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To Know Him and To Know Yourself (III): In the Company of the Saints

The example of the saints, especially our Lady, can be a great help for our life of prayer. A new article in the series on prayer.

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For the first time, Jesus goes up publicly to Jerusalem. There He begins announcing the kingdom of God through his words and miracles.

Since his astounding deeds at the wedding in Cana, his renown has been steadily growing. It is then that, hidden by the silence of the night, a well-known Jewish figure comes to speak with Him (cf. *Jn* 3:1). Nicodemus' heart has been deeply moved on seeing and listening to Christ. His head is spinning with many questions, and he decides to seek an answer through an intimate, face-to-face conversation. Jesus sees the sincerity in his heart and quickly tells him: *unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (*Jn* 3:5).

The ensuing dialogue continues with a question that any of us would have asked: What does this mean? How can one be born a second time? But what Jesus is really telling Nicodemus is that he shouldn't simply seek to understand but, more importantly, he needs to let God enter his life. Striving to be a saint is

like being born a second time, seeing everything with a new light. Really, it means becoming a new person, being transformed, little by little, into Christ himself: “letting his Life show forth in ours.”[1] So much so that one way to come to recognize Christ is precisely through the saints. Their lives can play an important role in the personal path of every baptized person who wants to learn how to pray.

Mary prays when joyful…

The women and men who have preceded us are witnesses to the possibility of carrying out a real dialogue with God in our life amid so many ups and downs that might lead us to think the opposite. A key witness to this is our Lady. Mary enjoyed the tender closeness of her son Jesus in the daily life of a family, and kept up a constant dialogue with God the Father amid the good

moments and difficult ones found in any family, including the home in Nazareth.

Our Lady teaches us to pray in every state of mind. Soon after receiving the angel's news, Mary *went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah* (*Lk* 1:39) to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She had received the news of the nephew who will soon increase the size of their family, always a joyful occasion, especially if unexpected as in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah due to their advanced age. "Saint Luke's description of the encounter between the two cousins is very moving, and is imbued with thanksgiving and joy."[2] The Holy Spirit seems to share in their joy when revealing, both to the Baptist and his mother, the Messiah's physical presence.

As soon as Mary enters their house, Elizabeth addresses her with words

of ardent praise, words that will become a universal prayer and that we echo each day, partaking in their joy: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!* (*Lk* 1:42). Mary responds to her cousin's enthusiasm with an overflowing heart: *My soul magnifies the Lord,and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*. The "Magnificat," as tradition has called our Mother's response, is a prayer of praise saturated with God's word. As Benedict XVI said: "Mary had a deep knowledge of Sacred Scripture. Her *Magnificat* is a tapestry woven with threads from the Old Testament."[3]

When we find our hearts filled with gratitude for a gift we have received, we can give voice to this in our prayer, perhaps with words from Scripture, thanking God for the "great things" He has done in our life. Thanksgiving is a fundamental

attitude in a Christian's prayer, especially in moments of joy.

...and also amid sorrow and discouragement.

Nevertheless, our Lady also prays in moments of darkness, when confronted with sorrow or a situation apparently without meaning. Thus Mary teaches us another fundamental attitude in a Christian's prayer, seen so clearly in the narrative of Jesus' death: *standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister* (*Jn* 19:25). Jesus' mother, overwhelmed with sorrow, is simply present there. She doesn't do anything to try to save her Son, nor does she reproach God for what she doesn't understand. Her only concern is not to miss a single word that Jesus pronounces from the Cross. Hence she accepts the new mission she is given without hesitating: "*Woman, behold, your*

son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" (*Jn* 19:26-27). Mary's sorrow is the deepest that a person can experience: being present at the death of a son. But Mary rises above her pain and accepts this new call to welcome John as her son and, with him, the men and women of all times.

Prayer amid sorrow is above all "standing" next to one's own cross, accepting and loving God's will; it is being ready to say "yes" to the persons and situations that our Lord places in our life. To pray is to open our eyes to reality, even when it seems especially dark, with the certitude that we can always find a gift there, that God is always present. Then we will be able to welcome persons and situations with Mary's response: *fiat*, "be it done unto me" (cf. *Lk* 1:38).

Finally, in our Lady's life we see another state of mind when she prays. We see Mary and her husband Joseph praying also in moments of anxiousness. One day, while returning from their annual pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, they realize that their twelve year old Son is missing, and they decide to go back to search for Him. When they finally find Him in the Temple conversing with the teachers of the Law, Mary asks: *Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously* (*Lk* 2:48).

Often we too can feel anxious when we sense our inadequacy in fulfilling our duties, or think that we are in the wrong place. It might even seem to us then that our entire world is out of kilter: our life, vocation, family, work… We could even think that our path in life is not what we had hoped for. All our plans and dreams now

seem naïve to us. Mary and Joseph too had to go through moments of anxiousness, and when they ask their Son why He has done this they fail to receive a clear answer: *"How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them* (*Lk* 2:49-50).

Praying when we are anxious gives no guarantee that we will find quick and easy solutions. Then what should we do? Our Lady shows us the best solution: remaining faithful to our path in life, rediscovering in our daily life God's will even when we don't fully understand it. And also, like Mary, we can keep all these mysterious and at times obscure events in our heart and meditate on them, that is, reflect on them with a prayerful attitude. Then little by little we will sense God's presence again, and we will see Jesus "growing" in us

and once again becoming visible (cf. *Lk* 2:51-52).

Biographies for our own lives

Mary is a privileged witness to the closeness with God that we long for, but so are the saints, each in their own personal and specific way: "Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God," Benedict XVI said. "We can think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in his search for truth and in his discernment of spirits; Saint John Bosco in his passion for the education of the young; Saint John Mary Vianney in his awareness of the grandeur of the priesthood as gift and task; Saint Pius of Pietrelcina in his serving as an instrument of divine mercy; Saint Josemaria Escrivá in his preaching of the universal call to holiness; Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, the missionary of

God's charity towards the poorest of the poor."[4]

Humanly speaking, it's only natural to feel sympathy for certain ways of being , for people whose efforts we find more attractive or who speak directly to our heart and mind. Getting to know the life and experiences of the saints and reading their writings is an excellent way to foster a true friendship with them. Hence if we stress only the extraordinary events in the life and prayer of the saints, we run the risk of making their example more distant and difficult to follow.

"Don't you remember Peter, Augustine, Francis? I have never liked biographies of saints which naively—but also with a lack of sound doctrine—present their deeds as if they had been confirmed in grace from birth," said Saint Josemaria, who always insisted on

the importance of never idealizing people, not even the saints canonized by the Church, as though they were perfect. “No. The true life stories of Christian heroes resemble our own experience: they fought and won; they fought and lost. And then, repentant, they returned to the fray.”[5] This realistic outlook helps make the testimony of the saints much more credible, since we see in them people like us. Among the saints, Pope Francis says, we may find “our own mothers, grandmothers or other loved ones (cf. *2 Tim* 1:5). Their lives may not always have been perfect, yet even amid their faults and failings they kept moving forward and proved pleasing to the Lord.”[6]

Our understanding of prayer can be deepened when we see it incarnated in the lives of specific people. For example, we can draw new light for our life of prayer by knowing that

Psalm 91 brought great consolation to Saint Thomas More during his long months in prison. *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust" … For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up*.[7] The example of a martyr facing death and the suffering of his loved ones can offer us a path of prayer amid the great and small setbacks we encounter in our own life.

Amazed at God's loving look

Familiarity with the saints can help us too to discover God in our daily life. Saint John Mary Vianney, the Cure of Ars, noticed that one of his parishioners, an illiterate peasant, was spending a long time in front of the tabernacle. One day he asked the

man: “What are you praying about?” And he replied with simplicity: “I look at Him and He looks at me.” The Cure of Ars never forgot this lesson. Contemplative prayer is “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus,”[8] the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, citing this humble peasant as an example. I look at Him and, much more importantly, He looks at me. God is always looking at us, but He does so in a special way when we raise our eyes to Him and return his look of love.

Something similar happened to Saint Josemaria, who often repeated this story. As a young priest, during one of his first pastoral assignments, he used to stay all morning in the confessional waiting for penitents. There he would often hear the sound of the door opening and cans clanging together, which puzzled and intrigued him. One day his curiosity got the better of him and he hid

behind the door to find out the cause of this noise. And he saw a man enter the church carrying cans of milk, who from the doorway looked at the tabernacle and said, “Lord, here is John the milkman,” and then left. This humble man gave the young priest an example of trusting prayer that led him to often exclaim: “Lord, here is Josemaria, who doesn’t know how to love you like John the milkman.”[9]

Saints from very different backgrounds and epochs show us that God is looking at us lovingly, wherever we are and just as we are. We can believe them because they themselves discovered this with amazement in their own life.

Both when asleep and awake

The saints are also an example for us when we see them tired and without strength. “Yesterday I couldn’t even pray two Hail Marys attentively,”

Saint Josemaria confided, near the end of his life. “You can’t imagine how I suffered! But, as always, although it cost me effort and I didn’t know how to, I continued praying. I told Him: Lord, help me! You have to be the one who brings forward the great things you have entrusted to me, because you see how I am unable to carry out even the smallest things: as always, I place myself in your hands.”[10]

Benedict XVI relates that Saint Philip Neri, “the very moment when he awoke in the morning, said to God: ‘Lord, keep Thy hands over Philip this day; for if not, Philip will betray Thee.’”[11] And Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri acknowledged in one of her letters that her prayer was sometimes devoid of sensible consolations: “Deep down God is there; but above all in the times of prayer I almost never have a sensible feeling of this during these

days…”[12] And Saint Therese of Lisieux wrote: “In truth I am no saint, as this frame of mind well shows. I ought not to rejoice in my dryness of soul, but rather attribute it to my want of fervor and fidelity. That I fall asleep so often during meditation, and thanksgiving after Communion, should distress me. Well, I am not distressed. I reflect that little children are equally dear to their parents whether they are asleep or awake; that, in order to perform operations, doctors put their patients to sleep.”[13]

We need the witness and company of the saints to convince us each day that we can strengthen our friendship with God, abandoning ourselves in his hands: “Truly we are all capable, we are all called to open ourselves up to this friendship with God, to not leave God’s hands, to never stop turning and returning to

the Lord, speaking with Him as one speaks with a friend."[14]

Carlo de Marchi

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[1] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 104.

[2] Words of Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz in Covadonga, 13 July 2018.

[3] Benedict XVI, Homily, 18 December 2005.

[4] Benedict XVI, Apost. Exhort. *Verbum Domini*, no. 48.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 76.

[6] Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, no. 3.

[7] *Ps* 91:1-2, 11-12. Cf. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against*

Tribulation. The third chapter is an extended commentary on the verses of Psalm 91.

[8] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2715.

[9] Cf. Andres Vazquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. I, ch. 5.

[10] Saint Josemaria, 26 November 1970, cited in Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del beato Josemaría*, p. 25.

[11] Cited by Benedict XVI in his general audience on 1 August 2012.

[12] Mercedes Montero, *En Vanguardia: Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, 1916-1975*, Rialp, Madrid 2019, p. 94

[13] Saint Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, ch. 8.

[14] Joseph Ratzinger, "Letting God Work," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 October 2002.

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