ will mean a whole new level of nourishment in our spiritual reading and prayer: for example, spiritual nourishment will result from praying with the Letters of St Paul or the Psalms, or reading the great masters of spirituality. These will keep us aiming at the God most high.

Solid food can be difficult to digest. Pope Francis reflects on this topic:

“If we look around, we realize that there are so *many offers of food* which do not come from the Lord and which appear to be more satisfying. Some nourish themselves with money, others with success and vanity, others with power and pride. But the food that truly nourishes and satiates us is only that which the Lord gives us! The food the Lord offers us is different from other food, and perhaps it doesn’t seem as flavorful to us as certain other dishes the world offers us. So we dream of other dishes, like the Hebrews in the desert, who longed for the meat and onions they ate in Egypt, but forgot that they had eaten those meals at the table of slavery. In those moments of temptation, they had a memory, but a sick memory, a selective memory. The memory of a slave, not a free one. We, today, may ask ourselves: what about me? *Where do I want to eat?* At which table do I want to be nourished? At the Lord’s table? Or do I dream about eating flavorful foods, but in slavery? Moreover, we may ask ourselves: What do I recall? The Lord who saves me, or the garlic and onions of slavery? Which recollection satiates my soul?”¹⁷

There is a high price for the *lonely bird* to keep its place. It may be tempted, like Israel, to return to the garlic and onions of Egypt, because the manna, *worthless food* (Num 21:5) of the desert, has become nauseating. In our case, maybe love has cooled down or we are not taking care of the ABC’s of prayer – not putting the phone in airplane mode, not recollecting ourselves, not aware that God is present, not choosing the best time to pray, not putting in affection.

The spiritual director plays a key role here. He is a privileged witness of God’s action in souls. His task, among others, is to feed souls and open up new panoramas. He is also there to confirm the insights that God grants.

The new *Mediterraneans* in one’s own life

Maturity in prayer may bring a deeper understanding of what we already knew. We may see events of the past in a new light. Our path will be better illuminated and our desires for God will be more pure. The Holy Spirit will open up Sacred Scripture, the

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Homily on the solemnity of Corpus Christi*, 19 June 2014.

Liturgy, the writings of the saints, and special events of our life to speak to our minds and hearts in a new, strong, unthinkable way. It is the *interior word* of the Spirit. He will inspire our prayer more and more frequently.

*Love the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity: listen in the intimacy of your being to the divine motions – those encouragements, those reproaches; walk through the earth within the light poured out in your soul: and the God of hope will fill us with all manner of peace so that this hope may grow in us ever more and more by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 15:13).*¹⁸

We all advance in our own way. Our Lord treats us differently at each stage. He opens up “Mediterraneans” of faith and love, then seems to lead us through dark tunnels, which end up becoming a shortcut to union with Him. Our Lord longs impatiently for this union, and wants us to live a life of love, of zeal for the salvation of souls. It is a life much greater than we could think of or imagine. He wants His grace to lift us up above what we could have aspired to, to encounter the divine intimacy. He takes into account our openness and resistance, and slowly shows us the mystery of His holiness. On the pathway of prayer, we discover new facets about God and new facets about ourselves and the world. We go deeper into His mystery and so we love him a little bit more.

At the end of Peter’s life in Rome, when Jesus Christ reveals to him that he will die soon, he remembers the Lord’s *precious and very great promises* (2 Pet 1:4). These great essential topics – Jesus Christ, the Church, the Eucharist, souls, divine filiation, divine mercy – require different kinds of understanding and have different applications. Think of a spiral that slowly ascends, going round and round... but there is sure, steady progress. God wants to raise us very high, even if it takes a while.

Sometimes, we will not be able to rise up higher. Maybe we will spin in circles, or descend noisily, or go off on tangents and abandon our relationship with God. But God’s plan, the plan of the God who called us, is a plan of election, justification, sanctification, and glorification: the result is holiness; it is 100% God’s action and 100% ours. It is a formula that has more to do with mystery than math. It is the mystery of man becoming divine by becoming a son of God in Christ.

St. Josemaría, like many saints, describes this process in general terms, with great realism and beauty. *One 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.*¹⁹ Grace frees man, who knows he is now free in a different way, *borne on the wings of a lover’s nuptial song, a canticle of love.*²⁰ When contradictions first arise, the right path opens up before us: the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ. The secret is to follow Him closely, and when we begin to follow him, we *share in the joy of being God’s friends.*²¹

When we meditate about what divine filiation really means, or about identification with Christ, or loving the Will of the Father, or eagerness to co-redeem, we see that

¹⁸ *Christ is Passing By*, 133.

¹⁹ *Friends of God*, 296.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

everything is a gift of the Spirit. We realize how much we owe Him. We become more obedient and thankful. The soul awakens to the motions of the Holy Spirit. These motions are much more frequent than we think and are infinitely more lovable than we can dream of. These are not extraordinary actions of the Holy Spirit: *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.*²²

In love with Love

We discover “the love which God lavishes upon us”²³ with new depth and clarity. The depth of that love should not stop amazing us: it is with us day after day, year after year, from our mother’s womb! His love floods the soul at prayer: it is a never-ending, intense Love born from God’s heart and it precedes every action and every merit.²⁴

God’s Love pierces the heart: *I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you* (Jer 31:3). We should be moved, knowing that we have been loved since the foundation of the world. It strikes the mind and the heart, like a luminous dart, *that divine admonition which fills the soul with disquiet and which at the same time tastes as sweet as honey from the comb: redemi te, et vocavi te nomine tuo: meus es tu* (Is 43:1); *I have redeemed you and called you by your name: you are mine!*²⁵

Maybe we have read or heard that phrase on other occasions, but now it sounds different. It is not just a ‘phrase’ but a divine loving remark. It is not something we read or hear, but rather sense in the depths of the soul: “I love you, you are mine! Now do you understand why I have done everything I have done? I have done it for you.”

The whole person is enraptured with love. It is not about effort but gift. He wonders how God could love him so much. He does not know how to answer, but does not doubt that Love for an instant. He is baffled and pained: How could I not have noticed this Love before? What was I thinking about?²⁶

What helps to prepare this encounter? One way is to consider the many favors we have received from God, including those we are unaware of. Another way is to think about how little love there was in our response to God’s call, and to say that we are sorry. As St Paul says, God sends us his Spirit *that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.* (1 Cor 2:12).

In this way, the Holy Spirit prepares us to welcome the divine gift. He will help us see the newness of the things we already know. That is, if the soul truly wants to be guided. That is why it is important for souls to be confident in their hope when they pray.

²² *Friends of God*, 307.

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus caritas est*, 1.

²⁴ *In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son be the expiation for our sins* (1 Jn 4:10).

²⁵ *Friends of God*, 312.

²⁶ For a more detailed view of the content of these pages, see: M. Ordeig, *Despertar al asombro*, Edicep, Valencia 2012.

God is the one who opens up the meaning of sacred Scripture, who enlightens the mind and stirs the heart. To perceive Him, with His grace, is a precious sign that he plays the lead more than we do, that the work is his more than ours.

“...so that your faith does not falter.”

The encounter with God's love may be very moving, but the obstacles and difficulties of the interior life have not disappeared. The devil can increase temptations when someone moves forward spiritually. Let us go over some details of this *battle of prayer* and consider some effects of the Love that we have considered in the previous section.²⁷

Spiritual Dryness

For someone who listens to God, he may receive frequent inspirations. Such a soul easily sees the new things God wishes to show. But there may also be long periods of spiritual dryness. ‘Dryness’ refers to difficulty concentrating in prayer. One feels far from, or indifferent to God. We may have strong doubts. Jesus knew about all this and warned Peter: *Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail* (Luke 22:31-32).

The symptoms are similar to spiritual negligence and lukewarmness, in which the heaviness and dryness may be due to a lack of struggle or a will that pursues whims and compensations. We snap out of lukewarmness by reacting swiftly, as often as we recognize the symptoms.

Dryness has the same symptoms (laziness, selfishness, etc.). Yet if the subject is doing all he can and is obedient in spiritual direction, then we can assume that it is a trial allowed by God. Spiritual dryness has its origin in the feelings. There is good will to pray and to struggle, even in the absence of consolations in prayer. If the person is living in an upright fashion and the situation continues, God may be purifying him and adding his suffering to Christ's for the salvation of the world. It may be the case that his prayer is very supernatural and most valuable. There may not be any tangible results, but this will purify his intention.

We can always offer the Lord humble and heartfelt adoration, even when our feelings are cold. Adoration comes from the intellect and the will, not the feelings. For those who love God, any difficulty becomes an opportunity to cry out in real need for God's mercy: “Cry aloud, spare not!” (Clama, ne cesses!) (Is 58:1). After all, man is a beggar of divine love.

²⁷ The Catechism uses the phrase “the Battle of Prayer” in the section on prayer, in the third chapter of the second article, #2725 and ss.

Monotony

Intimacy with God comes slowly. There is a risk of falling into routine, of “doing the prayer.” The years go by and we do not seem to make any improvement in prayer. We may face setbacks and crises in our health, work, relationships, and yet with no impact on prayer. We have little interest in bringing texts to our prayer. Everything is repetitive and boring. It is difficult to focus. Nothing unusual here: we are limited. Patience is called for, not complaining or losing hope. If we integrate this experience into the whole, it can be part of the general growth of our prayer life.

It is a time to learn to fill duty with love, to understand that love and pain, love and tiredness, love and failure, are two sides of the same coin. Christ lived that way and so do we. It is a time to believe that “faithfulness over time is the name of love.”²⁸ Believing this helps us bear life’s problems with joy. The monotonous passage of time becomes the best ally to purify our love for Our Lord. It may sound strange, but “useless activity” is a key element of love. We do not pray for any other reason than to please the Lord, because He wants us to pray: “To pray is to spend time freely with God just for the joy of being together.”²⁹ Over the years, this “uselessness” can become a fundamental attitude.

In moments of monotony, we learn to cook with a low flame. There will be ups and downs, unexpected and routine moments, and though feelings may be absent, we will be called to use them to nourish our love and dialogue with God. We ask our Lord for help and we grow in patience with ourselves and with our neighbor.

Having frequent encounters with monotony, our inner life will require frequent rejuvenation. The small details of piety supply this need: aspirations, phrases from the liturgy, glances at some picture, small mortifications, details, little things of love, which daily rebuild the first enthusiasm.

One of the prelates of Opus Dei shared that St. Josemaría “longed for the time of preparation for his evening meditation and the hours during the night, moments in which the members of Opus Dei try to be recollected, especially at night, having an intimate conversation with Our Lord. I have heard him say many times that *for a soul in love, those times are a need one doesn’t want to do without, nor could one.*”³⁰

Discouragement

Perhaps there were times when discouragement and hopelessness had to be overcome. The spiritual life seemed stagnant or faced a human failure. Perhaps we hid behind our work, putting in more hours to hide our spiritual emptiness. Maybe we stopped worrying about venial sin.

Sincerely, in a manly way, we must develop, both in our heart and in our mind, a sense of horror for mortal sin. We must also cultivate a deep-

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address at Vespers*, Fatima, 12 May 2010.

²⁹ J. Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, p. 12, Scepter, 2014.

³⁰ Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría Escrivá*, Rialp, Madrid 20002, p. 196.

*seated hatred of deliberate venial sin, those negligences which, while they don't deprive us of God's grace, do serve to obstruct the channels through which grace comes to us.*³¹

The soul became less complicated in those times, since it avoided perfectionism, comparisons, pessimism. *Do you want to know how to be frank and simple? Listen to these words of Peter and meditate on them: Domine, Tu omnia nosti... –Lord, You know all things!*³² There were times when one persevered in prayer:³³

*Don't ever omit the mental prayer ... When a soul starts thinking it doesn't know how to pray, or that what the Father teaches is very difficult, or that our Lord is not saying anything or is not listening, (...) No, my daughters and sons! Persevere in your meditation. Don't be slow to unburden yourselves to our Lord in your prayer. If need be, keep saying the same aspiration for the whole half hour: Jesus, I love You; Jesus, teach me to love; Jesus, teach me to love others for You. Persevere like this one day after another, for a month, a year, another year, and finally you'll hear our Lord saying to you: 'Don't be so silly, I've been here right beside you all the time!'*³⁴

These are calls to 'magnanimity.' *"The soul must foster great desires: "St Paul brings this out very clearly: quae sursum sunt quaerite; ('seek the things that are above'), where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Savor the things of Heaven, not the things that are upon the earth. (...) and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:1-3)."*³⁵

Besides the basic remedies, there are some that are quite simple, such as bringing a book to the prayer. This ensures that we are taking in things at a spiritual level. Remedies like this can be key, and useful once again when the same difficulties come up: lukewarmness, monotony, discouragement, or just the need to start again.

Prayer and hope in God

The situations we have just described are related to temptations to despair, which has its base in human weakness. The dominant culture tends to accentuate despair. One's capacity for being critical, normally a condition for progress, can become tainted when faced the hard reality of the world and oneself, and degenerate into mere negativity, and this paralyzes us. Normally these weaknesses can be overcome with personal struggle and God's grace. We cannot avoid, however, some natural discouragement in the face of failures and difficulties. But even here, hope finds new life in our desire to be faithful to love.

The devil relies on our weakness and on half-truths to focus our attention exclusively on what is not going well, on our sins, errors, limits, and imperfections. He

³¹ *Friends of God*, 243.

³² *Furrow*, 326.

³³ Cf. *The Way*, 934.

³⁴ *Get-together*, September 1973 in Notebook 8, p. 68.

³⁵ *Friends of God*, 206.

may even tempt us with more force when our soul is more on fire with love. *The devil knows that it's more difficult for the soul to fall then, but he also knows that, if he can manage to get it to offend its Lord even in something small, he will be able to cast over its conscience the serious temptation of despair.*³⁶

When we have spent many years getting to know the Lord, and realize how little we have grown, we may be tempted to judge that all our efforts were useless. In this *situation we are waylaid, assaulted by the temptation of discouragement, opposition, struggle, tribulation, a new dark night of the soul.*³⁷ When we were young we dreamed of giving ourselves and of loving God, but now it fades away as we see all our mistakes. Maybe holiness is impossible, we may think, as impossible as spreading the gospel. We are doomed to spiritual mediocrity. We may settle for a diminished peace, the peace of not fighting, but really it is only simple resignation, an *a priori* acceptance of defeat.

To resist these temptations and keep hope we need to realize that this concept of holiness is wrong. We are not looking for some unattainable fullness: to attempt it would only make the soul look for itself. We would forget that the only important thing is to please God.

Praying well leads to true humility, and this is the true source of hope. Those who are closest to God know that they are not better than anyone else; their goal isn't to be on a different level: that is not their concern. In describing himself, St. Josemaría would repeat a kind of litany that we have already mentioned: *I am worth nothing, I can do nothing, I have nothing, I am nothing.*³⁸

To resist these temptations the key is placing our hope in God. Christian hope is not simply human hope, based on our strengths, or on a natural intuition about the goodness of the Creator. It is a theological virtue given by God and directed to Him. It is a gift exceeding our strength, which the Holy Spirit provokes and renews in us. In those moments of discouragement, *the time has come to cry to him, Remember, Lord, the promises you made, filling me with hope; they console me in my nothingness and fill my life with strength* (cf. Ps 118:49-50).³⁹ God is the one who called and chose us. He wants to be united to us even more than we want to be united to Him, and He has the power to do so.

When our prayer is enriched by hope, the fruits are abundant. Then, *with God enlightening our intellect, which seems to be inactive*, as that supernatural clarity does not come from our reasoning, we understand without any doubt that if *the Creator takes care of everyone, even his enemies, how much more will he take care of his friends!* We are firmer in the conviction that *no evil or trouble can befall us which will not turn out to be for our good*; and, with that divine virtue, *joy and peace become more firmly rooted in our spirit, and no merely human motive can tear them from us, because these 'visitations' always leave us with something of himself, something divine.* It is natural that *we find ourselves praising the Lord Our God, who has worked such great wonders in us* (cf Job 5:9), and understanding that God

³⁶ *Friends of God*, 303.

³⁷ *Friends of God*, 310.

³⁸ *The Way of the Cross*, XIII, no. 5.

³⁹ *Friends of God*, 305.

has made us capable of possessing an infinite treasure (cf John 15:5).⁴⁰

A liberating question: how are you feeling?

Difficulties in prayer and the apparent lack of fruit may lead people to a certain temptation: examining their prayer over and over again, blaming themselves for its lack of fruit. What have I done wrong? Why is this happening to me? Why don't I see anything in prayer?

It is a matter of focus. It is the wrong question to ask. We need to consider our prayer from a broader perspective. We should not just think about the "why" question, but the "what's the point" question. The second question can pull us out of self-obsession and a certain misunderstanding of "wanting to pray well."

Here's another good question: how am I, both physically and mentally? If I am tired, I will pray like a tired person. If I am overwhelmed, my prayer will be about my worries; so take note—praying will always be pleasing to God! I cannot pray like someone I am not or expect a sudden change of mind. It is enough to want, and look for, an encounter with God.

We will avoid the fear of monotony. We will be at peace with our own prayer and end up at peace about our own life. We will stop complaining about "praying badly," even if it seems we have fallen into a deep rut. We open ourselves to the reality of how I really am, and how much God loves me just as I am. We acquire a realistic outlook about His expectations. Here, too, *omnia in bonum* applies ["We know that in everything God works for good (*omnia in bonum*) with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Rom. 8:28]. We should not be surprised that, just like in regular conversation, we experience distractions, fatigue and routine. These can be obstacles to dialogue with God. Even though they may not be major, but they can still be tiring.

Tiredness

Tiredness generally inhibits any new form of activity. It also makes us less eager to speak, and prevents us from focusing on what we are reading or listening to, even if it is important or inherently interesting material. Peter, James and John fell asleep on Mount Tabor without realizing that Our Lord was showing himself in his glory (cf. *Luke* 9:32). As God's children, we can make use of our tiredness to talk to God, to use it as a way to pray: *When you are tired and do not know what to say to Our Lord, tell him: Lord, I am tired!*⁴¹ And so we learn to rest in God, to rest our head on the breast of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁰ *Friends of God*, 305.

⁴¹ *Get-together*, 14 April 1974, quoted in Notebook 8, p. 65.

Distractions

Distractions scatter the attention in other directions. It is not uncommon to have a conversation with someone who is not interested in what we are saying, because he is thinking of other things: worries, memories, feelings, his devices. It may happen in prayer that *the whole half hour can go by with your head in a whirl and your body rebelling like a wild donkey...*⁴² In such a situation it may be better to direct the conversation towards those things which are a source of distraction, towards those worries, persons, events, or memories. It may also be a way of having an encounter with Him. *If the distractions are about good persons or good things, ask Our Lord for the virtues of those good people. If they have to do with things that are indifferent or with people who are doing evil things, then ask Our Lord to help the people concerned to shed their indifference or wickedness. In this way you use your time well, you pray, and you do a great act of charity.*⁴³

The Habit of Praying

In any long-term relationship we eventually establish a certain routine. It is not monotony or loss of interest, but familiarity, which is a good thing. It means that the two know each other well, that they have learned to live with the other's way of being and acting, that they have generated common ways of seeing things and that they have already talked about many aspects of life. Oftentimes a look or gesture of one is enough to understand the other. Prolonged contact increases the value of a relationship; old friends and close family have special significance to us. But familiarity can have negative aspects. The relationship can become repetitive, monotonous, incapable of growing, and closed to the new things that life brings with it.

Normally, when Christians are at peace with their efforts, the encounter with the Lord in prayer is lively and joyful. We feel the efficacy of grace, and it transforms our life. But even with commitment and the hope of corresponding to grace, stagnation in prayer can occur, which translates into a lack of interest, a certain lukewarmness in faith and love. *But don't forget that, though a path may have some particularly difficult stretches, and may occasionally involve wading across a river or passing through an almost impenetrable wood, as a rule it will be quite passable and hold no surprises for us. The danger lies in routine, in imagining that God cannot be here, in the things of each instant, because they are so simple and ordinary!*⁴⁴ We do not mean lukewarmness in the strict sense, which deserves its own section. There are remedies at hand to treat ordinary monotony, and to return to a lively dialogue with God.

Daring to use all the piano keys of the heart...

God pours out his Love on each of us personally, in a uniquely magnanimous way. Those who experience it know it is a peaceful, loving overflow of the heart, full of

⁴² *Get-together*, 25 August 1973, quoted in Notebook 8, p. 60.

⁴³ *Get-together*, 21 April 1973, quoted in Notebook 8, p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Friends of God*, 313.

intimacy and tenderness, which transforms the hardness of the human heart,⁴⁵ and moves it to a new response: “Nothing moves so much to love as to know that we are loved.”⁴⁶

The fruits of Love

Our spiritual outlook and struggle change radically. We seek not just to comply, but to love with all our heart. Prayer, other people, work... everything goes back to the Love of God; everything shines in a singular way. It is all the same but all different, and the difference lies in our own way of seeing reality: the gaze passes through creatures to joyfully rest on the Creator.

This and other consequences of the discovery of Love give the soul joy and strength to face any sacrifice. We will still have the same weaknesses and defects, but we don't give them too much importance. God does not love us less because we cannot measure up. Jesus Christ did not come to seek the righteous, but sinners.

We will live with a free spirit, with the “capacity and habitual attitude to act out of love, especially in the effort to follow what God is asking of us in each circumstance.”⁴⁷ This freedom, in proportion to the love that unites the soul with God, transforms obligations (using the word in its least noble sense) into encounters of love. We do things because we want to, that is, because we are in love. Carrying out our commitments and duties of the moment becomes a response of love.⁴⁸ *God seems as if He were ours alone, as if the only people on earth were just the two of us: he and I.*⁴⁹

We grow more constant and tenacious in the ascetical struggle. God's love shows us that there is a long way to go. Life is long and God awaits us at the end. In the meantime, we will purify the soul of disordered appetites, free ourselves from the slavery of sin and death, and facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit.

There will be greater facility for recollection and a great spontaneity for friendly dialogue with God the Father, with Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we do away with our set times for prayer and other spiritual practices. The spiritual struggle is still demanding, because we can never fully get rid of our sinful inclinations. But now everything is done out of love. Our efforts are joyful.

Varieties of prayer

Love enriches our ways of praying and gives it a deeper and more universal meaning. Praise, adoration, asking to be forgiven, acts of thanksgiving, petitions, reparation... all these are the different notes that a soul in love plays.

Talking to someone involves the whole personality. There are words and gestures,

⁴⁵ *I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh* (Ez 11:19).

⁴⁶ St Augustine, *De catequizandis rudibus*, c. 4.

⁴⁷ From the Father, *Letter*, 9 January 2018, 5.

⁴⁸ Cf. Blessed Alvaro, *Letter*, 8 September 1988, 31.

⁴⁹ *While he spoke to us on the way*, p. 184, *Meditation*, 27 March 1962.

which are sometimes imperceptible but play a role. The tone of voice, glances, calm or forced silences...these all can transmit authenticity and interest, or distrust and indifference. We speak with words and also with deeds, with deliberate actions and with more or less conscious omissions.

*Sometimes prayer is looking at an image of our Lord or his Mother. At other times it can be a petition formulated in words. And yet again it is expressed in those good deeds that are the consequence of faithfulness. Just like a soldier on guard duty, we keep watch at our Lord's door: that's prayer. Or like a little dog at his master's feet. Don't mind saying to him from time to time: 'Lord, here you have me, like a faithful dog.' Or better still: 'Lord, like a little donkey who won't kick the person who loves him.'*⁵⁰ Prayer, as in human dialogue, is expressed in many ways. Many of these are beautifully brought together in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁵¹ Taking to heart the advice from the Catechism can be a real boost to our prayer.

Faced with the infinitude of love and the scarcity of human correspondence, the heart breaks out into deep prayer of atonement and reparation, an expression of pain that can uproot sins and move us to personal, sincere and sorrowful contrition. This should readily extend to all offences committed against God.

*But we must pray with desires of reparation. There is so much to make amends for, outside and inside the Church of God. Look for some words, compose a personal aspiration, and say it many times a day, asking our Lord for forgiveness, first for our own failings and then for all the sinful actions that are committed against his holy Name, against his Sacraments and against his doctrine.*⁵²

Together with these feelings there is a growing conviction that *I myself am nothing, am worth nothing and have nothing, that I can do nothing and, even more, that I am nothingness itself !*,⁵³ which helps to throw away so many insecurities of our ego. This prayer is not perceived as something negative but as part of the joyful growth that converts our fragility into fortitude.

*But He is everything and, at the same time, he belongs to me and I to him because he does not reject me and has given himself up for me. Have you ever seen a greater love than this?*⁵⁴

Together with the prayer of petition and reparation, one of the attitudes that most favors intimacy with Our Lord is sincere, deep and explicit thanksgiving to God. We have a greater sense of His closeness, and acquire greater strength for the service of God.

⁵⁰ From Our Father, *Crónica*, 1970, p. 754, quoted in Notebook 8, p. 61.

⁵¹ Part IV: Section I. Chapter I, Article III, In the Age of the Church, nos. I-V: I. *Blessing and Adoration*. II. *Prayer of petition*. III. *Prayer of intercession*. IV. *Prayer of thanksgiving*. V. *Prayer of praise*; and Section I Chapter III, Article I, *Expressions of prayer*, nos. 1-3: I. *Vocal prayer* II. *Meditation*. III. *Contemplative prayer*.

⁵² *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 141.

⁵³ *Friends of God*, 215.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

*New lights! –What joy you have because God has made you discover a new Mediterranean! –Make the most of those moments: now is the time to break into a hymn of thanksgiving: and it’s also the time to clean up odd corners of your soul: (...) let your gratitude show itself in a concrete resolution.*⁵⁵

Adoration is “to adore God, is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love.”⁵⁶ It involves total gift of the intellect and the will to God. It is a delight to do this; it opens the soul to God’s great things. To adore is the highest act of love we can make and, in line with practical pieces of advice, it is probably the most effective remedy to get rid of distractions, concentrate the attention, dispel sleep and prepare the soul to listen to the Holy Spirit. *May your prayer always be a real and sincere act of adoration of God.*⁵⁷

There are many ways of praying. *Prayer, which is frequently expressed in a glance: looking at him and aware that he is looking at us; at other times, we think of God’s greatness and our littleness; or we tell him, in detail, what he knows perfectly well, something which may and should weigh us down, which is for his glory and not for our self-interest, since he is more committed to it than we are.*⁵⁸ And within that personal prayer, there are many ways of addressing Our Lord, more than those described in the paragraphs above. When there is routine or monotony it is advisable to make use of them, though this may depend on the state of the soul and other circumstances. Not insisting on worn out channels, one’s prayer will be more varied and rich.

The Affections

Allowing for different types of prayer will help transform our life. This may mean allowing the heart and the emotions to be involved. *I have felt flowing through me a prayer of copious and ardent feelings of affection,*⁵⁹ St. Josemaría used to say when he spoke of a prayer that moved him in a forceful way.

*Your mind is sluggish and won’t work: you struggle in vain to collect your thoughts in God’s presence: there’s a complete blank! Don’t try to force yourself, and don’t worry. –Listen to me: the time has come for your heart to take over.*⁶⁰

From time to time, God gives people a prayer of affection, which will provoke deep feelings of divine filiation, of gratitude, of zeal to save souls...: this will not be sentimentalism if we bear the fruitful and dry spells with equal gratitude. Sometimes the truths of faith shine out splendidly, and the soul and its powers are raised to search for God. With calm and peace these lights may illuminate our prayer and our whole life. It is

⁵⁵ *The Way*, 298.

⁵⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2096.

⁵⁷ *The Forge*, 263.

⁵⁸ *Letter*, 29 September 1957, 69 in Notebook 6, p. 115.

⁵⁹ A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. 1.

⁶⁰ *The Way*, 102; cf also 890.

good to desire and ask God for such a prayer; and above all to thank him for it and to take advantage of it when it comes.

All this may sound too theoretical, too ideal. But as the years go by the small details we look after in prayer will be a source of continuous gratitude to God. Love makes everything easier and more enjoyable: obedience, the sacrifices of charity, chastity...

But let us not forget: life is long and those dazzling moments can be followed by grey years. That is why it is critical to use all the resources we have to prolong our joyful experience of faith and love. It might seem that, with love, everything should come to us as a gift, but that is a deception. All love is demanding, however noble it is. Love asks for a total gift of self. The joy that it brings does not take away from the sacrifice. But it makes the sacrifices loveable as well.⁶¹

...and with all of God's richness

We will use all the resources of the heart in prayer, and dare to seek all of God's riches. That will mean having a personal relationship with each Person of the Blessed Trinity, with our Lady, with our Guardian Angel and with St. Joseph, with St. Josemaría and the saints who have preceded us, and with all those un-canonized saints who also await us in God's glory. Our heart and prayer will be full of God and other people, as we have said before.

Our knowledge of God here on earth will always be imperfect, a mixture of knowledge and ignorance; the fruit of an uncertain and weak love. But it impels us to advance in prayer to the very heights, to the point where our mind sees that knowledge and love can go as far as we would like, until we reach the eternal source of all Truth and all Good.

"He is the source of holiness, light for the intellect. He gives to every rational being a light to understand the truth. Although unapproachable by nature, he allows himself to be understood through his goodness. With his action he fills everything (...). He lifts hearts up on high, leading the weak with his hand, and making those who walk after virtue reach perfection."⁶²

An intelligence overflowing with Truth and a will filled with Love; it isn't possible to dream of greater happiness. Fullness, intimacy, closeness and enlightenment provoke God's attraction: an attraction that is not exclusively intellectual and that is shown to be irresistible if the emotions come into play. We should desire and ask for this grace of God's attraction with humility, because, although God is always attracting us to Himself, we often do not perceive His attraction.

In this attraction the divine truths cease to be arguments of faith and become objects of love. They are not only truth, but the most perfect sign of God's goodness. Hand

⁶¹ "There are no difficult deeds for the one who loves; because they are either not seen difficult or the very difficulty is loved" (St Augustine, *De bona viduitate*, c. 21, 26).

⁶² St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, chap. 9, nos. 22-23.

in hand with that love, everything in those truths is rendered simple, yet deepened in a new way: the way of love, infinitely more fertile and suggestive.

Chapter IV: “If you did but know the gift of God”

This chapter will describe the prayer of those with long years of experience and formation. The teachings of the Church and the spiritual tradition are our chief guides. We strive for unity of life and seeing God in everything and everyone. In other words, to be a contemplative in the middle of the world, as St. Josemaría always proposed.

What is the goal of mature prayer? The answer is simple: union with God. Communication and dialogue with the Creator always leads to a personal encounter with him. Friendship with Christ leads to intimate communion with God, One and Three, and with Jesus Christ our Savior. “Prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved.”¹

Contemplative prayer, which responds to the action of the Holy Spirit in the soul, is always the way. It begins with a request to gather ourselves in a state of peace. We have a lot to talk about with God, and our conversation begins to seep into our whole life. We turn more to God; our conscience becomes more refined and righteous than what we could have previously expected. Everything else takes a back seat, and our union with him is strengthened by life’s ordinary circumstances.²

We probably cannot explain how we arrived at this point. Contemplative prayer has turned merely intellectual knowledge into personal experience: we recognize what Jesus has done for us on the Cross. Without knowing how, contemplation makes us enter a little more into the mystery of God and experience him very closely. What is very clear is that this gift is absolutely undeserved.

Such an experience profoundly changes those who pray and perfects their own being. Only now is prayer understood in depth. It is not just a pious activity, but a transformative, performative attitude: a way of living out the Christian call. We do so relying wholly on Christ and identifying ourselves with his prayer, which is total dedication to the Father and complete abandonment to His Will. In short, it is union with God.

It is more than handing over control to God. The Holy Spirit gives us the right attitude and perspective to look upon God. Materially the new approach may seem the same, but spiritually it is all very different: “For to me to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21) as St. Paul said. This is the path we show to others, who come to us. But we have to walk that path first, having received help ourselves from those who have learned to become contemplatives in the circumstances of their own lives.

¹ St John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33.

² This union—or communion—that exists from the moment of Baptism, is the basis for any reflection on prayer. In the Church and with the Church, through the sacraments, we enter into communion with God through intelligence and love. Faith is the response of the Church, and of each individual, to divine revelation and the grace of communion is God's gift, in response to our faith. This gift is, in essence, the salvation won by Christ who, in addition to the forgiveness of sins, raises up human powers by making them capable of knowing and loving God.

Contemplative

At the heart of St. Josemaría's preaching is the call to be contemplatives in the middle of the world. This spiritual ambition is important to cultivate right from the beginning. It will keep us from cutting ourselves short in Love.

The task of people in love

All the definitions of contemplation emphasize the central place of love. "All that the mind knows is possessed through knowledge, but nothing is perfectly known unless it is perfectly loved,"³ as St Augustine said. And St. Josemaría wrote: *It is through Love rather than study that one comes to understand the 'things of God'.*⁴ But this does not imply that only our heart needs to be involved. We need to fall in love with Him also with our Head, as Blessed Alvaro insisted.⁵

Contemplation is an act of knowledge guided by love. God's truths are something to be loved more than understood. The result of this process will be a prayer that gradually abandons reflection and argument in favor of a contemplative outlook. This is something that must be learned.

Contemplation entails acknowledging God's goodness and our ingratitude, His greatness and our lowliness, His care and our selfishness. We recognize divine beauty, so far from our human concepts and so benevolent, so close to our weakness. Being favored with this divine gift demands a great deal of humility and simplicity. Let us read what Blessed Alvaro said about St. Josemaría:

"We asked him: 'Father, you are worried?'"⁶ And our Founder responded: *No. I am thinking about God's goodness and my wretchedness; about the fidelity of all of you that upholds me. And I have to give thanks to Our Lord, asking Him that I too might know how to correspond.*⁷

The starting point is noting how vast and how free God's gifts are. They are too much for us to grasp. At some point, Christians must give up on trying to understand and simply stop and admire. Still, when we pray we should review what we know about God and what the Holy Spirit has helped us understand – though all the time in the world will seem insufficient to assimilate what we see by intuition. "Don't run off, just look!" said St. Josemaría.⁸

Contemplating the divine truth is the framework of all prayer. And when we are dealing with truths we have long known and prayed about, we keep going. We pray over the details in a way only love can inspire. These details will shine like little diamonds and inflame the heart in love for God.

³ St Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus*, 35, 2.

⁴ *Furrow*, 656.

⁵ Cf. *Letter*, 19 March 1992, 35.

⁶ In Italian: pensive, concerned.

⁷ *Get-together*, 5 May 1977, in *Crónica* 1977, p. 298.

⁸ *Friends of God*, 307.

When contemplation passes from prayer to daily life, that closeness to God's greatness becomes the occasion of constant conversation with Him. Most of the time this will take the form of formulas or brief thoughts: aspirations, acts of contrition, etc. These prayers are short, but they can be a great stimulus for us.

Aspirations do not automatically lead us to contemplation: it is not about amount. Words or thoughts should be a bond of love. They should unite the heart to heaven, if only for an instant. Contemplative prayer will spread our love like wildfire throughout the day.

A constant call

God is constantly passing by us. He repeats his invitation every day: Venite post me... (Mk 2:17). It is as if to say "stay with me, live with me." Maybe we say yes and rush after Him, but soon we get lost, distracted, or sent off course. The Lord has to pass by again and call us back. This is the dynamic of the contemplative life. "O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is." (Ps 63:1) Then we pursue that priceless gift: "Give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." (Jn 4:15). This pursuit will not end until we reach heaven. *Spiritual conquest, which is Love, has to be – in big things and small – a desire for the Infinite, for eternity.*⁹ *Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram (Ps 26:8), Lord, I will seek your face. I love to close my eyes and think that, when God wills, the moment will come when I will be able to see him, not as in a mirror dimly, but... face to face (1 Cor 13:12). Yes, my children, My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? (Ps 41:3).*¹⁰

God remains at the horizon of life, but by contemplating Him we desire Him more. It is not enough to see Him from afar. We want Him at our side: as a friend on the road, as a brother in difficulties, as a merciful Father in our falls. This is the Master's reproach: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Mt 15:8; Is 29:13). Maybe we recognize how much hang on to our things: our interests, work, rest... the heart does not long for contemplation as it should. It still has to be purified until it rejects everything that hinders God's voice. The saints' eagerness to purify themselves is a powerful testimony. The ascetical struggle should guide and orient those who wish to be contemplatives, those who have desires for holiness. *A holy life in the midst of secular reality, lived without fuss, with simplicity, with truthfulness. Is this not today the most moving manifestation of the magnalia Dei (Sir 18:5), of those prodigious mercies which God has always worked?*¹¹

Contemplation means uniting the mind and the will to God, while embracing emotions into them. *Heaven and earth seem to merge, my sons and daughters, on the horizon. But where they really meet is in your hearts, when you sanctify your everyday lives...*¹² These poetic words contain an overwhelming reality: that of a Creator and Father

⁹ *The Forge*, 1031.

¹⁰ *In Dialogue with the Lord*, 181.

¹¹ *Conversations*, 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116.

God who has the mercy to approach each one of us—you and me—hidden in our noble affections and daily realities. *My children, your ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. There you have your daily encounter with Christ. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind.*¹³

Looking at Christ and with Christ

Contemplation has many paths. As they traverse these paths, Christians may have to make many fresh starts, always in close union with Christ. Jesus accompanies us because He became man and shared his life with us. Dealing with Jesus face to face, worshipping Him and looking to Him with immense trust, is the beginning of a wonderful, personal dialogue. It involves looking at Christ and looking with Christ.

*Your work has exhausted you, and you are unable to pray. You are always in the presence of your Father. –If you can't speak to him, look at him every now and then like a little child does... and He will smile at you.*¹⁴

Looking at Christ

As St. Josemaría said to our Lord: *To look is to turn the eyes of our soul towards you, yearning to understand you.*¹⁵ It is an understanding that always falls short and yet always seeks to grow.

*People in love yearn to see each other. Lovers only have eyes for their beloved. Isn't it only natural? That's the way the human heart is. I would be lying if I said I wasn't deeply affected by the thought of contemplating Christ's face. Vultum tuum, Domine, requiram (Ps 26:8), Lord, I will seek your face.*¹⁶

This look contains an eager desire for God and for consolation in the hardships of this life:

*Get to know the Sacred Humanity of Jesus... And He will place in your soul an insatiable hunger an 'uncontrollable' yearning to contemplate his Face. In this longing, which it is impossible to satisfy on earth, you will often find your consolation.*¹⁷

Looking at Him we will come to love the Cross. Contemplating his Love even to the end (Jn 13:1) and contemplating His Wounds is a shortcut to meet the Heart of Christ and experience His immense Love for men. Praying in peace before a crucifix is an experience that can really move the soul. Jesus is not present there as He is in the

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁴ *The Way*, 895.

¹⁵ *In Dialogue with the Lord*, 207.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁷ *The Way of the Cross*, VI, n. 2.

Eucharist, but the cross can draw out our emotions, which is also a way of knowing. At his feet, it is easy to make generous and effective resolutions.

When we take a calm and careful look at Christ on the Cross, we will see that He opens His arms to welcome sinners. *Jesus on the Cross, with his heart pierced with Love for men, is such an eloquent reply to the question about the value of things and people that words only get in the way.*¹⁸ Jesus, to speak to us about God, died on the Cross.

All human needs and sorrows, soaked in the Blood of Christ, are imbued with trust in God. They are redeemed by the Sacrifice that is renewed each day in the Eucharist. It is like a ray of light streaming from His open wounds and spreading over all men and women.¹⁹ Our Lord expects us to draw close to the Cross, to embrace our own daily Cross, in order to receive the strength needed to co-redeem with Him.

There are times when the soul feels vividly drawn to Christ: *Do you know what it is to be lifted up to the heart of God?* St. Josemaría once asked in a meditation.²⁰ At other times we may become unnerved: “Lord, since I know that I can only live through your strength (through your grace, through your redeeming merits...), why is it so difficult for me to live with You and for You?” And we cry out: “Separate me, O Lord, from what separates me from You.”

Looking with Christ

Looking upon the world and the persons around us with Christ we are granted the supernatural outlook we need to live charity as He lived it: *as I have loved you (Jn 13:34)*. The Lord shares with us his way of looking. It is a way that is clear and full of understanding. He looks at us and sees in our souls the image of children of God, despite our defects. The ultimate source of all fraternity and all apostolate lies in this loving look, which is able to love everyone, and to help each person to struggle against their sins and mistakes.

*The Master passes very close to us, again and again. He looks at us... And if you look at him, if you listen to him, if you don't reject him, He will teach you how to give a supernatural meaning to everything you do... Then you too, wherever you may be, will sow consolation and peace and joy.*²¹

When we look with Christ at the Church, at our neighbor, at the souls in Purgatory... acts of reparation for sin spring up in our soul. And in asking forgiveness for all men and women we become identified with Christ himself. He makes us co-redeemers, even though in a very small way. But a small measure in divine things infinitely surpasses any human measure.

The mature fruit of contemplating with Christ's eyes is apostolic zeal to spread the

¹⁸ *Christ is passing by*, 165.

¹⁹ Cf. St Faustina Kowalska, *Diary*.

²⁰ *Friends of God*, 153.

²¹ *The Way of the Cross*, VIII, n. 4.

Gospel. The explicit command to spread the Good News *to the very ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8) becomes a pressing demand for those who truly love Christ's truth. We feel a special obligation *to put this truth into the hearts, and minds and lives of others. Not to do so would show a love of comfort.*²² And we want to do all we can to help those around us, both in their material and spiritual needs. The hunger for God that we see in those around us is a constant call for help.

Christ looks at us

When we look at Christ we know that He is looking at us. That's the source of our hope. To know and sense that we are being looked at by Christ and our Father God, with a love of predilection, awakens us from spiritual slumber and draws us out of anonymity with the amazing discovery that we are loved infinitely.

*You are what you are: perfect goodness. I am what I am: the filthiest rag in this rotten universe. And yet, you look at me... and you seek me... and you love me. Lord, may my children look at you, and seek you, and love you. Lord, may I seek you, look at you, love you.*²³

The moment that this perception ceases to be merely intellectual and becomes the reason for our existence, we experience the inner renewal we always wanted: our faith is enlarged, we are filled with hope and our heart burns with love. We echo the words of Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). Knowing that Christ is watching us, always accompanying us by his grace and intercession before the Father, makes us courageous when the daily struggle weighs down on us.

God's gaze makes us want to please Him. It is a living love that allows us to listen closely to His words. When the Apostle Thomas, who was reluctant to believe, saw and touched the wounds of Christ, an exclamation of faith, admiration and adoration arose from the depths of his soul: "Dominus meus et Deus meus! My Lord and my God! (John 20:28). How can one look at Christ and with Christ? How can one feel pierced by the love of God? It is a task that takes years and the work of grace in our soul. But we begin, as St. Josemaría wrote, by calling him Jesus and telling him many times a day that we love him. He does the rest, if we ask him with faith and perseverance in prayer.

Ineffable God

God is indescribable. He surpasses all human explanation. We lack the concepts. We try to approach the knowledge of God by analogies, with metaphors and figures of speech. Many Christians have sought silence and to retreat from the world as ways of approaching that unknowable God, to achieve a contemplative silence that would provide them with the greatest possible union with God. Others, however, seek that recollection in the middle of the world, like the first Christians. It is a way of living daily events that does

²² *The Forge*, 946.

²³ *In Dialogue with the Lord*, 207.

not impede God's presence and leads to contemplation.

“Prayer in the events of each day and each moment is one of the secrets of the kingdom revealed to ‘little children,’ to the servants of Christ, to the poor of the Beatitudes . . . It is important to bring the help of prayer into humble, everyday situations.”²⁴

This means bringing our life to our prayer and bringing our prayer to our life, as St. Josemaría advised, so that recollection throughout the day is fed by recollection in the times of prayer. We realize in our prayer that we never manage to know Him fully, but what we intuit amazes us and fills our heart. We realize that we understand only a tiny part of what God is. But even so, we are overwhelmed by his greatness and above all by his goodness. It is incredible that the Creator should concern himself with his creatures and do so with such love: “The Lord surprises us, showing us that he loves us even with our weaknesses.”²⁵

What can we do to encourage this recollected admiration of God? Going deeper into theology and praying about what we read is a step in the right direction. It unites intelligence and piety in this knowledge of God. But that is not enough. Daily moments of special recollection help extend it to the rest of our occupations, and keep it in the depths of our hearts.

Divine filiation plays a fundamental role. In the effort to know God through Jesus Christ, His eternal filiation furthers our contemplative prayer, leading us to focus on and take delight in God’s Fatherhood, so that we become aware that “the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,” (2 Cor 1:3) is before our eyes. Seeing him inebriates the soul. It is not about talking or asking, but just being seen. Looking and admiring do not satisfy, because we want these experiences to be eternal. We contemplate with the head and the heart, and what we get a glimpse of the ineffable heart of the Father. “We feel the need to contemplate the beauty of the Father without ceasing and adorn our own souls accordingly.”²⁶ Contemplating the Father is a marvel, and it leads us to direct our last thought at night and the first in the morning to him.

For years that soul has known that it is God’s child, has admired his goodness, greatness and mercy, and has felt the Love of God. But today, a new thirst is awakened. The soul no longer contemplates the gifts and attributes of the Father: his power, his wisdom, his mercy... but the soul’s gaze falls on the Father as an unimaginable, most lovable and luminous person. Everything else falls into the background. Everything moves towards this new vision of the divine fatherhood. We do not cease to wonder.

This contact with the ineffable nature of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit, which comes to us when God wants it to, in the measure of our faith and love and of the recollection with which we pray. We must aspire to it, however far away such a goal may be. Progress in prayer is unlimited, because God is infinite. It is only our defects and our

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2660.

²⁵ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 15 November 2017.

²⁶ St Gregory of Nyssa, *Homiliae in orationem dominicam*, 2; quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2784.

lack of desires for God that hold us back.

St. Josemaría, around 1971, said that he tried to immerse himself in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. He repeatedly reviewed theological manuals on this mystery. At times God gave him a little light and he was very happy. At other times he would be left in the dark, and he would be just as happy, because if God were to fit into his head, "he would be a tiny god."

Union with God

Perseverance in prayer leads to union with God, little by little and with progress and setbacks. Jesus expressed it wonderfully: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (Jn 14:23). We can all attain that union with God because we are not the ones who reach it with our own strength, but it is He who draws us to himself.

"Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him (cf. St Augustine, *quaest.* 64, 4)."²⁷

And in our prayer this attraction provides us with the assurance of attaining – when God wants it and to the extent that He wants it – union with God insofar as it is possible in this world.

*Our prayer, which began so child-like and ingenuous, now opens out into a broad, smooth-flowing stream, for it follows the course of friendship with him who said: I am the way (Jn 14:6) (...) Our heart now needs to distinguish and adore each one of the divine Persons. (...) The soul spends time lovingly with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.*²⁸

Contemplative prayer draws us into divine intimacy. We no longer look at God from the outside, so to speak, but from within the Trinity, catching glimpses of the intimate life of divine knowledge and love. And our filial way of looking at the Father is deepened by the eternal Son's way of looking at his Father, focusing precisely on his Paternity, since in all other things there is no way of distinguishing between the two.

This participation in the Life of the Trinity, which we will enjoy fully in eternal life, is already a reality for those who follow Christ closely and receive the sacraments. It is a participation in God that is partial and imperfect but as real as our body and our soul.

Participating in the communion of the Son with the Father

Union with God through transformative love comes about through the personal

²⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2560.

²⁸ *Friends of God*, 306.

love of each individual. But it is also a gift from the Holy Spirit. The awareness of this mystery of loving union with God has the power to renew the spiritual life of any Christian. “Prayer gives us an anticipation of heaven.”²⁹ It allows us to understand here on earth what our activity will be for all eternity: to contemplate and enjoy God. But we need to thirst for God.

“I don’t feel nostalgia for his gifts, but rather for the One who gives them. I don’t aspire to glory; what I want is to embrace the Glorified One ... I don’t seek rest, but I earnestly seek the face of the One who gives rest. I don’t long for the wedding banquet, but for the presence of the Spouse.”³⁰

But to make this attractive proposition a reality, we need to set aside our own ego in order to make room for God. It’s about becoming Christ, filling my spirit with his Spirit, to call his Father my Father, and with Christ to give my life for all men and women.

Union with God is bestowed through Baptism, recovered through Penance and brought to fulfilment in the Eucharist. And it is meant to become a reality in our daily life until it reaches its fullness in our whole life. This is the path of holiness in this world. And prayer is the first place to incarnate this union with God in our own life

“Again and again, the gospels note that Jesus withdrew ‘to the mountain’ to spend the nights in prayer ‘alone’ with his Father ... This ‘praying’ of Jesus is the Son conversing with the Father; Jesus’ human consciousness and will, his human soul, is taken up in that exchange, and in this way human ‘praying’ is able to become a participation in this filial communion with the Father.”³¹

Our prayer too, that of sons in the Son, is meant to take part in the communion of the Son with the Father, an entering into intimacy with the divine Persons. And the fact that we are unable to fathom what this truly means, should not keep us from appreciating it and giving thanks for it. It is the meaning of our whole life.

The Holy Spirit

Our sharing in the life of the Trinity is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love between the Father and the Son. *Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him. But to us God has revealed them through his Spirit* (1 Cor 2:9-10). This revelation will not fully take place until heaven, but we experience it partially even on earth, because “Christ has baptized us in the Holy Spirit and in fire.”³² Only omnipotent and perfect Love can overcome our weakness and direct our entire existence towards the divine infinity. “The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, is the blessed light that enlightens all hearts.”³³

²⁹ J. Philippe, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

³⁰ Gregory of Narek, Prayer XII.

³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Part I, Doubleday, p. 9.

³² Liturgy of the Hours, *Antiphon ad Magnificat*, feria IV, Seventh Week in Easter.

³³ Liturgy of the Hours, Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Intercessions at Morning Prayer. Cf. Also the hymn

This is the mission of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification. He comes to transform and elevate our soul. We are illuminated by the Spirit and transported to the heart of the Trinity. Perhaps, theologically, there are only very slight differences between the two, but from the point of view of one who goes up the ladder towards holiness, the difference is essential. In the first instance, the Holy Spirit can seem like a means for our sanctification: “the finger of the right hand of God”³⁴ that fashions our soul. But in the second instance, one perceives that He is the goal of our life, the ultimate object of our knowledge and love, in union with the Father and the Son.

We cannot “utilize” the Holy Spirit. But what we can and ought to do is allow our entire being and all our deeds to be filled with his powerful action. This leads us to identify ourselves with Christ. When this happens, the soul is filled with an uncontrollable desire to love and know *in* the Holy Spirit and *with* Him. It is a longing to melt, to dissolve one's self until it disappears, to find oneself again in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The way

What is the path for attaining this intimacy with God? Having recourse each day to prayer and petition. We should be deeply convinced, through faith and hope, that God is waiting to unite us to Himself. We ask with the urgency of knowing we cannot go on living without God, because he is life itself.

We need a great soul, a magnanimous soul, with an insatiable desire for God, which no human failing, whether our own or that of our neighbors, can undermine. And with hope we need to tirelessly fight against our personal imperfections. Even though it may seem that we are far from such a prayer, these desires alone, which God puts in our heart, already make us contemplatives. God makes love for him spring up in our heart *like a lily among brambles* (Song 2:2). With such desires, every sincere act of piety leads us into that Trinitarian communion. We should also try to enlist our feeling in this endeavor, which will help us win in moments of struggle.

With these graces from the Holy Spirit, an act of adoration, for example, simple but heartfelt, can deeply move the soul and open wide its doors to moments of divine intimacy.

The Eucharist

Contemplation, with the help of grace, leads to communion with God. We have tried to explain this from the subjective point of view, as successive steps in prayer that lead us towards that intimacy and union with the Trinity. But we also need to see this process more objectively so that it does not remain merely an accomplishment of a *voluntaristic* asceticism.³⁵

Veni, Sancte Spiritus.

³⁴ Hymn *Veni Creator.*

³⁵ Both errors – neo-gnosticism and neo-pelagianism – are pointed out by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* (19 March 2018), on the call to holiness.

Communion with God always takes place in the Church and with the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. This gift becomes something living and objective in sacramental communion, in the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. This supreme gift contains in itself all the other gifts – including contemplation – and shows in an unequivocal way the love of God that draws us to Himself, seen so clearly in Christ’s death and resurrection.

The Eucharistic sign is not a mere symbol of his Love. The Eucharist, like every sacrament, brings about what it signifies. And hence in a contemplative soul it converts the desires for union with God into something objective, thus emphasizing the aspects of unmerited gift and objective reality.

Contemplation and Eucharist

Since the Last Supper, Christ has remained in the Church under the sacramental signs of the Eucharist. Whenever and wherever celebrated, the Eucharist makes present the “hour” of Christ: his ardent desire (cf. Lk 22:15) to celebrate with his loved ones the culminating moment of his self-giving for mankind, the very heart of Redemption, when Christ loved us to the end (John 13:1).

Hence looking at Christ means looking with body and soul at “the Eucharistic face” of Christ.³⁶ In contemplating the Sacred Host, we are seeing the Heart of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist we truly consummate our union with God on this earth. The Eucharistic sacrifice is “the source and summit of the Christian life,”³⁷ and consequently the source and summit of contemplative prayer. Prayer and Eucharistic piety – in the Mass and outside the Mass – are intimately united.

“To illustrate the beauty of the Eucharistic celebration, I would like to begin with a very simple aspect: Mass is prayer; rather, it is prayer *par excellence*, the loftiest, the most sublime, and at the same time the most ‘concrete.’ In fact it is the loving encounter with God through his Word and the Body and Blood of Jesus.”³⁸

In terms of practical advice, the affection we put into our Eucharistic devotions will directly influence the quality of our prayer. To pray before the Tabernacle or before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar, looking directly at Him, never goes unrewarded.

The Holy Mass

Our life of prayer is greatly helped by celebrating or attending the Holy Mass with the conviction that it is the most extraordinary moment of our day, the moment that truly unites us to Christ, to the Father and to the entire Church. We are unable to comprehend the full extent of the reality of this union with God in the Mass and Eucharistic Communion. If we were to suddenly see it clearly and in all its fullness, we would die of love, the Curé of

³⁶ St John Paul II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 7.

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 11.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 15 November 2017.

Ars said. This love - which we can be more or less conscious of - is what gives fullness to our contemplation.

Each day the Eucharist is a new Pentecost. Transubstantiation reveals the power of the Spirit, who changes the bread and wine into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The force of this transformation³⁹ does not end there. In receiving Communion, the faithful are interiorly transformed: they are “Christified,” made like Christ. And through them this transformation is spread to their fellow men and women and to all human activity. Hence the progress of the person who prays is closely tied to a deepening in Eucharistic piety: both at Mass and in our daily life.

Moreover, if the time of prayer precedes or follows the Holy Mass, many references to the mystery about to be celebrated or just celebrated should naturally be included. It would not make sense in general to meditate during that time exclusively on other matters, without in some way tying them to the Eucharist, for this is *the center and root of a Christian's spiritual life*.⁴⁰ Hence the Eucharist is the greatest means for making our desire for a personal encounter with God a reality. This, then, is the last of the great means at our disposal for achieving a prayer in which, while keeping our feet firmly on the ground, we raise our head and our heart to the height we all desire: that of personal encounter with God.

Our Lady

The Mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ transforms human realities by making them the channel of the supernatural. The Humanity of the Lord not only brings to us what is divine, but also interweaves it into the daily life of men. In this context, both natural and supernatural, God counts on the simplicity and marvel of human motherhood. He prepares his coming and the gift of new life with a creature of singular beauty: a virgin of Nazareth called Mary, chosen to be the Mother of God.

It is through Mary Immaculate that we *look at God without needing rest or feeling tired*.⁴¹ Neither did the heavenly Father fail to care for her and draw her to himself, nor did she have eyes and a heart but to look at her God. Mary was astonished when she saw so much goodness towards her, the handmaid of the Lord. Jesus Christ “fully reveals man to himself”⁴² by unveiling his unsuspected greatness; Mary, following Jesus, marvelously reveals what we can become, if we do not put obstacles in the way of God's action.

She is the Father's favorite daughter, God's delight, his rest and his comfort. God enjoys and rejoices in her, and with him all the angels and saints of heaven.⁴³ And He lets his

³⁹ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *XX World Youth day*, Address at the Vigil and Homily on Sunday, Cologne, 20-21 August 2005.

⁴⁰ *Christ is Passing By*, 87.

⁴¹ *Friends of God*, 296.

⁴² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁴³ St John Paul II writes: “The Blessed Virgin Mary is the ‘*tota pulchra*’ portrayed by countless artists, whom Dante contemplates among the splendors of Paradise as ‘beauty that is joy in the eyes of all the other saints’ (*Divine Comedy*, Paradise, XXXI, 134-135” (*Letter to Artists*, 4 April 1999, 16).

faithful children on this earth share in this joy. At the foot of the Cross, Jesus gives her to us as our Mother. She is his testament, his last will.

An irreplaceable function of mothers is to make love flourish. Not only to give love, but to produce echoes of that love, to make it sprout in the children and in the husband: to teach love! Under this prism, the role of Holy Mary in our lives shines forth. She has been the one who has made love for God flourish in our hearts, who has taught us to love the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. At first, little by little; then, impetuously: dazzling us every day with new divine lights. It is surprising that it takes, at times, so long to discover what we already knew from the beginning!

For many years, even without realizing it completely, our earthly journey has been protected, surrounded, wrapped up and accompanied by the Mother of God. She pours out divine mercy on our past, present and future: so that we never doubt, so that we decide to always love God's will, so that we feel safe. She is “Mother of God and the Mother of grace, Mother of piety and mercy.”⁴⁴

From our first steps in the life of prayer, we have striven to foster devotion to Our Lady, as St. Josemaría taught us: *Holy Mary, Mother of fair love, help your children!* Not to have recourse to this means of salvation, explicitly given to us by Our Lord, would be a great mistake and a sign of ingratitude, since it is such a great help for all the faithful:

*There's one thing that has helped me always, the fact that I am still a child, and I am always climbing onto my Mother's lap and finding refuge in the Heart of Christ, my Lord.*⁴⁵

This devotion will help us go deeper into Mary's role in our sanctity, just as St. Josemaría “discovered” one day his Marian filiation, a *new Mediterranean*, after praying many years to Our Lady and drawing close to her in a filial manner:

*We go to Jesus – and we ‘return’ to him – through Mary (The Way, 495). It was a reflection that had been brewing in his soul for quite some time, but he suddenly understood it with new depth, and it clarified for him anew the importance of Mary in his relationship with God.*⁴⁶

In our case, if we want to improve our prayer and unite ourselves more closely to God, one of the best means will be to draw closer to Our Lady. Mary will lead us to know and love Jesus. Who better than her to teach us to look at Christ?

“Mary was a peerless model of contemplation of Christ. The face of the Son belonged to her in a special way because he had been knit together in her womb and had taken a human likeness from her. No one has contemplated Jesus as diligently as Mary. The gaze of her heart was already focused on him at the moment of the Annunciation.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Salve Mater*, ancient Carmelite Marian hymn.

⁴⁵ *Friends of God*, 147.

⁴⁶ Lucas Buch, *New Mediterraneans (V)*; (available at <https://opusdei.org/en/document/new-mediterraneans-v-to-jesus-through-mary/>).

⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, 28 December 2011.

As a result of this contemplation, we will have the strength needed to follow Christ closely and to love the Will of the heavenly Father as Jesus did, and as she did throughout her whole life.

“Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word,’ *Fiat*: this is Christian prayer: to be wholly God’s, because he is wholly ours.”⁴⁸

Together with Mary, St. Joseph can also play an important role in our spiritual progress if we know how to have recourse to his intercession. Joseph is among the great listeners of God. It is not possible to distinguish the voice of God in a dream if one is not used to listening to him while awake. No one pays any attention to a dream unless it clearly manifests a warning from God. But for that, to differentiate that dream from others, it is necessary to have heard that inner voice many times and to have made an effort to be receptive to it. Joseph was. He spent his life, before and after the birth of Jesus, attentive to what God was asking of him. The fact that his name was included in the Eucharistic prayers at Mass signifies the importance given to him in the Western Church.

Hand in hand with Mary and Joseph, St. Josemaría is also a teacher and guide. His preaching and his texts constitute a pattern with which to mark our own spiritual progress. After several readings, many of his texts begin to speak to us in a previously unthinkable way. Knowing, moreover, the details of his life will be of great help in understanding them well and in bringing to light their ultimate meaning.

⁴⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2617.

Helping others to pray

Some General Principles

The apostles tell Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Our Lord’s answer to his disciples, giving them his own prayer, has resounded in our hearts, and we (the authors) have tried to respond to Christ’s invitation in this book with some ideas and suggestions on how to deepen and expand our personal prayer. By sharing our own experiences in personal prayer, we hope we have somehow helped you to advance in your own dialogue with God. The ultimate fulfilment in prayer will not depend on any human guide or teacher, but the action of the Holy Spirit inside each soul, as we have continually stated in this book.

Obviously, the more deeply and fruitfully you yourself pray, the more you will desire—and be able to—help others to draw closer to God. Some of your friends, who know you well, may even make the same request to you: “Teach me to pray!” Sometimes it will be that direct, but often it will only be a question of the heart.

Your challenge will then be to respond adequately to their thirst for God.”⁴⁹ This thirst can only be satisfied in prayer because prayer is not a human action but a divine one. Prayer is our response to a God who reaches out to us, to a God who does not wait until he is found, but comes looking for us.

Prayer is indispensable for any Christian who wants to become a saint, and one very helpful practice to achieve this is the practice of good *mental prayer*. Helping people to do mental prayer is quite different from teaching people how to pray better at Mass, how to say vocal prayers, or how to take care of the other key aspects of the spiritual life. Each of those would go beyond the aims of this book, and would require a book of its own.

We believe in respecting the freedom of all Catholics in their spiritual journey. This was something that St. Josemaría Escrivá strongly defended:

*I don’t want to lay down how each person should pray, because prayer is a very personal activity. I just give general indications. Then each one can follow his or her own path, which is different from everybody else’s.*⁵⁰

Teaching others to be contemplatives means fostering progress in prayer, teaching them to make a special effort to listen to and fall in love with God. As Bl. Alvaro said, “We take on an obligation before God, before the Work and before our own conscience, to be contemplatives in the middle of the world.”⁵¹ This desire is not so much ours at first as it is God’s – the desire to know and fall more deeply in love with Him.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, Apost. Exh. *Evangelii gaudium*, 89.

⁵⁰ Comments recorded in a get-together with St. Josemaría, held September 6, 1973.

⁵¹ Blessed Alvaro, *Letter*, 28 November 1982, 51 in *Family Letters* (2), 360.

More specific ideas

Here are three suggestions that can help you to help others to pray.

The first is to introduce people to God and speaking to them about Him. People pray when they encounter the reality of God. They may need strategies to nourish their prayer, such as reading books on the life of Christ or other spiritual books, or to foster their desires to know and love God. This holds true both for the beginning of their spiritual journey and along the way. Our own action is less important than allowing ourselves to be *led* in prayer.

Second, listen to other people so you get to know them. All Christians have their own path. We need flexibility and knowledge of the worth of every soul. Otherwise, we will not respect and love their freedom, and they will not discover where they need to grow. Everyone is unique, and God meets people where they are.

In the case of young people, the added challenge is the importance of spending time with them. That is how we can get to know them, and help them know themselves. The key is helping them understand their gifts and their opportunities to serve. Fostering their trust in God is another important area. It will help them accept their own limitations, turning them into opportunities to live as children of God. Their sense of God's mercy thus intensifies and they grow more in hope, and will eventually take more risks for God.

The third idea is to help people to realize that they are part of the story of redemption and that they belong to a *tradition*. God speaks to us as social creatures. He revealed Himself to a people, the Church. Our individual history is not a random verse of a poem. We understand it in light of the whole *poem*, so to speak—of what God wants for our life according to his loving plan.

Opening people's eyes

To know Christ is to know oneself. Christ draws us and shapes our identity. Spiritual directors can accompany others in their adventure of self-knowledge and love for God. They help people to take life more seriously, to open their eyes to the meaning of their own existence, not only as a nice idea but in daily life.

Those who have difficulties praying will not move forward until they realize that something is wrong in their life; that they, perhaps, lack a foundation. They should realize that they are spiritually drowning. It is not so much about demanding that people pray more, but opening their eyes to be more aware, and to experience the existential emptiness of a life without prayer.

From the moment that they begin to see things in this new way, their struggle, asceticism, and self-denial acquire a new meaning. It is born from the depths of their freedom, where the powerful force of the Holy Spirit acts (cf. Rom 5:5). But until someone becomes aware that they are unhappy (i.e. that something is missing in their life),

there is little that can be done to help them. Do not give up on them: why not ask them to pray to God about their unhappiness?

Self-knowledge is the remedy for superficiality, as well as for the omnipresent tyranny of sentimentality. This self-knowledge is impossible to attain on one's own. That is why spiritual accompaniment plays a big role in the development of self-knowledge and of our identity—an identity that is based on the harmonious development of our personality. God's grace elevates nature and perfects it, but does not supplant it.

A good spiritual director should know about a person's state of soul, and ask himself: How does this person come to appreciate the novelty of the love received from God? There is no single answer to this question. It is a matter of divine mercy and the action of the Holy Spirit. It is a free gift from God that cannot be earned, but it can be asked for. Every time we pray well, we prepare our soul to receive this gift. Explicitly putting a little love for God in every detail of our prayer life, great or small, makes the journey easier. Calling Jesus Christ by name, affectionately, showing him our tender love without any embarrassment, all this brings us close to that moment. We have to ask and search Him out: *I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares I will seek him whom my soul loves (Song 3:2)*. We have to press on and respond promptly to love's little invitations. That is how we prepare for love's bigger invitations.

For those who do not know how to begin to pray, the following words from St. Josemaría could be a guide: *Let each of us meditate on what God has done for him and how he has responded.*⁵² Similarly, Pope Francis encourages us to “remember the beautiful, great things that the Lord has done in the life of each one of us,” since a ‘memorious’ prayer “does much good to the Christian heart.”⁵³

In helping others to pray, we must never forget the reality of God's Love and its effects on those who pray. Certainly we must help people to know and face possible obstacles to prayer, but we must always prepare others to perceive God's love in his or her own way and in God's good time. When the moment arrives, fidelity to prayer after so many years will take on an unsuspected fullness of meaning. It is the arrival of the bridegroom and the reception of the wise virgins.

Some concluding thoughts

Teaching people to pray is not about training or skills or learning how to use certain tools, although some of these may be required, especially at the beginning. Learning to pray is more about preparing oneself for an encounter with God. What God does in prayer is more important than what we do. Our task is to recognize, appreciate, thank, and love God as He comes to us.

This approach keeps prayer from feeling like a commitment or obligation, something “we have to get done.” Prayer is the door that allows God into our life. His

⁵² *Friends of God*, 312.

⁵³ Pope Francis, *Homily in Santa Marta*, 21 April 2016.

presence and word create a new relationship with us, one that transforms our whole life. It cannot be otherwise, because God is our Creator and we are His creatures.

The more we renew our prayer, the more we ourselves are renewed. Prayer makes us quicker to love and trust Him in a fuller way, as we place our life completely in His hands. We all aspire to such heights. We can only reach them with God's grace, through many slow advances and after years of trying to pray.

At the beginning of the spiritual life, the goal is often simply to increase the amount of time spent praying. As one progresses in the spiritual life and prayer matures, specific advice becomes more difficult to give. The key, then, is to show people how the Holy Spirit acts in their life. This strengthens their walk with the Lord and helps them to face obstacles. Teaching an experienced soul requires broad knowledge of the spiritual life and a capacity for discernment.

In sum, helping others to be contemplatives means fostering personal progress in prayer, teaching them to make a special effort to listen to and fall in love with God. This desire, however, is not so much ours as God's; the desire to know and fall more deeply in love with Him is a response to his thirst for us.