

Renewing ourselves by the way we pray

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I. Renewing ourselves by the way we pray

– After years of regular prayer, it is advisable to stop, take stock, and examine the way we pray. We should look, for example, at the most frequent topics of our prayer, our habitual attitudes, its fruits in our apostolate, the progress that has resulted from our last few retreats, and so on.

– With God’s help, this examination of the way we pray can lead to a renewal—perhaps a small one or perhaps a major one—of our whole interior life.

a) Why should we renew ourselves?

– With the passage of time, love tends to become dull and stray from the course amidst the thousand-and-one concerns and worries of daily life.

This can be seen in married couples: to prevent their love from diminishing over time they need to take steps to refresh it, to renew it in some way; otherwise it can wear away and even completely disappear.

– Prayer is based on love of God.

Only if that love is kept alive will the interior life stay young. If our love is kept burning, as time goes on our interior life will be as strong as St. Josemaría’s interior life was in the final years of his life on earth.

Many recall how our Father in his final years, in get-togethers and conversations, would share aspirations, make exhortations, acts of atonement and expiation, acts of thanksgiving, transmit joy as the constant theme of his life, etc. The little details of his life of piety were always fresh and new. He was like a volcano, constantly overflowing with personal spiritual initiatives.

How did he constantly maintain and increase the freshness of his devotion and keep his love of God ever young? Among other things, by constantly renewing his prayer and his conversation with God. It would be true to say that in his prayer he never repeated himself.

– We each have our own experience, but it is not easy to maintain such a youthful spirit. We are always in danger of slackening off, mediocrity, settling for less [see II e) below], or merely “checking boxes.”

We all do the Norms, and perhaps we put effort and self-sacrifice into doing them, and we can be sure that Our Lord is happy with us. But isn’t it also true that after all these years, we ought to be drawing more abundant fruit from them? Shouldn’t we have a zeal that renews our love of God and others every day, from the inside?

b) What does this renewal consist of?

– Renewing our prayer does not necessarily mean praying in a different way, but refreshing our usual way of praying and using this effort as a springboard to leap forward in our entire interior life.

In short, we need to ask ourselves, “What can I do in my daily prayer in order to rejuvenate the love in my interior life, and make up for my persistent defects?”

– We can sum up this intimate process as follows:

“I need to go about my times of prayer every day as I did on those occasions when I attained the greatest intimacy with Our Lord, and was deeply inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

We all know when those occasions were. We have sometimes prayed like that, and there is no reason to give up trying. The only obstacle is our tendency to settle for less, to be content with “just getting by.”

– That is why the title of this outline is “Renewing ourselves by,” and not just “renewing” the way we do the prayer.

Our primary goal is an inner renewal of our personal attitude of faith and love towards our Father God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and towards our neighbor.

– An example that can help make this clearer is vocal prayer. We are obviously not going to change the words, but we aim to allow the words to draw our soul towards God or Our Lady.

We aim to “soar up” to God in our times of prayer,¹ and as a result, to do so throughout the rest of the day.

– Hence this is a supernatural endeavor that depends on God’s grace. But, as we well know, God does not do anything in us unless we freely want it, unless we have the right dispositions.

“Do I want a new way of wanting and loving, a renewal of love?” That is a question we each have to ask and answer personally.

c) How can we renew ourselves in and through our prayer?

– To begin with, the path of prayer is personal and there are as many ways of praying as there are human beings. Even so, it can be useful to summarize approaches known for their good results.

– A renewal of our prayer is linked to the rest of our interior life and depends on many factors: our recollection, spirit of penance, apostolic drive, etc.

¹ Cf. *The Forge*, no. 39, about the little bird that is snatched up by an eagle and borne aloft to great heights.

At the same time, only renewed prayer, full of hope and living piety, can fill our whole interior struggle and apostolate with joy and optimism.

– When we are careless about fraternity, little things, apostolic zeal or work, this two-way influence should lead us to think: “How is my prayer going? Through my prayer, do I need to infuse charity into my life, so as to do all the usual things, but in a new way?”

– From another angle, it is also true that apostolic zeal has the power to rejuvenate our prayer and devotion. Filling our prayer with apostolic desires will often be the key to the renewal we are seeking.

– Spiritual renewal opens up to us the sources of supernatural life that we are already familiar with:

A sense of our divine filiation that binds us to God in the inmost depths of our being and gives us unlimited trust and confidence.

A relationship with Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Teacher and Friend; a special, intimate conversation with Him.

The Holy Spirit, who is the force inspiring every spiritual endeavor, whom we need to beg for his Gifts.

Devotion to Our Blessed Lady; always an effective remedy for our obvious defects.

The ordinary means through which God’s grace reaches us: the Sacraments and spiritual direction.

Self-knowledge, which we need to increase constantly, together with sincerity and docility.

– Of course, there is nothing here that we don’t already know about and practice.

What we need to do is return to these sources of the Christian spirit with renewed trust and vigor; remembering that they have produced so many saints over the course of history.

We need to return to them with the absolute certainty that we have all the help of God, who is all-powerful!

– An overview of various aspects of the way people can pray is set out below under four headings, as a way of orientating the renewal we seek. This is necessarily a simplified and hence somewhat imprecise summary.

II. Prayer over time

The way we pray changes and develops over the course of our life. This process involves elements that are useful to reconsider if we are to renew ourselves in our prayer.

Hope is what keeps alive our desire for God in spite of all disappointments and weaknesses. Hope is therefore essential for renewal of our prayer.

a) Beginnings

- At the beginning people need to learn how to pray. We will not dwell on this subject here; there are many useful books about it, and abundant teachings by St. Josemaría.
- It should be stressed, however, that although we may have been doing mental prayer for many years, we will repeatedly need to begin again to learn how to pray.²

This is not humiliating; on the contrary, it is a sign that we are growing in humility and progress in prayer: “This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer... But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray, as it were: learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: ‘Lord, teach us to pray!’ (Lk 11:1).”³

- Among other reasons, we need to learn how to pray because we always need to teach other people how to pray.

A primordial task in the Church’s mission is to teach people to pray, just as Christ taught his disciples. And no one can give what he does not have.

We need to learn to pray because, as St John Paul II says, we should aspire to a high quality of prayer, based on love. “Our Christian communities must become genuine ‘schools’ of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly ‘falls in love.’ Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God’s plan.”⁴

- At the beginning, and always, the golden rule for conquering in the “battle of prayer”⁵ is to be assiduous and regular in spending time in prayer; otherwise any progress will be slow and uncertain.

This is of primary importance, but it is not easy, both early on and after many years have gone by. Prayer demands time and effort. Even though it is both childlike and simple to pray, it demands concentration of both mind and will, which can be tiring.

² Blessed Alvaro wrote, “Begin again so as to learn to be humble” (*Letter*, June 1975, p. 31). It is a lesson that also applies to our prayer.

³ St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 33.

⁵ Prayer is frequently described as a “battle” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), Part Four “Christian Prayer,” especially nos. 2725-2758.

b) Enjoyable times

– At the start of the path of prayer, and also at other points in life, the Holy Spirit can lead us in such a way that we enjoy praying and find that it satisfies our mind and heart, makes us savor God’s closeness, and fills us with happiness.

“In prayer... there come forth living sparks, blazing desires of heaven, in which the flame of divine love burns.”⁶

– When this happens, we should thank God very much and ask him humbly for the grace to respond generously, since God’s gifts are always both a gift and a task.⁷

It sometimes happens that such times fade out because of our failure to respond to them, because of our lack of sacrifice and care, often in little things.

These times of rich fruit in our prayer do not usually last for a long time. Normally we go back fairly soon to the daily continuity described below.

– In times of spiritual “bonanza,” St. Josemaría exhorted us to store up those graces, as rainwater is stored up after a downfall. “Have you seen how water is stored in reservoirs against a time of drought? In the same way..., you have to store up the cheerfulness, the clear insights and the light which the Lord sends you.”⁸

c) Difficult times

– One kind of difficulty in prayer is when dryness and aridity predominate.

We may or may not know the cause, but we find it very hard to concentrate on prayer; we feel distant from God and indifferent to or even doubtful about the faith.

– There is a different kind of difficulty in prayer that is the result of spiritual neglect and lukewarmness (although some of its symptoms may be similar to the difficulty caused by aridity). Lack of temperance in its various aspects, carelessness and laziness, neglecting the things of God, selfishness, etc., block the soul’s union with God, leaving it alone and unable to react.

– A time of difficulty in prayer can be recognized as one of the first sort, and a trial permitted by God, if the person applies the available means and is docile in spiritual direction.

If someone in this situation makes a sincere effort but the difficulty persists, they should realize that God wants their suffering to be joined to Christ’s sufferings for the salvation of the world. This will help them to pray in a very supernatural and valuable way, even if there are few or no visible results.

⁶ St Peter of Alcantara, *Tratado de la oracion y meditacion*, quoted in Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, New York: Scepter, 2014, p. 2.

⁷ As St John Paul II so often loved to remind us.

⁸ *Furrow*, no. 788.

– More often, however, difficulty in prayer is the result of a state of lukewarmness and neglect, or at the very least, a spiritual cooling-down.

In this case the person needs to recognize it and react sincerely, beginning again to apply the means, probably more than once, to improve the way he prays.

It will be difficult, but when light finally returns to his soul he will see that it really was worth the effort to get out of that situation.

d) Times of monotonous continuity

–When the person has reached a certain spiritual maturity (15 or 20 years from the beginning of his life of prayer, up until old age), there can be the danger of monotony, even for many years.

This period should consist of slow but steady progress in intimacy with God; nevertheless it includes a risk of falling into routine and merely external fulfilment.

–As the years go by, it is possible to not notice any progress in prayer, or even find that we have gone backwards.

Together with this, we may go through some type of crisis, either because of lukewarmness that waters down our love, or due to factors such as age, health, work, etc., directly or indirectly related to our spiritual life.

– The fruit of these long years is learning to interweave love with the fulfilment of duty.

In other words, to understand in real, practical terms that love and suffering (love and tiredness, love and human failure...) are two sides of the same coin.

This was true of Christ's life and his disciples' lives too; with joy and cheerfulness, which are the sign of genuine love.

This learning process is essentially a task for our prayer.

– Bearing all this in mind, we need to realize that “faithfulness over time is the name of love.”⁹

Only perseverance in love, with the accompanying sacrifices, purifies our prayer from the dross of selfishness contained in every human effort.

To become aware of this, it is necessary to embrace cheerfully the negative aspects, because we understand that they are what are best for our soul even though they make us suffer.

– In the end, the waiting itself, and the “monotonous” repetition of days, become our best allies in showing Our Lord how we love Him.

⁹ Benedict XVI, Speech at the vigil with priests and religious, Fatima, 12 May 2010, tenth anniversary of the beatification of the children of Fatima.

Gratuitousness – doing things without seeking any recompense – is a key element in love and hence in prayer. We do not pray so as to get something out of it, we pray for Our Lord’s sake, because He wants us to. Perseverance in times of dryness guarantees and strengthens our gratuitousness.

“To pray is to spend time freely, ‘gratuitously’ with God, just for the joy of being together.”¹⁰

– During those long years we need to learn how to pray, making of our heart a slow oven where we “cook” the adversities and joys, the memorable times and the routine moments that make up our life, into nourishment for our love and conversation with God. We become a burning ember, as our Father said.

How do we learn to pray like that? By asking God for a lot of help and also by being very patient, both with ourselves and with our neighbor.

– Precisely because these years are monotonous, we need to renew our inner life frequently by strengthening our piety with little details that adorn our Norms like little jewels and that are of great value in God’s eyes: aspirations, loving glances at a picture or statue, small mortifications...

Like the bricks of a building,¹¹ those little details, little touches of love, rebuild our initial enthusiasm every day and every week.

– The afternoon work period and the night period are splendid tools for renewing and maintaining our prayer throughout each day.

e) The main enemies

– The main enemy is always sin, certainly mortal sin but also venial. “Settling” means making a pact with venial sin because it does not offend God seriously and it takes effort to reject it.

“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-seated hatred of deliberate venial sin, those negligences which, while they don’t deprive us of God’s grace, serve to obstruct the channels through which grace comes to us.”¹²

– Discouragement and at its worst, despair, are powerful enemies in these long years, when the spiritual life seems to have reached a plateau.

Sometimes they are accompanied by failure on the human level. In other instances they are covered up by frantic professional activity, which masks the deficiency of the spiritual life.

¹⁰ Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, New York: Scepter, 2014, p. 12.

¹¹ Cf. *The Way*, no. 823.

¹² *Friends of God*, no. 243.

– Along with discouragement and despair, lukewarmness sets in: abandoning, in practice, any hope of escaping from our interior inertia because it would require too much effort.

“How far one is from obtaining something, if the very wish to possess it has been lost through fear of the demands involved in achieving it!”¹³

f) Remedies

– First of all, loyal perseverance in our commitment to pray:

“Never omit your mental prayer. When a soul begins to think that he can’t pray, that what the Father teaches us is very difficult, that our Lord doesn’t say anything to him, that he doesn’t listen... No, my children! We have to persevere in prayer. Make those very complaints to our Lord in your prayer; and if necessary, keep repeating the same aspiration to him for the whole half-hour: ‘Jesus, I love you; Jesus, teach me how to love; Jesus, teach me how to love the others for your sake...’ Persevere like that, day after day, for a month, or a year, or two years, and in the end our Lord will tell you: ‘Stupid, I’ve been with you, right beside you, from the very start!’”¹⁴

– Second, de-complicate the soul. Shun perfectionism, comparisons, pessimism.

“Do you want to know how to be frank and simple? Listen to these words of Peter and meditate upon them: ‘*Domine, Tu omnia nosti...* Lord, you know all things!’”¹⁵

– The most effective remedy of all against the enemies of prayer is to grow in magnanimity, which enriches our soul with great desires. Since these desires are to love God more, and to give him glory, our heart’s ambitions should be limitless:

“Allow your soul to be consumed by desires – desires for loving, for forgetting yourself, for sanctity, for Heaven. Do not stop to wonder whether the time will come to see them accomplished, as some pseudo-adviser might suggest. Make them more fervent every day, for the Holy Spirit says that he is pleased with ‘men of desires’ (cf. Dan 10:19 [Vulg.]). Let your desires be operative and put them into practice in your daily tasks.”¹⁶

– Everything that helps open up our soul to God’s great marvels is very useful: spiritual and cultural reading to learn more about the greatness of the human spirit; the study of theology, and biographies of saints and holy people, which can benefit us enormously if we pause to ponder God’s action in their lives.

“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

¹³ *Friends of God*, no. 207.

¹⁴ St. Josemaría, *Crónica*, 1976, pp. 1406-1407.

¹⁵ *Furrow*, no. 326.

¹⁶ *Furrow*, no. 628.

Heaven, not the things that are upon the earth. For you are dead to worldliness, through Baptism, ‘and your life is hidden with Christ in God.’”¹⁷

– Other lesser remedies (which may be no less crucial) include: habitually taking a book to provide matter for our prayer; using our spiritual reading to enrich our prayer; making use of prayer-books or the classic prayers of the Church, etc.

III. Our times of prayer

– Our times of prayer offer a valuable source of renewal for the way we pray. What we are aiming at is to learn how to put our whole heart into praying:

“I know the plans I have in mind for you – it is the Lord who speaks – plans for peace, not disaster, reserving a future full of hope for you. When you seek me you shall find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”¹⁸

That is a basic condition, laid down by God himself.

a) The introductory prayer

– We may find it hard to believe that something as simple and often-repeated as the words of the introductory prayer could bring about any valuable renewal. And yet, it is an unexpectedly effective instrument.

– We need to put it in first place, and only proceed once we have made the effort to say the introductory prayer slowly and meditatively, until it fills us completely.

“St. Josemaría used to begin his times of meditation with a fixed form of prayer. You could tell that he was already entering into a very intense dialogue with Our Lord because he gave the full meaning to every single word of that preparatory prayer. He had an almost tangible certainty that Our Lord was listening to him.”¹⁹

– When we feel distracted, unable to concentrate, and our mind seems empty, the remedy is clear: repeat that prayer slowly, once, twice, three times, saying it more slowly each time, dwelling on the words, changing one or several of them in order to fix our attention on what we are saying. How often? As often as it takes to center our attention totally on Our Lord.

“When [St. Josemaría] was preaching, as he said those words, he would sometimes encourage his hearers to make an explicit act of faith. Opening his soul to us, he said that in his meditation the very first words, ‘My Lord and my God,’ were often all

¹⁷ *Friends of God*, no. 206, quoting Col 3:1-3.

¹⁸ Jer 29:11 and 13.

¹⁹ Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2000, p. 196.

he needed to surrender himself entirely to the Blessed Trinity and spend the half hour contemplating the depth of that short invocation in its many facets.”²⁰

– We will also often need to return to it more than once in the course of our prayer, if we have become distracted.

– Similarly, vocal prayers, the Psalms, the liturgy of the Mass, etc., when prayed well, can trigger an explosion of love.

– Finally, appealing to our Mother Mary, St Joseph, our Guardian Angel, and others, has the effectiveness described in the following points.

b) Appeal for help from on high

– A time of prayer is a time to spend with God. Jesus Christ has made this so easy for us that we don’t realize what it means. The Old Testament contains exhaustive lists of the conditions and attitudes needed in order to approach God.

– The first conclusion is that we have an absolute need of God’s help to speak to Him. On our own we are incapable of making any progress in prayer, but there is no room for encouragement, since the Holy Spirit is working for us:

“... within ‘the believing and praying Church,’ the Holy Spirit teaches the children of God how to pray.”²¹

– We all know about this need, but have we actually experienced it? Do we feel the total incapacity of our nothingness when before any aspect of God’s greatness?

– To help us understand this, we need to realize that in prayer we are like shipwreck survivors in the sea when a lifebelt is thrown to them. How eagerly they cling to the lifebelt!

Is that how eagerly we cling to the supernatural means at our disposal? Do we really beg for help as urgently as a shipwreck-survivor?

– How hard did we ask for help as we began our prayer today? Did we appeal to God’s Mercy and to our Mother’s intercession?

We will never be able to pray well on our own. In practice we often act as if it depends on us how much effort we put in – even though we may never say so explicitly. With that attitude we are unlikely to succeed.

– By contrast, the day we begin our prayer asking God urgently for help, our prayer is more likely to open up “into a broad, smooth-flowing stream,”²² as St. Josemaría said.

The reason is that the Holy Spirit gives us his help and places the most difficult things within reach.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ CCC no. 2650.

²² *Friends of God*, no. 306.

– It is very good for us to learn how to urgently beg God for help. The Gospel example of the Canaanite woman is an example for us: her neediness made her beg with faith and humility, which are the necessary conditions for our prayer to be heard.

c) Faith and trust in God

– Faith and trust are basic attitudes of prayer; we need to develop them constantly.

“Go to Jesus as his disciples did and say to him, ‘Lord, teach us how to pray.’ 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.”²³

– That trust, together with humility (see below), bring us victory in the battle of prayer.

“‘Lord, I don’t 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.”²⁴

d) Simplicity and humility

– “Humility is the foundation of prayer,” a necessary condition “to receive freely the gift of prayer. ‘Man is a beggar before God’ (St Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6, 9).”²⁵

– Praying is not a matter of us doing something for God, but above all letting ourselves be loved by Him.

God does not need anything we can give Him. He only wants our hearts, our freedom: for us to accept and prize being loved by God.

Among other things this demands full trust in Him, and a readiness to put ourselves at his disposal and trust in his love.

– That implies giving up our own self-sufficiency and autonomy, and having more confidence in Him than in our own points of view. In other words, being humble.

Every remnant of pride that we consent to becomes a major obstacle to union with God, which is the ultimate purpose of our prayer.

– By contrast, through a combination of trust, humility and simplicity we are led to a simple but unexpectedly rich path: spiritual childhood. St. Josemaría recommended this path, without imposing it on anyone.

²³ *Friends of God*, no. 244.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ CCC, no. 2559.

“Have you seen the gratitude of little children? Imitate them, saying to Jesus, when things are favorable and when they are adverse: ‘How good you are! How good!...’ These words, if you mean them, are the way of childhood, and will bring you peace, with due measure of tears and laughter, and without measure of Love.”²⁶

Saying this simple aspiration again and again is a huge help for our soul.

e) The main enemies

– Enemy number one of our prayer is the devil. The devil will try harder to prevent someone who is on the path to holiness from praying than someone who has fallen into a state of sin. His usual methods are inciting uncontrolled imagination and pride in its various forms.

– The imagination has an endless capacity for going off into its own fantastical worlds, especially during times of prayer.

At other times (e.g., times of work or other activities) our mind is focused on some specific object, but in prayer, we aim to clear our mind of other things so as to set it on God, and that very fact makes it easier for our mind to wander.

– To improve our prayer we need to acquire the habit of mortifying our imagination, turning it to God and other people. This would be a very arduous task without the help of grace.

– Along with our imagination, in our mind there is a whole string of memories, little grudges, sore points, jealousies, sensuality, ambitions, etc., which center us on ourselves and take us away from God.

– Prayer is exactly the opposite of all that: it means forgetting ourselves, and going out in search of God and our neighbor.

We need to ask God for help to forgive and forget, and to take pleasure in the good of others, to see the positive side of things, reject temptations quickly, be grateful for humiliations, etc.

– A piece of advice born of experience: when starting the prayer, beg God urgently for the help of his grace, and reject promptly and forcefully the first two or three temptations from the imagination. The result will be a prayer that is fruitful and filled with peace. God repays our initial sacrifice a hundredfold.

f) Remedies

– As well as asking God for help, there are two ways of fighting against the enemies described above: purification of the heart, and being concerned about other people.

²⁶ *The Way*, no. 894.

– The purpose of purifying the heart is to cleanse our soul of the remains of wounded pride, concupiscence and jealousy. Our Lord promises that “the pure of heart” will “see God,” which is the goal of our prayer. And that necessarily entails mortifying our external and internal senses.

“Mortification is the drawbridge that enables us to enter the castle of prayer.”²⁷

– Being concerned about people means that in our prayer we think more about others, about their problems, hopes and interests, than about ourselves. And when we start thinking about others, we are united to God even without actually realizing it.

– This includes the broad areas of fraternity and apostolate, together with our concern for other people’s spiritual and material needs.

– We can never forget that “prayer is inseparably personal and communal; it concerns both those who are praying, and all men.”²⁸

IV. Ways of praying

– Many familiar kinds of prayer offer possibilities for us for renewal: we can renew ourselves in them and through them.

The fruit of effort in this area is peace of soul: a peace that nothing in this world can destroy.

a) Prayer of petition

– Prayer of petition is one of the first kinds of prayer to rise from the human heart. In itself it is excellent, but it can go astray if what we really want is for God to do our will.

Obviously nobody would put it as crudely as that, but it may be implicit in the way we pray.

– As the years go by we learn to ask, as in the Our Father, “your Will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

“If, like Jesus, we entrust ourselves entirely to the Father’s will, the object of our prayer [our petitions] is of secondary importance; what matters above all is our relationship with the Father. This is what prayer does: it transforms our desires and models them according to the will of God, aspiring first of all to union with God, who comes to encounter his children, full of merciful love.”²⁹

– St. Josemaría told us that for some time he stopped asking for anything in his prayer in order to let God’s Will express itself more freely in his life. But afterwards he starting

²⁷ *Furrow*, no. 467.

²⁸ CCC no. 2586.

²⁹ Translation of Rome Reports summary of Pope Francis’ general audience, 25 May 2016.

asking for things again, and asking very intensely. His last years on earth were a continual petition for the Church, the Work, the canonical solution he sought, all his sons and daughters, and so much more.

– The sincerity of his prayer of petition was proved by the fact that he accompanied it with extra mortifications.

People who offer generous mortifications for the Church will never break their unity with her, even though they may point out things that need changing.

Likewise, when we pray and offer mortifications for someone, their defects cease to be an obstacle to charity and become instead a means for practicing it.

– Our prayer of intercession unites us to Christ in his prayer for all mankind, and should therefore participate in his sacrifice in some way too.

“Asking on behalf of another has [always] been characteristic of a heart attuned to God’s mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ’s, as an expression of the communion of saints.”³⁰

– This aspect—prayer of petition accompanied by sacrifice—can be a very effective means of renewing ourselves by the way we pray.

For example, it is very important to examine our conscience on whether we take the ordinary difficulties of human interaction as the theme of our sincere, self-sacrificing prayer for others.

b) Other kinds of prayer

– A kind of prayer that is closely joined to sacrifice is the prayer of atonement and reparation. The desire to make atonement to God for human sins is a clear sign of having matured in prayer.

“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.”³¹

– Beginning our prayer with a sincere, sorrowful act of personal contrition is always a good way to draw fruit from it. We should do so every day, and make a similar act of contrition many times a day, because our weaknesses are constantly with us.

– Keeping up that contrition in our souls, without giving way to pessimism, will be enormously helpful in achieving the renewal we seek.

³⁰ CCC, no. 2635.

³¹ St. Josemaría, Meditation “Time for Reparation,” February 1972; in *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 141.

It is useful to examine ourselves and see how many acts of contrition we make in our prayer. A high number shows that we are advancing in prayer.

“In our daily meditation we have to always seek ways to rectify so as not to depart from the way.”³²

– Meditating, as St. Josemaría did, on the fact “that I myself am nothing, am worth nothing and have nothing, that I can do nothing and, even more, that I am nothingness itself”³³ is not something negative but rather a path of love.

This is because it strips away many of the defenses of our ego, making it possible for the Love of God to break into our heart and turn our weakness into strength.

“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?”³⁴

– As well as petition, three other “styles,” so to speak, of prayer can be discerned, which come to the fore as the spiritual life matures:

Prayer of thanksgiving (for good things and “bad,” for sickness and for health, etc.);

Prayer of praise;

Prayer of adoration.

– In a way they reflect, in the Church on earth, the song raised to God ceaselessly by the Angels and Saints in the glory of Heaven; and we share in that song if we rejuvenate our prayer on the basis of the above three “styles.”

It is wonderful to end every day with the *Glory Be to the Father*, the hymn *Te Deum*, or Psalm 50[51], the *Miserere*!

St. Josemaría used to stress: “May your prayer always be a real and sincere act of adoration of God.”³⁵ It is a piece of advice that is never out of place. We need to learn to “color in” all our acts of piety, however small, with adoration. That will turn them into top-quality prayer.

c) Prayer of affections

– We are not seeking feelings in prayer; we are seeking God and Jesus Christ, to talk to Him, love Him, and know that we are loved by Him.

³² *Furrow*, no. 444.

³³ *Friends of God*, no. 215.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *The Forge*, no. 263.

“Prayer is not a question of what you say or feel, but of love. And you love when you try hard to say something to the Lord, even though you might not actually say anything.”³⁶

“Our Father had an ardent, ‘mad’ love for God because he remained faithful to his meditation even when he felt as cold as ice during that time.”³⁷

– But we do not need to reject feelings if they come. Human beings know others not just intellectually but also through love and affection (as any mother would tell us). For as long as we are here on earth our knowledge of God follows the same channels, and that is one of the reasons why Our Lord Jesus Christ became man.

– There are certain cases when we can and should give a special place to feelings in our prayer:

“Your mind is sluggish: you try to collect your thoughts in God’s presence, but it’s useless: there’s a complete blank. Don’t try to force yourself, and don’t worry. Look: such moments are for your heart.”³⁸

– The error of sentimentalism is a different thing altogether. It is a defect where we seek feelings for their own sake, and thus we are no longer seeking God but ourselves.

Feelings have their limitations. “What we taste of God is not yet God. God is infinitely greater.” If we content ourselves with what we experience subjectively, we are losing God. “What matters is not what we feel, but what we believe.”³⁹

– Dryness (aridity) and monotony, if we bear them well, help us to be detached from our feelings without rejecting them. This gives us a great freedom of spirit, so that we are able to bring feelings and affections into play when opportune, but without becoming enslaved to them.

– At the same time, in order to make progress in prayer it is important to make use of inner feelings when God grants them.

Those are times when the truths of the faith shine radiantly, drawing our soul and its faculties in pursuit of God.

We should store up such lights, so that they light up our prayer and our whole life.

– We should also thank God for them again and again, as mentioned at II (b) above.

Gratitude and thanksgiving for specific things brings intimacy with Our Lord and a sense of his nearness; and gives us more strength for serving God.

“New lights! What joy you feel that God has let you ‘discover’ an old discovery – another Mediterranean! Make the most of the occasion: it is the moment to break into a

³⁶ *Furrow*, no. 464.

³⁷ Bl. Alvaro del Portillo, Pastoral Letter, 1 November 1991; *Family Letters* 3, no. 179.

³⁸ *The Way*, no. 102; cf. also *The Way*, no. 890.

³⁹ Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, p. 42 and p. 43.

hymn of thanksgiving. It is also the moment to clean up odd corners of your soul, to get out of some rut, to act more supernaturally, to avoid giving bad example to your neighbor. In a word: let your gratitude show itself in some concrete resolution.”⁴⁰

– Intimacy, nearness and lights produce an attraction towards God, which is a key element for all progress in the spiritual life.

Although there is an attractiveness that is exclusively intellectual, this attractiveness of God becomes overwhelming if, in addition, it includes feelings. Hence the importance of affections, which should always act as a complement of faith, grace and reason. In some people or situations, this complement may even be essential.

For the renewal on the basis of prayer that we are seeking, the “attractiveness of God” is also an essential ingredient.

– The divine truths then become an object of love, because they are not only the Truth but the most perfect proof of God’s Goodness.

Led by that love we will enter into those truths in a new way, a way that is deeper, infinitely more fruitful and enlightening.

– Always, but more especially at those times, we need to look and see how we are responding to God’s grace.

It is not necessarily about making resolutions (though they may also be needed), but about being filled with those lights from God and allowing them to mature in our soul over time, so that they transform us progressively from within.

This demands a great deal of generosity, because we will need to get rid of a number of things that are not in accord with all that God has given us.

d) The Gospel

– The endeavor to seek Christ, to get to know Him, talk to Him, and love Him always leads us to go deeper into what the Gospel writers tell us about Him.

“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.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ *The Way*, no. 298.

⁴¹ *Friends of God*, no. 253.

– Going back to the Gospel again and again is a sure path to real prayer. However, we need to read it slowly, dwelling on each paragraph and sometimes on each line. If we do so, the Gospel will always speak to us.

“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.”⁴²

“There is one particular way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his Word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit. It is what we call *lectio divina*. It consists of reading God’s word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us.”⁴³

e) Two pieces of advice from experience

– First: make a note of the inspirations and lights received from God in prayer. St. Josemaría did this constantly. The purpose is to go over those ideas afterwards, to engrave them on your soul.

“Engrave on your memory those words which struck you while praying, and repeat them slowly many times throughout the day.”⁴⁴

– When we glimpse lights from God it seems as though we will never forget them because they are so clear, but this is not the case. All memories fade with time, including the memory of God’s inspirations.

Therefore we need to write them down while the impression is still vivid. At that point we can write about them with enough force to rouse the soul again in duller times.

– Second: Blessed Alvaro said that in prayer, what has helped us once helps us always. Going over the texts and reflections that helped us on a particular occasion in the past will also be a good help now.

– When we experience times of darkness or find ourselves apathetic or tired, with the sensation that there is nothing we can pray about, going over the notes we wrote at a time of fervor is a good remedy and perhaps the best way to put our prayer on the right footing.

V. Conversation with Our Lord

– Prayer is a dialogue with God. It may be about many different questions and problems, but it is always a conversation. Whether it consists of thanksgiving, petition, or reflection,

⁴² *Christ is Passing By*, no. 107.

⁴³ Pope Francis, Ap. Ex. *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 152.

⁴⁴ *The Way*, no. 103.

it is still a conversation. The enemy is not silence, which is the “doorkeeper of the interior life,” but a monologue with ourselves.

Every genuine conversation is always an encounter, interpersonal communion, with or without words.

“... prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved.”⁴⁵

a) Learning to listen

– When St Peter arrived at the house where the centurion Cornelius and his household were waiting for him, Cornelius gave him a moving explanation:

“We are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”⁴⁶

– Genuine dialogue includes the ability to listen. And when there is a disproportion such as exists between Creator and creature, it is obviously much more important to listen than to talk.

“This primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed listening to the word of God ... It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter.”⁴⁷

St. Josemaría recommended, “May you seek Christ; may you find Christ; may you love Christ.”⁴⁸ Seeking him means that we have to learn how to listen, because He seeks us even more eagerly. So listening generously leads us to find Him.

– Some people do not value silence. This includes some people who pray – perhaps because in their prayer they don’t hear anything, or think they don’t, and so they fill up the time with talking.

Others fill up the time with reading. Reading can be a good way of praying if it is done slowly and meditatively, pausing at least between every paragraph to give God an opportunity to speak. But if it is done quickly and without stopping, it is not prayer.

If we do read, we should not start the prayer by reading. We should start by putting ourselves in God’s presence in silence, unhurriedly, as described above under III (a), “The Introductory Prayer.”

– God’s voice reaches us in all sorts of different ways. The most usual ones are:

Meditative reading of Sacred Scripture;

⁴⁵ St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 33.

⁴⁶ Acts 10:33.

⁴⁷ St John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 39.

⁴⁸ *The Way*, no. 382.

The writings of many of the saints or Doctors of the Church, or the Magisterium of the Popes;

For people in or close to the Work, the writings of St. Josemaría, and also Blessed Alvaro, Don Javier, and the Father;

Biographies of some of the saints, or extracts from their lives that inspire by their example;

The voice of the Holy Spirit within, suggesting, reminding, demanding, filling with hope, and giving strength for the struggle;

Spiritual guidance, practiced regularly and sincerely.

– In all cases, it is fundamental to commit God’s inspirations, whether many or few, to memory and work at putting them into practice. As stressed under IV (e) above, we need to write them down, so as to be able to reflect and act on them.

– If we do so, these supernatural inspirations will normally become more frequent as the years go by, as we learn how to listen.

Obviously, however, each person’s pathway is different: there may be times of abundant lights from God, and other times of notable spiritual dryness.

– When such dryness lasts for a long time (months or even years), it may mean that we are neglecting something in our spiritual life: piety, the spirit of penance, our examination of conscience, charity towards our neighbor, or some other aspect.

Perhaps that is not the case, and the dryness is a test sent by God, but we should examine our conscience and speak sincerely in spiritual direction.

– By contrast, looking after every aspect of prayer down to the smallest details – time, place, having a book to fall back on – is the first step that makes it easier for us to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.

– There is a very striking example of this in St. Josemaría’s life, described in five articles about the “new Mediterraneans” that God revealed to him in his interior life.⁴⁹

They show how simply and deeply the Holy Spirit speaks, and how our Father did everything in his power to recall what he had heard, put it into practice, and pass it on to us.

These “new Mediterraneans” referred to his spiritual life, not God’s inspirations about founding Opus Dei.

Of course, he had many other inner lights from God in his life, which he made into aspirations, or passed on to us in order to form us, or preached about in his meditations and writings.

⁴⁹ Available at: <https://opusdei.org/en-us/section/spiritual-life/>

– We have all received similar lights in our souls. It is not possible to pray regularly for twenty or thirty years without God speaking to us often, not in audible words but through interior motions.⁵⁰

Perhaps what has been lacking has been our care to note them down, dwell on them, fill our soul with these ideas, thank God for them, ask his help to put them into practice, and confess having forgotten them.

– It is never too late: from now on, we can resolve to listen to God more, beg for his help, and back up our petition with some mortification. Then we will realize how effective it is to renew our prayer in that way.

b) Looking at Christ

– “Don’t be afraid to call Our Lord by his name – ‘Jesus’ – and tell Him that you love Him.”⁵¹

Our personal conversation with Jesus Christ is unquestionably the best way to renew our prayer and hence our interior life.

The “method” is to speak to Jesus on familiar terms, with reverence, but with immense trust, because He is God. That is why He became man and shared his life with us.

– That tender dialogue is the preliminary step towards turning our prayer into looking at Christ and looking with Christ; together these bring about an inner renewal that would be difficult to achieve by any other means.

“Work tires you out and leaves you 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... and he’ll smile at you.”⁵²

– As our Father said in his prayer, “To look is to turn the eyes of our soul towards you, yearning to understand you”⁵³ – with an understanding that will always be inadequate yet always overflowing.

“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 long to see your face.”⁵⁴

– Looking at God is a desire for God and at the same time consolation amidst the difficulties of this life:

⁵⁰ Cf. the quotation from St Peter of Alcantara referenced at Footnote 7 above.

⁵¹ *The Way*, no. 303.

⁵² *The Way*, no. 895.

⁵³ “Gathered together in unity,” *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 214.

⁵⁴ “The Joy of Serving God,” *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 189.

“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.”⁵⁵

– Looking at the world and the people around us with Christ and from Christ’s viewpoint gives us the supernatural outlook we need in order to practice charity as He does.⁵⁶

Our Lord “infects” us with his look, which is objective and full of understanding. Over and above all our defects, his Love sees the image of God’s children that we bear in our soul.

The ultimate source of all fraternity and all apostolate is this look of preferential love, which is able to love everyone and to help each person struggle against his sins and backslidings.

“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.”⁵⁷

– Looking at Christ is necessarily complemented by the feeling that we are being looked at by Christ, which leads us to live by hope.

“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, and love you.”⁵⁸

– Knowing and sensing that we are being looked at by Jesus Christ and by our Father God with preferential love wakes us up, and we are lifted out of the anonymous mass of mankind, to discover with astonishment that we are loved personally and infinitely.

At the point when this stops being a mere intellectual conviction and becomes the unifying principle of our life (leaving us exalted, humbled and dazzled), the much-sought-after interior renewal comes about, increasing our faith, filling us with hope, and setting our heart aflame with love.

– What can we do to look at Christ and see things from Christ’s viewpoint? What can we do to sense God’s love within us?

This can take years of effort, and it is always the result of the working of grace in our soul. But, as our Father said, we should start by calling Jesus by his name and telling him that we love Him.

⁵⁵ *The Way of the Cross*, Sixth Station, no. 2.

⁵⁶ “...as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34).

⁵⁷ *The Way of the Cross*, Eighth Station, no. 4.

⁵⁸ “Gathered together in unity,” *In Dialogue with the Lord*, p. 214.

God will take care of the rest if we ask Him to with faith and perseverance in prayer.

c) The inexpressible nature of God

– As we know, God is inexpressible in human terms. He surpasses all human explanations. We have no concepts that can clearly explain him. We try to give people a certain degree of knowledge of God by analogy, using figures of speech and metaphors.

– Hence Christian ascetics down through the centuries have often withdrawn from the world and sought silence and solitude as ways to approach and come to know the “unknowable” God.⁵⁹

– For Christian faithful living in the world a similar approach, but one suited to their circumstances, is “recollection.” Recollection is a way of experiencing the events of everyday life that does not impede the presence of God and leads us to be contemplatives in the middle of the world. It is a long-term effort, but that is no reason for abandoning it.

“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.”⁶⁰

– Returning to the main topic of this article: it is easy to see that recollection throughout the day has to begin from God-filled recollection in our times of prayer.

In our prayer we find ourselves drawn irresistibly by the inexpressible nature of God; we cannot know Him as He is, but what we intuit about Him stirs us deeply and fills us with wonder.

“The second condition, too, is being precisely like children; it is to let ourselves be surprised. A child always asks thousands of questions because he wants to discover the world; and he even marvels at little things because everything is new to him. To enter the Kingdom of Heaven we must let ourselves be astonished. In our relationship with the Lord, in prayer – I ask – do we let ourselves be astonished, or do we think that prayer is speaking with God as parrots do? No, it is trusting and opening our heart so as to let ourselves be astonished. Do we allow ourselves to be surprised by God who is always the God of surprises? Because the encounter with the Lord is always a living encounter; it is not a museum encounter.”⁶¹

– We realize that we can only understand a minuscule part of what God is; even so, we are dumbstruck by his greatness and above all by his goodness. It seems hard to believe that the Creator can concern himself with his creatures as lovingly as He does.

⁵⁹ St Thomas Aquinas says: “Indecibilia Dei, casto silentio” – before God’s inexpressibility, we should maintain a reverent silence.

⁶⁰ CCC, no. 2660.

⁶¹ Pope Francis, General audience, 15 November 2017.

“The Lord surprises us by showing us that He loves us even in our weaknesses.”⁶²

– What can we do to develop thus “awestruck recollection” in God’s presence?

A deep study of theology helps greatly, provided that we make what we have studied into material for our prayer. Then our mind and our piety join together to make our knowledge of God grow.

Intimacy with the Holy Spirit in prayer can make up for the lack of theological knowledge, as has happened to many saints. However, the Holy Spirit will not enlighten those who do not apply the human means available.

– In short, coming into contact with God’s inexpressible nature is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who obtains it for us when God wants, to the measure of our faith and love, and the recollection with which we pray.

Around 1971, St. Josemaría told us that he was trying to delve deeply into the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. Sometimes God gave him a little bit of light, and he felt very happy. Other times He left him in darkness, and he felt just as happy, because, he said, if God fit into his head, that “god” would be ridiculous.

d) Union with God

– Perseverance in prayer leads us little by little, with steps forward and steps backward, to union with God.

Some mystics have expressed this union in matchless poetry. But all of us who strive to pray are travelling in some sense in that direction.

“A person who tries to talk to God and listen to him, sooner or later arrives at contemplation. It is a long process in which ‘prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit’s touch, resting filially within the Father’s heart’ (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 33). This is the goal of our life on earth: a kind of anticipation of heaven, which will be loving contemplation, perfect and timeless.”⁶³

– We are all called to that union with God, because it is not about ourselves and our qualities: it is God drawing us to Himself.

“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, *De Diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, 64, 4).”⁶⁴

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ M. Ordeig, *Despertar al asombro*, EDICEP, Valencia 2012, p. 57.

⁶⁴ CCC no. 2560.

– This action of God gives our prayer the certainty that, when God wants and in the measure that He wants, we will achieve union with Him insofar as it is possible in this world.

“Our prayer, which began so childlike and ingenuous, now opens out into a broad, smooth-flowing stream, for it follows the course of friendship with the One who said: ‘I am the way.’ ... 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.”⁶⁵

– This situation, in which we will share fully in eternal life, is a reality here and now for those of us who have followed Christ and receive his sacraments. It is still a partial and imperfect share, but it is as real as our body and our soul.

The awareness of this mystery of union with God, if it is followed up one hundred per cent, has sufficient power to renew the spiritual life of the most abandoned and reluctant Christian.

“Prayer gives us a foretaste of heaven.”⁶⁶ It enables us to learn, here on earth, the activity that will be ours forever: contemplating and rejoicing in God.

– Union with God is given to us ontologically in Baptism; it can be recovered in Penance if we have lost it through sin, and brought to all the fullness possible by the Eucharist.

– To make it into a lived experience, bound up with the events of our day, so that it fills our whole life, is the commitment of the ascetical struggle we are engaged in.

It is the path to holiness in this world.

– The first place in our life where this union with God should be a lived experience in practice is our prayer.

From our prayer it will pass into the rest of our life, making us contemplatives in the middle of the world.

It is useless to try to be contemplatives in the world if our prayer is not what it needs to be.

“Again and again the Gospels note that Jesus withdrew ‘to the mountain’ to spend 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 into that exchange, and in this way human ‘praying’ is able to become a participation in this filial communion with the Father.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Friends of God*, no. 306.

⁶⁶ Jacques Philippe, *Thirsting for Prayer*, New York: Scepter, 2014, p. 13.

⁶⁷ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Introduction.

– We too, sons and daughters in the Son, can make our prayer into a participation in the communion of the Son with the Father: an entering into the intimacy of the three divine Persons, as we saw in the last quotation from St. Josemaría.

Probably we are not capable of sounding the depths of all that this means, but that should not prevent us from valuing it and being sincerely grateful for it. It is part of the “dazzling light” referred to at V (b) above.

– Going to the prayer every day, deeply convinced by faith and hope that God is waiting there to unite us to Himself, is perhaps the “stirring-up” that our interior life needs in order to banish all lukewarmness, so that the fervor of charity masters our heart and takes us into God.

– What is the path that leads to this in practice? First, knowing it by faith. Second, asking God for it.

But, as stated above, we need to ask for it urgently, out of a real sense of need, with the urgency of knowing that life will become burdensome if God does not grant it to us.

To do that, we need magnanimity, greatness of soul, with an indestructible desire for God that is not diminished by any human defect, whether our own or someone else’s. And we also have to combat our imperfections steadily and in hope.

e) The Blessed Eucharist

– Looking at Christ, in practice, means above all fixing our eyes (the eyes of the body and the eyes of the soul) on Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

– It is in the Eucharist that our union with God is consummated on this earth. There are countless quotations from the Magisterium of the Church and also from our Father on the meaning and importance of the “Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the source and summit of all Christian life.”⁶⁸

– This means that it is also the source and summit of Christian prayer and renewal.

“To illustrate the beauty of the Eucharistic celebration, I would like to begin with a very simple aspect: Mass is prayer. Rather, it is the 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.”⁶⁹

– Therefore prayer and Eucharistic piety, both within the Mass and at other times, are closely connected.

A personal relationship with Our Lord in the Eucharist is what will bring about the renewal of our prayer that we are seeking, and will also be one of its results.

⁶⁸ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, General audience, 15 November 2018.

– Fervent love for Our Lord in the Eucharist has a direct influence on our prayer.

The effort to do the prayer before the Tabernacle or before the Blessed Sacrament exposed, setting our gaze on him, never goes unrewarded by Our Lord.

In practical terms, there is no better way to improve our prayer than to get into the habit of praying before the Blessed Sacrament.

– If our time of prayer is immediately before or after Holy Mass, it is natural for it to include frequent references to the Mystery that is about to be or has just been celebrated.

Generally speaking, it would not make sense to spend the prayer at such times meditating exclusively on other topics without connecting them in some way to the immediacy of the Blessed Eucharist, which is, after all, “the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life.”⁷⁰

– In short, renewal of prayer goes hand-in-hand with a renewal of Eucharistic piety: in celebrating or attending Holy Mass, and in making Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament present in our daily lives.

This is the best means available to achieve the interior renewal each of us needs.

f) Our Lady

– A very special element in Christian spiritual life is devotion to Our Lady. This is so well known that it is not necessary to expand on it here. It is enough to recall the great help Mary offers everyone.

“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.”⁷¹

– If we want to give new impulse to our prayer, one of the first means will be to appeal to Our Blessed Lady to teach us to contemplate her Son.

“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.”⁷²

– As a result, we can ask our Lady to grant us the strength to follow Him and love the Will of God the Father as she did:

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’
Fiat: this is Christian prayer: to be wholly God’s, because He is wholly ours.”⁷³

⁷⁰ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 87.

⁷¹ *Friends of God*, no. 147.

⁷² Benedict XVI, General audience, 28 December 2011.

⁷³ CCC, no. 2617.