

2023 -2024 Year of Prayer

Pope Francis' Catechesis on Prayer, arranged for each liturgical week

Seventh Sunday of Easter (after the Ascension of the Lord) – 12th May 2024

This last week we celebrated the Ascension of the Lord, when Jesus ascended to heaven, to take his place with his father at the centre of the throng of angels and saints. It is a good occasion to remind ourselves of the practice of praying in communion with the Saints; a topic on which Pope Francis gave his catechesis on Wednesday, 7 April 2021.

Praying in communion with the Saints

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

Today, I would like to reflect on the connection between prayer and the communion of saints. In fact, when we pray, we never do so alone: even if we do not think about it, we are immersed in a majestic river of invocations that precedes us and proceeds after us.

Contained in the prayers we find in the Bible, that often resound in the liturgy, are the traces of ancient stories, of prodigious liberations, of deportations and sad exiles, of emotional returns, of praise ringing out before the wonders of creation... And thus, these voices are passed on from generation to generation, in a continual intertwining between personal experience and that of the people and the humanity to which we belong. No one can separate themselves from their own history, the history of their own people. We always carry this inheritance in our attitudes, and also in prayer. In the prayers of praise, especially those that blossom from the hearts of the little ones and the humble, echo parts of the *Magnificat* that Mary lifted up to God in front of her relative Elizabeth; or of the exclamation of the elderly Simeon who, taking Baby Jesus in his arms, said: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word" (*Lk 2:29*).

Prayers — those that are good — are "expansive", they propagate themselves continuously, with or without being posted on social media: from hospital wards, from moments of festive gatherings to those in which we suffer silently... The suffering of each is the suffering of all, and one's happiness is transmitted to someone else's soul. Suffering and happiness are part of a single history: they are stories that create history in one's own life. This history is relived in one's own words, but the experience is the same.

Prayer is always born again: each time we join our hands and open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous saints and recognized saints who pray with us and who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters who have preceded us on this same human adventure. In the Church there is no grief that is borne in solitude, there are no tears shed in oblivion, because everyone breathes and participates in one common grace. It is no coincidence that in the ancient church people were buried in gardens surrounding a sacred building, as if to say that, in some way, the multitude who preceded us participate in every Eucharist. Our parents and grandparents are there, our godfathers and godmothers are there, our catechists and other teachers are there... That faith that was passed on, transmitted, that we received. Along with faith, the way of praying and prayer were also transmitted.

Saints are still here, not far away from us; and their representations in churches evoke that "cloud of witnesses" that always surrounds us (cf. *Heb 12:1*). At the beginning, we heard the Reading of the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews. They are witnesses that we do not adore — certainly, we do not adore these saints — but whom we venerate and who, in thousands of different ways, bring us to Jesus Christ, the only Lord and Mediator between God and humanity. A "saint" who does not bring

you to Jesus Christ is not a saint, not even a Christian. A saint makes you remember Jesus Christ because he or she journeyed along the path of life as a Christian. Saints remind us that holiness can blossom even in our lives, however weak and marked by sin. In the Gospels we read that the first saint to be “canonized” was a thief, and he was “canonized”, not by a Pope, but by Jesus himself. Holiness is a journey of life, of a long, short or instantaneous encounter with Jesus, but always a witness. A saint is a witness, a man or woman who encountered Jesus and followed Jesus. It is never too late to convert to the Lord who is good and great in love (cf. *Ps* 103:8).

The Catechism explains that the saints “contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth.[...] Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC, 2683). There is a mysterious solidarity in Christ between those who have already passed to the other life and we pilgrims in this one: our deceased loved ones continue to take care of us from Heaven. They pray for us, and we pray for them and we pray with them.

We already experience this connection in prayer here in this earthly life, this connection of prayer between ourselves and the saints, that is, between us and those who have already reached the fullness of life, this bond of prayer: we pray for each other, we ask for and offer prayers... The first way to pray for someone is to speak to God about him or her. If we do this frequently, every day, our hearts are not closed but open to our brothers and sisters. To pray for others is the first way to love them and it moves us toward concretely drawing near. Even in moments of conflict, a way of dissolving the disagreement, of softening it, is to pray for the person with whom I am in conflict. And something changes with prayer. The first thing that changes is my heart, my attitude. The Lord changes it to make an encounter possible, a new encounter, to prevent the conflict from becoming a never-ending war.

The first way to face a time of anguish is to ask our brothers and sisters, the saints above all, to pray for us. The name given to us at Baptism is not a label or a decoration! It is usually the name of the Virgin, or a Saint, who expects nothing other than to “give us a hand” in life, to give us a hand to obtain the grace we need from God. If the trials in our life have not reached breaking point, if we are still capable of persevering, if despite everything we proceed trustingly, perhaps, more than to our own merits, we owe all this to the intercession of many saints, some who are in Heaven, others who are pilgrims like us on earth, who have protected and accompanied us, because we all know there are holy people here on this earth, saintly men and women who live in holiness. They do not know it; nor do we know it. But there are saints, everyday saints, hidden saints, or as I like to say, the “saints next door”, those who share their lives with us, who work with us and live a life of holiness.

Therefore, blessed be Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world, together with this immense flowering of saintly men and women who populate the earth and who have made their life a hymn to God. For — as Saint Basil said — “The Spirit is truly the dwelling of the saints since they offer themselves as a dwelling place for God and are called his temple” (*Liber de Spiritu Sancto* 26, 62: *PG* 32, 184A; cf. CCC, 2684)

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer we now consider the communion of saints. Whenever we pray, we find ourselves immersed in a great stream of past, present and future intercession for the needs of individuals and of the whole world, for we pray together with all the saints in the communion of the Body of Christ which is the Church. The saints — this great “cloud of witnesses” (*Heb* 12:1) both known and unknown — ceaselessly pray with us and for us in giving glory to God. Our veneration of the saints draws us closer to Jesus, the sole Mediator between man and God. In Christ too, we sense a mysterious solidarity with our loved ones who have died, for whom we continue to pray. We experience this prayerful solidarity also here below, as we pray for one another and for our brothers and sisters who are poor, suffering and most in need. In these challenging times, let us thank the Lord for the great gift of the saints and confidently entrust ourselves to their intercession, for the spread of the Gospel and the salvation of our human family.