



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 30 November 2011

[[Video](#)]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our previous Catecheses we have reflected on several examples of prayer in the Old Testament. Today I would like to begin to look at Jesus, at his prayer that flows through the whole of his life like a secret channel that waters existence, relationships and actions and guides them, with progressive firmness, to the total gift of self in accordance with the loving plan of God the Father. Jesus is also our Teacher in prayer, indeed he is our active and fraternal support on every occasion that we address the Father. Truly, “prayer”, as it is summed up in a heading in the [*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#), “is fully revealed and realized in Jesus” (nn. [541-547](#)). Let us also look at him in our forthcoming Catecheses.

The prayer that followed the baptism in the River Jordan to which he submitted is an especially important moment on his journey. Luke the Evangelist noted that after receiving baptism from John the Baptist together with all the people he was praying a very personal, extended prayer. “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him” (Lk 3:21-22). The fact that he “was praying”, in conversation with the Father, illuminated the act he had carried out along with so many of his people who had flocked to the banks of the Jordan. By praying, he gave his action, baptism, an exclusively personal character.

The Baptist had launched a forceful appeal to live truly as “children to Abraham”, being converted

to goodness and bearing fruit worthy of this change (cf. Lk 3:7-9). And a large number of Israelites had felt impelled to act, as Mark the Evangelist recalled, writing: "There went out to him [to John] all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins" (Mk 1:5).

The Baptist was bringing something really new: to undergo baptism was to mark a decisive turning point, leaving behind forms of conduct linked to sin and starting a new life.

Jesus too accepted this invitation, he joined the grey multitude of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. However, a question also wells up in us, as it did in the early Christians: why did Jesus voluntarily submit to this baptism of penance and conversion? He had no sins to confess, he had not sinned, hence he was in no need of conversion. So what accounts for his action?

The Evangelist Matthew records the amazement of the Baptist who stated: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Mt 3:14), and Jesus' response: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (v. 15). The word "righteousness" in the biblical world means the acceptance of God's will without reserve. Jesus showed his closeness to that part of his people who, following the Baptist, recognized that it was not enough merely to consider themselves children of Abraham and wanted to do God's will, wanted to commit themselves to ensuring that their behaviour was a faithful response to the Covenant God had offered through Abraham.

Therefore by entering the River Jordan, Jesus, without sin, showed his solidarity with those who recognize their sins, who choose to repent and to change their lives; Jesus made it clear that being part of the People of God means entering into a perspective of newness of life, of life in accordance with God.

In this action Jesus anticipated the cross, he began his ministry by taking his place among sinners, by taking upon his shoulders the burden of the whole of humanity and by doing the Father's will. Recollected in prayer, Jesus showed his profound bond with the Father who is in Heaven, he experienced his fatherhood, understood the demanding beauty of his love and, in conversation with the Father, received the confirmation of his mission.

The words that resounded from Heaven (cf. Lk 3:22), anticipated a reference to the Paschal Mystery, the cross and the resurrection. The divine voice called him "my beloved Son", reevoking Isaac, the beloved son whom Abraham his father was prepared to sacrifice, in accordance with God's command (cf. Gen 22:1-14). Jesus was not only *the son of David*, of royal, messianic lineage, or *the Servant* with whom God was well pleased; he was also the *only begotten Son*, beloved, like Isaac, whom God the Father gave for the world's salvation.

At the moment when, through prayer, Jesus was experiencing the depth of his own sonship and

God's fatherhood (cf. Lk 3:22b), the Holy Spirit, whom he was to pour out after being raised on the Cross (cf. Jn 1:32-34; 7:37-39), descended upon him (cf. Lk 3:22a) and guided him in his mission that he might illuminate the Church's action. In prayer, Jesus lived in uninterrupted contact with the Father in order to fulfil completely his plan of love for mankind.

Against the background of this extraordinary prayer Jesus lived his entire life in a family deeply tied to the religious tradition of the people of Israel. This is demonstrated by the references we find in the Gospels: his circumcision (cf. Lk 2:21), and his presentation in the temple (cf. Lk 2:22-24), as well as his education and training at Nazareth, in the holy house (cf. Lk 2:39-40 and 2:51-52).

This was "about thirty years" (Lk 3:23), a long period of hidden daily life, even though it included experiences of participation with the community in moments of religious expression, such as pilgrimages to Jerusalem (cf. Lk 2:41).

In recounting the episode of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers (cf. Lk 2:42-52), Luke the Evangelist makes us understand that Jesus, who was praying after his baptism in the Jordan, had a long-standing habit of intimate prayer to God the Father. This habit was rooted in the traditions, in the style of his family, and in his own crucial experiences within it.

The 12-year-old's answer to Mary and Joseph already suggests the divine Sonship which the heavenly voice expressed after his baptism: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" to do his bidding (Lk 2:49). Jesus did not begin to pray after emerging from the waters of the Jordan, but continued in his ongoing, customary relationship with the Father; and it was in this close union with the Father that he stepped out of the hidden life in Nazareth into his public ministry.

Jesus' teaching on prayer certainly derives from the approach to prayer that he acquired in his family but its deep, essential origins are found in his being the Son of God and in his unique relationship with God the Father.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* answers the question: "*From whom did Jesus learn how to pray?*" in this way, "Jesus, with his human heart, learned how to pray from his Mother and from the Jewish tradition. But his prayer sprang from a more secret source because he is the eternal Son of God who in his holy humanity offers his perfect filial prayer to his Father" (n. 541).

In the Gospel narrative, the settings of Jesus' prayer are always placed half-way between insertion into his people's tradition and the newness of a unique personal relationship with God. The "lonely place" (cf. Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16), to which he often withdrew, "the hills" he climbs in order to pray (cf. Lk 6:12; 9:28), "the night" that affords him solitude (cf. Mk 1:35; 6:46-47; Lk 6:12) recall moments in the process of God's revelation in the Old Testament, pointing out the continuity of his saving

plan. Yet, at the same time, they mark moments of special importance for Jesus who fits consciously into this plan, completely faithful to the Father's will.

In our prayer too we must learn, increasingly, to enter this history of salvation of which Jesus is the summit, to renew before God our personal decision to open ourselves to his will, to ask him for the strength to conform our will to his will, throughout our life, in obedience to his design of love for us.

Jesus' prayer penetrates all the phases of his ministry and all his days. Difficulties do not obstruct it. The Gospels, on the contrary, allow us a glimpse of Jesus' habit of spending part of the night in prayer. Mark the Evangelist tells of one of these nights, after the tiring day of the multiplication of the loaves, and writes: "Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went into the hills to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land" (Mk 6:45-47). When decisions became urgent and complicated his prayers grew longer and more intense. Just before he chose the Twelve Apostles, for example, Luke emphasizes the nocturnal duration of Jesus' preparatory prayer: "In those days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: (Lk 6:12-13).

In looking at Jesus' prayers, a question must arise within us: how do I pray? How do we pray? How much time do I give to my relationship with God? Are people today given sufficient education and formation in prayer? And who can teach it? In the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* I spoke of the importance of the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. In gathering what emerged at the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, I placed a special emphasis on the specific form of *lectio divina*. Listening, meditating, and being silent before the Lord who speaks is an art which is learned by practising it with perseverance.

Prayer is of course is a gift which nevertheless asks to be accepted; it is a work of God but demands commitment and continuity on our part. Above all continuity and constancy are important.

Jesus' exemplary experience itself shows that his prayer, enlivened by the fatherhood of God and by communion with the Spirit, was deepened and prolonged in faithful practice, up to the Garden of Olives and to the Cross.

Today Christians are called to be witnesses of prayer precisely because our world is often closed to the divine horizon and to the hope that brings the encounter with God. In deep friendship with Jesus and living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows on God's Heaven. Indeed, by taking the way of prayer, attaching no importance to human things, we can help others to take it. For Christian prayer too it is true that, in journeying on, new paths unfold.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us train ourselves in an intense relationship with God, with prayer that is not occasional but constant, full of faith, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus taught us. And let us ask him to enable us to communicate to people who are close to us, to those whom we meet on our way, the joy of the encounter with the Lord, Light for our existence. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I greet the distinguished delegations from various countries taking part in the meeting promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio on the theme: *No Justice without Life*. I express my hope that your deliberations will encourage the political and legislative initiatives being promoted in a growing number of countries to eliminate the death penalty and to continue the substantive progress made in conforming penal law both to the human dignity of prisoners and the effective maintenance of public order. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present, including those from the United States, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, I address an affectionate thought to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, I invite you to rediscover intimacy with Christ in the spiritual atmosphere of Advent, setting yourselves to learn at the school of the Virgin Mary. I recommend you, dear *sick people*, to spend this period of more intense expectation and prayer offering your sufferings for the world's salvation to the Lord who comes. Lastly, I urge you, dear *newlyweds*, to build authentic Christian families, drawing inspiration from the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth to which we look in particular during this season of preparation for Christmas.

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