

FIFTH STRING

THE PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

From the Gospel according to Luke (11, 1-13)

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread,

and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation."

And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Many times it seems to us that God no longer listens, and so we wonder: what is the point of praying? There are times when we actually feel abandoned, crushed by life and it seems that the many prayers addressed to heaven remain unanswered. If we don't realise that Christian prayer means turning towards the Father, it becomes difficult for us to understand certain silences and certain expectations, which often turn out to be useless and disappointing. Jesus shows us the face of the Father to pass on a certainty in us: it is truly impossible for our prayer not to be heard. The insistence with which we turn to a friend for either bread or a favour somehow makes us understand how constant and continuous our prayer of intercession must be.

Usually we turn to God full of expectations, we are tempted to design the times and ways of his intervention, but the relationship with a father cannot be like this: in faith, as in family relationships, it is necessary to have the certainty that the answer to the call for help will be much higher than our requests themselves and will go beyond the times of our expectations. Surely God does not give us a snake when we ask for a fish or a scorpion when we request an egg. In the same way he certainly hears our prayer, but he does it as a Father, and chooses the best times and ways to fulfil our requests.

Our coming together as Groups shows us that through our prayer we should always act in a special mode; if we were to use the language of social networks: we must always be connected! We should always bear in mind that somewhere in the world, at this moment, some Group is asking God for a grace. Our prayer is always in community and is always in communion with that of all the Groups of the world, even if we are praying on our own.

Praying together means supporting each other, asking for the strength to live and understand prayer in the light of God's fatherhood; it is asking the Lord to open all hearts, to trust and hope in his word: "If you then,

who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Lk 11:9).

SPIRITUALITY

From a letter from Padre Pio to Raffaolina Cerase (Ep. II, pp. 70-71)

Not all of us are called by God to save souls and propagate His glory by the noble apostolate of preaching. We should also bear in mind that this is not the only means of achieving these two great goals. One can promote God's glory and work for the salvation of souls by means of a truly Christian life, by praying without ceasing that "His kingdom come", that His name "be hallowed", that "we may not be led into temptation" and that He "deliver us from evil".

This is what you ought to do, offering yourself continually to the Lord for this purpose. Pray for the wicked, pray for the lukewarm, pray even for fervent souls, but pray for the temporal and spiritual needs of the Holy Church, our most tender mother. We should also raise a special prayer for all those who are working for the salvation of souls and for God's glory, as this is a special mission among the infidels and many nonbelievers.

I recommend once more that you devote yourself entirely and bring as many others as you can to devote themselves to the ends I have just explained to you. You may be perfectly sure that this is the highest form of apostolate that anyone can carry on in the Church of God. Abide resolutely by this statement of mine, which is precisely what Jesus tells us, and treat with contempt all the suggestions to the contrary which the devil is telling you.

The prayer of intercession in the Epistolario

Human pain deeply touched the heart of Padre Pio. He would participate in the suffering of the people and comforted them, gave them words of hope, and above all, assured them of his prayers. He did not like to talk about miracles and extraordinary events and, even when someone came to him to thank him, he always referred to the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

In his letters, he often promised his spiritual directors and the people he directed that he would pray for their intentions. Having learned that the provincial minister, Father Benedetto, was in particular distress for problems related to his ministry, Padre Pio wrote to him: «It breaks my soul to know that you are enduring such spiritual suffering and how I have prayed and continue to pray to the Lord for you! He makes me feel in my heart that he is always the same for you, or rather that he has redoubled his graces, his preferences, his predilection for your soul» (Ep. I, p. 1093). When Father Agostino tells him that the Cerase sisters ask for prayers, he replies: «Please reassure them that I, in my nothingness, never forget to recommend them to the Lord and that I pray for them more than I do for myself. The Lord knows that I am telling the truth» (Ep. I, p. 435).

Prayer for one's spiritual directors is a duty: "Do not doubt, father, that your son, in his lowliness, is capable of doing his duty towards our common Father, in the trust that you shall see your desires fulfilled" (Ep. I, p. 443).

Francesco Forgione, the future Padre Pio, soon realized how important the prayer of intercession can be. Father Alessandro da Ripabottoni reports a miracle that he himself had witnessed, which took place on the occasion of a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of San Pellegrino in Altavilla Irpina. «A woman in tears had a child in her arms, a mass of flesh more than a son, and she prayed and prayed St. Peregrine, weeping hotly to obtain this grace ... Tired of praying, the mother, exasperated and exhausted, in a gesture of faith, desperate and with words that border on heresy and blasphemy with the insult to the holy martyr, lifts up that little monster and throws him impetuously on the altar. A moment of silence, of bewilderment and then a cry of joy and thanksgiving: the child stands up, alone, completely healed».

For him it was a confirmation, the path of intercession was the first response to give to compassion for those who suffer. According to his mother, Francesco was already doing penance at that time and often reflected on the passion of Christ. It would be interesting to understand whether he first encountered his prayer of compassion and self-giving for the Lord or the prayer of intercession, but it is pure academia: from an early age Padre Pio lived the prayer of intercession in its entirety, as through intercession he would experience a moment of particular communion with God.

Prayer and personal commitment

Padre Pio was fully aware that prayer must involve the whole person: one cannot ask God for something if one is not first completely open to him: "I always pray for you and you always have first [place] in my prayers, but in these days which are so holy, in which it seems that the divine mercy is more willing to hear the prayers of those who hope and trust and abandon themselves in him, I shall pray with greater confidence for the fulfilment of all the desires of your heart, among the first of which will be the desire for perfect and total abandonment in the arms of divine goodness» (Ep. I, p. 1270).

Not infrequently, when we resort to prayer, we feel a certain remorse: "until now I have not remembered God, now that I need him for a grace, I am almost ashamed to present myself before him".

In any case, this gesture of humility, which is already more than enough to put us in communion with the Lord, must be preceded by Jesus' promise: "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you." (Lk 11:9) "Supplication - says the Pope - is the expression of those hearts that trust in God, who know that they cannot make it by themselves. In the life of God's faithful people, many supplications are lifted up, filled with a tender and profound trust». (GE, n. 154).

It is Jesus himself who authorizes our prayer of intercession, often regardless of our lifestyles. However we cannot forget that in the face of our many requests for miracles, he gives considerable importance to our faith in him and in his word. One day, addressing the disciples, he said: "If you have faith equal to a mustard seed, you will be able to say to this mountain: move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt 17:20).

The person of faith soon understands that prayer is not important in itself, in the formulas that are said or even in the inner strength with which a grace is asked. The prayer of intercession teaches our souls how to gain a communion with God, so that we can gradually discover how important he is in our lives, far beyond the grace we are asking of him. Despite this, the communion that is being created between us and God, that desire to belong to him and truly be his children without ifs and buts, becomes a form of intercession in itself.

Prayer does not open a line of credit with God, one cannot think that an extra rosary, a pilgrimage or half a day of fasting can force God to perform a miracle. Certainly, however, when we decide to belong to him, our stories, our worries, the needs of our loved ones, whom he already knows and who are already important to him, become - all the more so - his own stories, his worries and his needs.

The fifth string evokes a sound that, once produced, belongs to everyone and is returned to us as a gift; each person sings our song. Similarly, if we let our prayer soar freely to heaven and entrust ourselves to Jesus because we believe in Him, what He promised in the Gospel will happen: "On that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:26-28).

INTERCEDE WITH OUR LIFE

From Elena Bandini's diary we learn that gradually Padre Pio accompanied her in the choice to consecrate herself to God with the vow of virginity. The journey lasted a few years, and then in the silence of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Padre Pio finally accepted her vote. After this, Elena Bandini recounts that Padre Pio remembered the prayer she often made for the healing of her brother and so he said to her:

«Jesus will also have to make you happy - referring to the grace I asked for - if you married, you had to obey him, while you gave Jesus everything; you have made the vow, you have consecrated everything to Him, your thoughts, your words, your works. Now you have the right to ask for something, too».

SILENT WORSHIPPERS OF GOD'S LOVE

You were gifted with the presence of a special model of priest, Father Pio of Pietrelcina, among you. He has helped many souls find the main road of Truth and Love. But where did he draw that light that he was able to communicate to those who met him? Certainly in prayer, in listening to God, in long penance and, above all, in the celebration of Holy Mass, which constituted the heart of his entire existence.

One is sometimes tempted to believe that prayer is not necessary; one is inclined to think that life's problems can only be solved through concrete action. Daily commitment in the various fields of human action is indispensable. However the teachings of the Gospel and the example of all saints - in particular the testimony of Padre Pio - remind us that even solitude, silence and even hiding can effectively help others.

Only in heaven will we be able, for example, to know how much the "Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza" of San Giovanni Rotondo owes to the insistent prayers of Padre Pio and countless other faithful. These are all prayers that have remained hidden from the eyes of men, but not from those of God.

Therefore, I recommend that all of you, wherever you are, should become silent adorers of the divine mystery and apostles of his mercy. Follow the example of Padre Pio; imitate his constant search for intimacy with the Lord, as this is the only secret of the spiritual life. Like him, walk along the path of authentic conversion, of voluntary penance and of a trusting abandonment in Providence.

Look at Mary who, while contemplating in her soul the extraordinary events that she is called to experience (Lk 2, 51), is always attentive and prompt towards the concrete needs of her neighbour (Jn 2, 1ss.). (*JOHN PAUL II, Speech to the Prayer Groups, September 29, 1990*)

PRAYER TO SAINT PIO

by Saint John Paul II

Humble and beloved Padre Pio, teach us, we pray, humility of heart,
so that we may be counted among the little ones of the Gospel,
to whom the Father promised to reveal the mysteries of His Kingdom.

Help us to pray without ceasing,
certain that God knows what we need even before we ask Him.

Obtain for us the eyes of faith
that will be able to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor and the suffering.

Sustain us in the hour of the combat and trial and, if we fall,
make us experience the joy of the sacrament of forgiveness.

Grant us your tender devotion to Mary, mother of Jesus and our own Mother.

Accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage towards the blessed Homeland,
where we hope to arrive in order to contemplate
the Glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever.

Amen