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VATICAN - "AVE MARIA" by Mgr Luciano Alimandi - "Prayer is the breath of the soul"

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - " Prayer is the breath of the soul ": this definition of prayer highlights the vital importance of prayer in our lives. In fact who could ever say to one's breath: "today I have no time for you?". If we had no time to breathe, any other action would be impossible simply because we lack the strength. Without breath, human life cannot exist. The same is true of prayer: everything depends on it, in the sense that with prayer God's grace enables us to face the trials of life, to overcome temptation and to complete the tasks assigned to us by Divine Providence. But without prayer we can do nothing which is truly good and of eternal value, for ourselves or for others.
A crisis of faith is essentially a crisis of prayer. We will never learn to confide in God unless we become familiar with Him, with the afflatus of the soul which is nurtured only by prayer. To receive the Holy Spirit, who, as Jesus says, is similar to "the wind" (cfr. Jn 3, 8), we must pray in order to open our will, our intellect and our memory to the Love of God. The Church Fathers and Doctors, the great masters of the spiritual life, all tell us that prayer is the heart of the Christian life: if the heart stops beating, life is extinguished!
So, in the light of the revealed Truth, we can truly say that there can be no spiritual life, nourished day after day, without a journey of prayer which the great mystical doctor St John of the Cross for example calls the "ascent of Mount Carmel". In fact a journey of prayer is an "ascent", because those who undertake it experience the fatigue of prayer, with its periods of aridity and darkness, against which it is necessary "struggle". But if we obey Jesus' teaching on prayer - " Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to hold your ground before the Son of man.' " (Lk 21, 36) - we experience ever deeper personal communion with the Lord and with the Church, and eventually, prayer becomes the "breath" of the soul, as it is meant to be.
God makes use of everything: life's temptations, sins, trials, joys and sadness, in order to "convince us" and "win us" for prayer, so that it becomes in us "continual", like a flowing stream bringing fresh, life-giving water to our whole being. People who pray with the heart, make prayer the "centre" of life, and live a relation with Jesus which is effective not theoretic: they live of Him, with Him and for Him. In a praying heart the Lord's promise is perfectly fulfilled: " 'So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. What father among you, if his son asked for a fish, would hand him a snake? Or if he asked for an egg, hand him a scorpion? If you then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11, 9-13).
The "doctor of prayer", Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori, in many of his works, in particular in his "Gran mezzo della preghiera", highlights the Gospel teaching, the treasure of the whole Church, with regard to prayer, and he laments that it is not taken sufficiently to heart by those charged with transmitting it to others: "what saddens me most of all is that I see preachers and confessors who spend little time speaking of it to their audiences and penitents; and I see that even the spiritual books which we have in our hands today fail to say enough about prayer. When all preachers and confessors and indeed all books, should teach nothing but prayer " (From "Gran mezzo della preghiera"). This book on prayer, written with fatigue and with zeal for the salvation of souls by Saint Alfonso, is a best seller, and excellent spiritual reading for those who wish to learn in the light of Revelation, Tradition and the Magisterium, more about the great and vital subject of prayer. If we read this work with an open heart and mind, we will convince ourselves of the necessity and the urgency of prayer for our salvation and for the salvation of all mankind.
How important is a life of prayer for every Christian, for every priest, for every religious! As the Holy Father Benedict XVI has said and taught frequently, for example during a recent meeting with the clergy of the northern Italian diocese of Bozen-Brixen: " A fundamental priority of priestly life is to be with the Lord and thus to have

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time for prayer. St Charles Borromeo always used to say: "You will not be able to care for the souls of others if you let your own perish. In the end you will no longer do anything even for others. You must always have time for being with God". I would therefore like to emphasise: whatever the demands that arise, it is a real priority to find every day, I would say, an hour to be in silence for the Lord and with the Lord, as the Church suggests we do with the breviary, with daily prayers, so as to continually enrich ourselves inwardly, to return …to within the reach of the Holy Spirit's breath. And to order priorities on this basis: I must learn to see what is truly essential…" (Benedict XVI, 6 August 2008).
Who better than the Blessed Virgin Mary can introduce us and guide us to the mystery of prayer! Who other than Mary knows the perfect path of prayer which leads to the Heart of her Son and through Him, to the Heart of the Father! May Mary in her maternal concern, remove from our soul anything which prevents us from living an authentic life of prayer and may She illuminate our mind with regard to the unrivalled majesty and beauty of the Face of Jesus, which shines on those who adore Him! (Agenzia Fides 10/9/2008)

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