



VATICAN - "AVE MARIA" by Mgr Luciano Alimandi - Prayer is, longing for God

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - Prayer, as such, has always had, and will continue to have, a central place in the life of the Church and in the life of the individual Christian, since it is an essential part of it: "you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her." (Lk 10, 42). These words of Jesus addressed to Martha, the busy sister of Mary, could also be read as a continual call from the Lord to live a life of prayer, which is the essentiality of being a Christian. Is prayer not the "only one" needed? Is it not true that since prayer is a sort of spiritual breathing, without it, the soul has no life? Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori wrote clearly: "those who pray save themselves, those who do not, dam themselves".

Certainly, we cannot become men and women of prayer in a day, it takes time. The path is long, as we see from the lives of the saints, who met with many difficulties before reaching a state of 'continual prayer', that is, prayer of the heart: the heart beats incessantly, never stopping. In the same way the disposition of the soul should be a constant longing for Him. Of course, no one can ascend the "mount of prayer" alone; how true it is, especially for prayer life, that we can 'do nothing' without Jesus (Jn 15, 5)!

We must set out with the right step, the step of humility. We are assured of this by an expert in prayer, Saint Teresa of Avila, who wrote that the house of prayer is built only on humility. Prayer starts and ends with humility. In her "Way of Perfection" we read: "I knew perfectly well that I had a soul, but I did not understand what that soul merited, or Who dwelt within it, until I closed my eyes to the vanities of this world in order to see it. I think, if I had understood then, as I do now, how this great King really dwells within this little palace of my soul, I should not have left Him alone so often, but should have stayed with Him and never have allowed His dwelling-place to get so dirty." (Way of Perfection 28, 10-11).

God heeds and blesses prayers which are humble, coming from a humble heart, like that of a child. How humble was the prayer of the publican in the temple! Unlike the Pharisee who was also praying, the publican, not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven, beat his breast, begging for God's mercy (cfr. Lk 18, 13).

The Lord desires to give us a life of prayer, but as the Gospel teaches, to do so he asks us to make a decision to pray "pray continually" (Lk 18, 1). We must have that "resolute determination", of which Teresa of Avila writes. We must make our whole life rotate around prayer so that "come what may" it becomes the hub, the centre, of our every action and plan. Once we undertake a way of prayer, perhaps after many unsuccessful attempts, insufficiently resolute, we should persevere, nothing must stop us.

Certainly numerous writings on prayer are found in the masters of the spiritual life, since the first necessity of man is to 'listen' to God and to 'speak' to God. We learn from the Gospels that one day the disciples said to Jesus: "teach us to pray" (Lk 11, 1)! This was not by chance. On this teaching and the consequent lesson learned, depends in fact the holiness of the disciple. But there are two categories of Christians: saints and failed saints. For the former, prayer was like breathing, for the latter, it was not!

So let us allow ourselves to be captivated by prayer, so that our soul may be ever more captivated by Jesus. On the subject of prayer another Doctor of the Church, Saint John Chrysostom, wrote: "There is nothing more worthwhile than to pray to God and to converse with him, for prayer unites us with God as his companions. As our bodily eyes are illuminated by seeing the light, so in contemplating God our soul is illuminated by him. Of course the prayer I have in mind is no matter of routine, it is deliberate and earnest. It is not tied down to a fixed timetable; rather it is a state which endures by night and day. Our soul should be directed in God, not merely when we suddenly think of prayer, but even when we are concerned with something else. If we are looking after the poor, if we are busy in some other way, or if we are doing any type of good work, we should season our actions with the desire and the remembrance of God. Through this salt of the love of God we can all become a sweet dish

for the Lord. If we are generous in giving time to prayer, we will experience its benefits throughout our life. Prayer is the light of the soul, giving us true knowledge of God. It is a link mediating between God and man...Prayer ... gladdens the soul and gives repose to its affections. You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words. It is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God's grace. To set about this prayer, paint the house of your soul with modesty and lowliness and make it splendid with the light of justice..." (From the homilies of St John Chrysostom, Bishop: homily 6 on prayer). (Agenzia Fides 17/9/2008)