

As Holy Week and Easter draw near, so do forgiveness, mercy, divine compassion and a superabundance of grace. A little while longer and the mystery of our salvation will be consummated. If at times we have been afraid of penance and atonement, we will be filled with courage at the thought of how short is the time involved, and how great the reward, a prize entirely disproportionate to our own little efforts. So let us cheerfully follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to Calvary, to the Cross. After all, *is it not true that as soon as you cease to be afraid of the Cross, of what people call the Cross, when you set your will to accept the Will of God, then you find happiness, and all your worries, all your sufferings, physical or moral, pass away?*¹⁵

15. J. Escrivá, *The Way of the Cross*, Second Station

FOURTH WEEK OF LENT - MONDAY

27. PERSONAL PRAYER

27.1 The need for prayer. Jesus' example.

*When he had found a place to pray in ...*¹ There are many passages in the Gospel narrating that Jesus has withdrawn from the crowds and has gone on his own to pray.² And this is more clearly thrown into relief at the more important moments of his public ministry: at his Baptism,³ at the election of the Apostles,⁴ on the occasion of the first multiplication of the loaves,⁵ at the Transfiguration,⁶ etc. It was a normal thing for Jesus to do: *At times He spent the whole night in an intimate conversation with his Father. The Apostles were filled with love when they saw Christ pray.*⁷ How it helps us too!

During this Lenten period we could perhaps concentrate especially on a scene we contemplate in the Rosary: the agony of Jesus in the Garden. Immediately before giving himself in the Passion, the Lord makes for the Garden of Gethsemane with the apostles. Jesus must often have prayed there, for St Luke says: *Now He went out, as his custom was, to Mount Olivet.*⁸ But this time Jesus' prayer would be special: the moment for his agony had arrived.

1. Luke 11:1-3

2. cf Matt 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; etc

3. cf Luke 3:21

4. cf Luke 6:12

5. cf Mark 6:46

6. cf Luke 9:29

7. J. Escrivá, *Christ is passing by*, 119

8. Luke 22:39

Arriving at Gethsemane He tells them: *Pray that you may not enter into temptation.*⁹ Before withdrawing a little to pray, Our Lord asks the Apostles too to pray. Jesus knows that they are soon to be subjected to the temptation of scandal on seeing the Master taken captive. He had already announced it at the Last Supper; but now He warns them that unless they are found vigilant and praying, they will not pass the test.

Prayer is indispensable for us, for if we neglect our dealings with God, little by little our spiritual life begins to languish. *If you abandon prayer you may at first live on spiritual reserves and, after that, by cheating.*¹⁰ On the other hand, prayer unites us to God and He tells us: *Without me you can do nothing.*¹¹ It is good to pray with perseverance,¹² never vacillating. We have to speak with Him a great deal, insistently, in the various circumstances of our lives. Now, moreover, during Lent, we walk with Jesus along the Way of the Cross and *without prayer, how difficult it is to accompany him.*¹³

With the example of his own life, the Lord teaches us what our fundamental approach has to be: a continuous filial dialogue with God. *And mental prayer, in my view, is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary conversation, with him Who we know loves us.*¹⁴ We have always to try to have presence of God and to contemplate the mysteries of our Faith. This dialogue with God should not be interrupted. But even further, it ought to be carried on in the midst of all our activities. And what is

9. Luke 22:40

10. J. Escrivá, *Furrow*, 445

11. John 15:5

12. cf Luke 18:1

13. J. Escrivá, *The Way*, 89

14. St Teresa, *Life*, 8, 2

indispensable is that it should be more intense during those periods we dedicate each day to mental prayer: we meditate and we speak in his presence, knowing that He truly *sees us and hears us*. The need for prayer, together with the importance of charity, is one of the points most stressed by Our Lord in his ministry.

27.2 Personal prayer: confident dialogue with God.

*Then he parted from them, going a stone's throw off, and knelt down to pray. 'Father,' he said, 'if it pleases thee, take away this chalice from before me; only as thy Will is, not as mine is.'*¹⁵

When his spiritual suffering was so intense that it led him into agony, the Lord turns to his Father with a prayer brimming with confidence. He calls him *Abba*, Father, and says intimate things to him. This is the way we too should adopt. In our lives there will be moments of spiritual peace and others of more intense struggle, some moments perhaps of darkness and others of profound sorrow, with temptations to discouragement. The sight of Jesus in the Garden always points to the way we have to proceed – with a persevering and confident prayer. To move along the road to holiness, but especially when we feel the weight of our weaknesses, we have to recollect ourselves in prayer, in an intimate conversation with the Lord.

Public prayer (or prayer in common), in which all the faithful take part, is holy and necessary, for God also wishes to see his children praying together.¹⁶ But the Lord's precept: *go into your inner room and shut the door upon yourself, and so pray to your Father in secret,*¹⁷ should never be superseded. The liturgy is public prayer *par*

15. Luke 22:41-42

16. cf Matt 18:19-20

17. Matt 6:6

excellence: it is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows ... The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with others, but he must also enter into his inner chamber to pray to his Father in secret; furthermore, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he must pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17).¹⁸

Prayer in company with other Christians ought also to be personal prayer; while the lips recite it with the proper pace and pauses, the mind gives it all her attention.

In prayer one speaks with God just as one converses with a friend – knowing that he is present, always attentive to what we are saying, listening to us and replying. It is in such intimate conversation as the one we are just now trying to have with God, that we throw open our soul to the Lord, to adore him, to give him thanks, to ask him for help, to go more deeply – as the Apostles did – into the divine teachings.

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

In a word: to get to know him and to get to know yourself: 'to get acquainted'.¹⁹

Prayer ought never to be impersonal, anonymous, dispersed and lost in the crowd; because God, who has redeemed each individual person, wants to maintain a dialogue with each one: at the end of one's life, salvation or condemnation will depend on the personal response of each one. Prayer ought to be the dialogue of a particular

18. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10:12

19. J. Escrivá, *The Way*, 91

person – one who has ideals, a job, friends, who has received specific graces from God – with his God.

27.3 Using the means to pray in a recollected way.

When he rose from his prayer, he went back to his disciples and found that they were sleeping, overwrought with sorrow. 'How can you sleep?' he asked. 'Rise up and pray, so that you may not enter into temptation.'²⁰

The apostles had ignored the Lord's command. He had left them there, close to himself, so that they would watch and pray, and thus not fall into temptation. But even now they do not love him enough, and allow themselves to be overcome by sleep and weakness, leaving Jesus unaccompanied, alone during that time of his agony. Sleep, the mental epitome of human weakness, has allowed an evil sadness to take hold of them: depression, lack of spiritual struggle, abandonment of a life of piety ...

We will not get into this situation if we maintain a living dialogue with God during each period of prayer. We will frequently resort to the Gospels or another book – like this one which you are reading – so that it may help us to channel our dialogue, to come closer to Our Lord, for whom no one or nothing can be a substitute. Thus many saints have been made. *During all these years, says St Teresa, except after communicating, I never dared begin to pray without a book; my soul was as much afraid to engage in prayer without one as if it were having to go and fight against a host of enemies. With this help, which was a companionship to me, and a shield with which I could parry the blows of my many thoughts, I felt comforted.²¹*

20. Luke 22:45-46

21. St Teresa, *Life*, 4, 3

We have to use all the means at our disposal to do this mental prayer in a recollected way. We should do it in the best place, according to our circumstances; and, whenever possible, in front of Our Lord in the tabernacle. It should be done, too, at the time we have already planned in our schedule for the normal day. In the prayer we will always be on our guard against distractions. To a large extent this means mortifying the memory and the imagination, keeping distant whatever may impede our attentiveness to God. We have to avoid having our *senses awake and the soul asleep*.²²

If we fight earnestly against distractions, the Lord will make it easy for us to take up again the threads of our dialogue with him. Our Guardian Angel too, has, among other things, the task of interceding on our behalf. What is important is that we do not want to be distracted, and certainly that we have no intention of being willingly distracted during our time of prayer. Involuntary distractions, which come about in spite of ourselves, and which we try to reject as soon as we are aware of them, do not lessen the merit or the benefit of the prayer. A father or mother does not get annoyed if the baby keeps uttering meaningless noises because it does not as yet know how to speak. God knows our weaknesses and is patient, but we have to ask him: *grant us the spirit of prayer*.²³

It pleases Our Lord when we resolve to improve our mental prayer each day of our lives – even on those occasions when things require more effort, are difficult, or when we feel arid. For *prayer is not a question of what you say or feel, but of Love. And you love when you try to say something to the Lord, even though you might not actually*

22. cf J. Escrivá, *The Way*, 368

23. *Divine Office, Lauds – Monday of Fourth Week of Lent*

say anything.²⁴ If this is our approach, our life will continually be enriched and strengthened. Prayer is a powerful lamp which throws light on our problems, which enables us to get to know people better and thus to help them on their path to Christ, and to assign the proper place to matters which preoccupy us. Prayer locates the soul in an environment of serenity and of peace, which then is transmitted to others. The joy it produces is a foretaste of happiness in Heaven.

No one on this earth has known how to treat Jesus better than his Mother, Mary, who spent long hours looking at him, speaking with him, handling him with simplicity and veneration. If we turn to Our Mother in Heaven, we will learn quite quickly to speak with Jesus confidently, to follow him closely, very united to his Cross.

24. J. Escrivá, *Furrow*, 464