

We Have Come to Adore Him: An Introduction to Prayer at the School of Benedict XVI

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CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE



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COVER IMAGE

The three Magi offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant
Christ. From the chapel of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.
The chapel mosaics were completed by Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, SJ and the
artists of Centro Aletti in 2008. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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Mary, the God-bearer, with the infant Christ.
Their arms are outstretched in prayer.

Rest home chapel,
Črni Vrh, Slovenia.

Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

“We Have Come to Adore Him”: An Introduction to Prayer at the School of Benedict XVI

Fr. Andreas Schmidt

Prayer is LIFE

What is Christian life really about? God, who in himself is infinite love, life and light, wants to give us his life! He wants us to share in the riches of his own life, in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the foundational truth of Christianity. This is why the first paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that in his Son Jesus, God the Father calls men and women “to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life.”¹

Christian life consists in this happiness: to know that we are infinitely loved by God the Father and truly to love with God the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the “good news” (Gospel), the meaning of our life and the “fullness of life,” of which Jesus speaks. A lot of the time, our problem is not that we don’t know this. How often

have we heard it in church and in catechism class! But does this “good news” really determine our attitude toward life at every moment? Do we live in this most intimate certainty that we are infinitely loved? The result of this certainty is an indestructible joy, such that St. Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always!” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

If we do not recognize the good news, it might be because we do not live out what Paul calls us to do in the next verse of his letter: “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We don’t pray or don’t pray rightly or don’t pray enough – and so we also don’t live our Christian identity to the full. For as the *Catechism* tells us, the life of prayer “is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him.”² This is the meaning of all prayer: that we receive God’s love and live from it not only now and then, but at every moment of our life.

So prayer is much more than we might think at first. It’s not about uttering a few words in the direction of heaven every now and again. It’s about communication with God, who leads us ever more deeply into an everlasting communion with him. During his pontificate, Pope Benedict XVI stressed again and again that in such a life of prayer we don’t simply find God. We also find ourselves! “In learning how to speak to him, we learn to be a human being, to be ourselves.”³ After all, we are made for communion with God.

If we live this communion, we sense that we are not only truly living our humanity. In this steady association with the living God, we can also recognize ever more clearly – and very concretely – what form our lives should take. In other words, we recognize our vocation. “It is in silence that we find God,”

Benedict told the young people he encountered on a visit to Great Britain in 2010. It is “in silence that we discover our true self. And in discovering our true self, we discover the particular vocation which God has given us for the building up of his Church and the redemption of our world.”⁴

So that there is no misunderstanding: when we speak here of “praying always” and of silence,” this isn’t only for monks and nuns, who live a life of complete dedication to prayer in their cloisters. It is also not simply for Pope Emeritus Benedict, who, in obedience to a special call of God, has decided to spend the last years of his life serving the Church through prayer. Paul addresses his letter to very ordinary Christians, who live in the world. He knows very well that Christians have a lot of other things to do. And yet he says, “This is your vocation: to pray always!” How is it possible to live our everyday lives in prayer or, as we often hear today, to live contemplatively in the midst of action? This is precisely the “art of prayer” that Blessed John Paul II called Christians to embrace at the beginning of the new millennium.⁵

Benedict, too, sought in the most varied circumstances to describe what such an “art” might look like today. In the end, he has shown us this art with his life. The Pope whom Jesus called to “go up the mountain” (cf. Luke 9:28) and adore him in a hidden life of contemplation, did what he told others to do. In silence, he discovered his remarkable “particular vocation”: In the last years of his life, the pope emeritus will sustain the Church and the world with his prayer. Benedict XVI, who renounced the Petrine ministry in order to *be* prayer at the heart of the Church, has become a great master of prayer for our age.

Even before Benedict's momentous decision, during his weekly Wednesday audiences, he began a "school of prayer." In May 2011, at the beginning of this series of catecheses, he said, "We know well, in fact, that prayer should not be taken for granted. It is necessary to learn how to pray, as it were acquiring this art ever anew."⁶ In this booklet, we will be students at Pope Benedict's "school," allowing him to introduce us to the "art of prayer."

Time for God

The *Catechism* brings us right to the point: "We cannot pray 'at all times' if we do not pray at specific times."⁷ In order for our lives to be increasingly permeated by God's life and love, we must find times in which we do nothing other than open ourselves to him.

It's part of our human nature that only those things that are important to us, and for which we make time, really influence our life. Only the friendships in which we talk about personal matters and spend a lot of time together become profound, lifelong relationships that carry us. The same thing is true of prayer, which, as St. Teresa of Avila says, is "nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us."⁸ Benedict, too, told us that "the life of prayer consists in being habitually in God's presence and being aware of it, in living in a relationship with God as we live our customary relationships in life, with our dearest relatives, with true friends."⁹

Often the problem begins here. It is hard for us concretely to set aside time for prayer. In today's society, we are under more and more pressure to be productive. At the same time, we have more ways to distract ourselves during our rare free time. Both of these circumstances have a negative effect on prayer, which often simply gets brushed aside. Benedict was very aware of this difficulty. "Inward and outward silence are necessary if we are to be able to hear this word," he said. "And in our time this point is particularly difficult for us. In fact, ours is an era that does not encourage recollection; indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that people are frightened of being cut off, even for an instant, from the torrent of words and images that mark and fill the day."¹⁰

With these words, Benedict described with astonishing accuracy the lives of many people, especially young people, today. The very thought of not being "online" or "reachable by cell" for a certain time makes many people anxious, afraid of missing something and of not "being there." But taking a step back is precisely what is needed – the risk of "inward and outward silence" is crucial in order to come into contact with God. So the pope emeritus called on us not to forget the most important thing, and in this to take Mary as our model:

In our time we are taken up with so many activities and duties, worries and problems: we often tend to fill all of the spaces of the day, without leaving a moment to pause and reflect and to nourish our spiritual life, contact with God. Mary teaches us how necessary it is to find in our busy day, moments for silent recollection, to meditate on what the Lord wants to teach us, on how

he is present and active in the world and in our life: to be able to stop for a moment and meditate.¹¹

Benedict does not hide the fact that this requires discipline. It requires a firm resolve to reserve time for prayer every day, to step back from everything in order to listen to God and to spend time with him: “Real prayer requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day. Often it means waiting for the Lord to speak. Even amid the ‘busy-ness’ and the stress of our daily lives, we need to make space for silence, because it is in silence that we find God.”¹²

Let’s be honest: We find time for what’s important to us! This is why every serious Christian life begins with taking the time every day to pray, to care for the most important relationship of our lives. It is essential to cultivate real regularity in prayer. It’s easy, on a day when we feel very motivated, to pray for a long time and then to put God in the storage closet, so to speak, because other things capture our interest. But this is not how we treat a person who is important to us – certainly not God. Thus we need, as Benedict described, real perseverance in prayer. This perseverance then allows our joy in prayer to grow: “Dear friends, making time for God regularly is a fundamental element for spiritual growth; it will be the Lord himself who gives us the taste for his mysteries, his words, his presence and action, for feeling how beautiful it is when God speaks with us; he will enable us to understand more deeply what he expects of me.”¹³

Entering into God's Presence

Once we have grasped the vital necessity of dedicating concrete time to pray and have resolved to lead a life of prayer, the next difficulty emerges: How exactly am I supposed to pray? Where can I find God? How can I enter into contact with him? Often, we make the mistake of simply starting to speak with a vague hope that somebody “up there” might hear us. And we forget the first step of every prayer: to become aware, in faith, that God is *present*, that he is already here and waits for us. Only with this step, which the *Catechism* calls “recollection,”¹⁴ can prayer become a real encounter with God. Otherwise, our prayer often remains a mere brooding and circling around ourselves. Benedict concretely named the places where we can find the God who is present: “private prayer in the quiet of our hearts and before the Blessed Sacrament, and liturgical prayer in the heart of the Church.”¹⁵ Let’s take a closer look at these places.

Encountering God in Us

The first place of God’s presence Benedict mentioned is our own heart. This is a truth that Jesus tries to impress upon his disciples: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). St. Paul experiences the fulfillment of this promise and says that we become a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19): The triune God dwells in us. The art of praying consists in discovering this presence

of God in us, receiving it in faith and entering into communion with him.

The real presence of the triune God in her heart was the decisive discovery of St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, a young French Carmelite nun who died in 1906. She prayed, “May I never abandon you there [in my heart], but may I be there, whole and entire, completely vigilant in my faith, entirely adoring, and wholly given over to your creative action.”¹⁶

For that is the problem: God is present, even in us, but all too often we leave him alone because we are not aware of his presence. This is why we need to dedicate time every day to prayer, the better to understand that God is always there. Benedict called the youth of the United Kingdom and all of us to this: “I ask you to look into your hearts each day to find the source of all true love. Jesus is always there, quietly waiting for us to be still with him and to hear his voice. Deep within your heart, he is calling you to spend time with him in prayer.”¹⁷ Personal prayer is nothing other than this person-to-person, heart-to-heart encounter with Jesus – and in him, with the entire triune God, who is present in us.

An Encounter with a Friend

What should we say in this encounter? Just as in every genuine and deep relationship, we share what is really in our heart. *Everything* that moves you and that you would share with your dearest friend: gratitude and love, pleas and questions, laments, joy and praise. And as in every friendship – this is important! – every real encounter is two-sided.

Benedict said this explicitly: Prayer involves listening to Jesus' voice.

When only one person speaks (in prayer, this is mostly ourselves), there is no conversation. So we, too, must follow the priest Eli's instructions to the young Samuel in the First Book of Samuel. We must say to the Lord again and again, "Speak, LORD, your servant is listening!" (1 Samuel 3:9). And *not*, though we would very much like to say this at times, "Listen, Lord, your servant is speaking!"

But how can we hear God's voice? Obviously, not as directly as we hear the voice of another person. And yet there are many ways in which God can speak to us. First, he speaks through his word in the Scriptures. Benedict described very concretely how God's word can lead us in prayer. We can "ruminate" on Sacred Scripture, he said,

For example, by taking a brief passage of Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of the Apostles, or a passage from a spiritual author that brings us closer and makes the reality of God more present in our day; or we can even ask our confessor or spiritual director to recommend something to us. By reading and reflecting on what we have read, dwelling on it, trying to understand what it is saying to me, what it says today, to open our spirit to what the Lord wants to tell us and teach us.¹⁸

God's word is not a word from the past. It is "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12), and so it can say something important for my life here and now. But God also has many other possibilities for speaking to us. The *Catechism* names other sources for prayer: "the great book of creation, and that of

history – the page on which the ‘today’ of God is written.”¹⁹ This means, for example, that I can contemplate the beauty of creation, which speaks to me of the greatness and goodness of the Creator. Or I can reflect with God about what I have experienced and consider what God wanted to say to me through this or that event, or through an encounter with this or that person. In this way, God often grants us concrete light for particular situations in our lives.

Light for Our Lives

In prayer, God helps us to find the right path. He comforts us in difficult times and gives us strength for our task. Often, after a time of prayer we see clearly again and return to our everyday life strengthened. “We learn from Jesus,” Benedict told us, “that constant prayer helps us to interpret our life, make our decisions, recognize and accept our vocation, discover the talents that God has given us and do his will daily, the only way to fulfill our life.”²⁰ A little later in his catech-eses on prayer, he said,

By raising our gaze to God’s Heaven, in a constant relationship with Christ, opening our hearts and minds to him in personal and community prayer, we learn to see things in a new light and to perceive their truest meaning. Prayer is, as it were, an open window that enables us to keep our gaze turned to God, not only to remember the destination towards which we are bound but also to let God’s will illuminate our earthly pilgrimage and help us live it with intensity and commitment.²¹

So prayer helps us to live the here and now rightly, to recognize false paths in a timely way and to avoid them, and to use our time for the right things.

This is why it is important to “pray through” our life. That is, we need to bring everything we do every day into prayer, to ask God whether we are on the right path, how we should act, and to beg for his strength and his blessing. And if we are not sure what decision to make with regard to a particular question, we need to bring this question before him and to ask for his light. God answers! Probably not immediately with a “voice from heaven,” but he lets us sense the direction in which we should go. St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced something like this. In her autobiography, she described how prayer and reading of the Holy Scriptures helped her to sense the right decision: “I have only to open the Holy Gospels and at once I breathe the perfume of Jesus, and then I know which way to run.”²²

So prayer helps us to do the right thing. It helps us not to waste our time but to use it fruitfully. In fact, only through prayer do our actions remain rooted in God and avoid turning into empty and fruitless forms of activism. In his last Angelus address before he renounced the papacy, Benedict once more emphasized the “primacy of prayer, without which the entire commitment to the apostolate and to charity is reduced to activism.”²³ And in his final Lenten message, he wrote, “The Christian life consists in continuously scaling the mountain to meet God and then coming back down, bearing the love and strength drawn from him, so as to serve our brothers and sisters with God’s own love.”²⁴

Conversation with God thus gives us light and strength for our concrete, everyday life. It allows us to understand what God wants of us and how we can serve him. At the same time, it makes our relationship to God ever deeper. When prayer is a living conversation with God, in which a person listens to and answers his voice, then such communication leads one ever further into *communio* – into a deep, interior communion with the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit perfectly united in love. Thus prayer with words and thoughts often leads us naturally into another form of prayer, which we will now look at more closely.

Adoration and Contemplative Prayer

In a deep human friendship, we can have the following experience. At first, we want more than anything to get to know the other person, so we need to speak with him a lot. Once we get to know him well, we will of course talk over one thing or another with him, but often, many words are no longer necessary. We rejoice and long simply to be in the presence of the other, to be near him.

Something similar happens in prayer. After reflecting on God's word and conversation with him, we no longer need to think or speak further. Rather, what we really want is simply to remain near him, in his light, in his love.

The spiritual tradition calls this kind of prayer "contemplative." Literally, this means "gazing" or "looking at." "I look at him and he looks at me," said St. John Vianney.²⁵ Just as, among people, gazing into someone's eyes for a long time is a very personal encounter, contemplative prayer is a pro-

found, wordless, personal encounter with God. It is simply being and resting in the personal love of God, who is present and who gives us his love.

This kind of prayer is often linked to a particular form of Jesus' presence: the Eucharist, in which he is present under the form of bread. In eucharistic adoration, we gaze at this great gift of his love. And we know in faith that he looks at us with the same love with which he once spoke to his disciples: "This is my body which is given for you" (Luke 22:19). So eucharistic adoration consists essentially in "knowing and believing the love God has for us (cf. 1 John 4:16), allowing ourselves to be loved by God, and gratefully returning his love with love.

In his encyclical letter on the Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II described very personally how Eucharistic adoration was for him a resting on Jesus' heart, just as the Apostle John was permitted to rest at Jesus' side. "It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple (cf. John 13:25) and to feel the infinite love present in his heart.... How often, dear brothers and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!"²⁶

As he did so often, Benedict further developed John Paul II's teaching. In his homily at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, in 2005, he explained the two essential dimensions of eucharistic adoration with the help of the Greek and Latin words for "adoration." *Proskynesis* literally means "falling down" before God, reverencing and acknowledging him in his greatness as God. *Adoratio*, on the other hand, means "mouth to mouth contact, a kiss, an embrace, and

hence, ultimately love.”²⁷ Eucharistic adoration thus leads us to a direct encounter with God. To adore Jesus present in the Eucharist is to reverence and to bow profoundly before the great God. Adoration is a kind of continuation with receiving the Eucharist in holy Communion, which manifests the most profound communion of love that is possible on this earth. For this reason, both John Paul II and Benedict continually invited people to this deepest of all forms of personal prayer.

Eucharistic adoration also shows us something else: Even when we pray privately, our prayer is never isolated. Genuine Christian prayer is always ecclesial, embedded in the communal prayer of the Church. So let us look at this place of the presence of God and of our prayer, which Benedict mentions again and again.

Encountering God in the Church's Liturgical Prayer

The Church's liturgical prayer includes what is called the “liturgy of the hours,” through which the different times of the day are sanctified; the sacraments; and especially the celebration of the Eucharist. But why do we need such liturgical prayer? At times this kind of prayer can seem to us to be stiff, formalized, not lively and spontaneous enough. Nonetheless, we can experience what great strength lies in praying as a community and not only alone in our room.

This is the first reason why liturgical prayer is essential for the Church: Precisely its sobriety and set structure make it possible for very different people in very different life situations to pray together. And in prayer, they become a unity.

Simultaneously, then, the faith of each individual is fortified by membership in the Body of the Church, while the communion of the Church is enlivened and strengthened by every one of its faithful members.

Here we find the second answer to the question, “Why liturgical prayer?” We often have the experience of not really knowing what words to use when praying to God. If we simply kept to ourselves, we would never see beyond our own, limited perspective. The liturgy opens us to a deeper and wider spiritual horizon. Benedict described the liturgy as a “precious ‘place,’” a “precious ‘source’ for developing in prayer, a source of living water ... a privileged context in which God speaks to each one of us, here and now, and awaits our answer.”²⁸

A comparison can help us to understand why we need the liturgy. No person learns how to speak alone. Rather, our mother and father first communicate with us; then we come into contact with other family members and our fellow human beings. Only in this way do our vocabulary and capacity to think, to understand and to express ourselves grow. Something similar happens in the liturgy.

This is true first of all in the praying of the Psalms, which are, after all, the very word of God. In particular, the Psalms shape the Church’s liturgy of the hours. But they also appear in each celebration of the Eucharist, as our praying response to God’s word in the reading. It is above all in the Psalms, Pope Benedict tells us, that we learn to pray as little children learning to speak with God:

What the child wishes to express is his own experience, but his means of expression comes from others; and little by little he makes them his own, the words received from his parents become his words and through these words he also learns a way of thinking and feeling, he gains access to a whole world of concepts and in it develops and grows, and relates to reality, to people and to God. In the end his parents' language has become his language, he speaks with words he has received from others but which have now become his own.

This is what happens with the prayer of the Psalms. They are given to us so that we may learn to address God, to communicate with him, to speak to him of ourselves with his words, to find a language for the encounter with God. And through those words, it will also be possible to know and to accept the criteria of his action, to draw closer to the mystery of his thoughts and ways (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9), so as to grow constantly in faith and in love.

Just as our words are not only words but teach us a real and conceptual world, so too these prayers teach us the heart of God, for which reason not only can we speak to God but we can learn who God is and, in learning how to speak to him, we learn to be a human being, to be ourselves.²⁹

What is true of the Psalms can also be said of every other form of the Church's liturgical prayer that has grown through the centuries: "By participating in the liturgy we make our own the language of Mother Church, we learn to speak in her and for her."³⁰ Praying with the Church, we are lifted up into a new understanding, into her true and full relationship to the living God. Benedict explained that this does not happen all at once. We must grow into the liturgy

and its language. “Of course ... this happens gradually, little by little. I must immerse myself ever more deeply in the words of the Church with my prayer, with my life, with my suffering, with my joy, and with my thought. It is a process that transforms us.”³¹

For this reason, we must not be scandalized when for a moment the prayers of the liturgy don’t speak to us very much, or when they seem dry or hard to understand. We simply receive what does speak to us and keep going on this path. We will see that the path leads us to ever-deeper discoveries. The Church’s liturgy has been tested over centuries. By no means does it consist of superficial prayers that wear out with time. Through its depth and density, these prayers allow us to immerse ourselves ever more in the fullness of the triune life of God.

The liturgy points the way for us, we said, because it strengthens us as communal prayer and because it teaches and broadens the language of prayer. But the most profound reason why the highpoint of the Church’s liturgical prayer, the celebration of the Eucharist, is also the “source and summit” of all the Church’s activity,³² lies in the fact that it allows us to become one with Christ.

In Union with Christ, Praying to the Father

At the beginning of our reflections, we emphasized that prayer means living in communion with God. There is only one way to this communion with the living God: Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:6). In, through and with Jesus and through the working of the Holy Spirit, we become sons and daughters

of our Father in heaven. In this way, we participate in the life and the love of the triune God.

“Through him and with him, and in him,” we hear in the Doxology, the concluding prayer of praise in the eucharistic prayer. This shows us that the Eucharist sacramentally effects what we continue in a general way in prayer (and especially in eucharistic adoration): It makes us live in communion with the triune God. We unite ourselves with Jesus and, in the Holy Spirit, we pray with him to the Father.

Benedict explained that Jesus “identified himself with me, taking our body and the human soul. And he asks us to enter this identity of his, making ourselves one body, one spirit with him because from the summit of the Cross he brought not new laws, tablets of stone, but himself, his Body and his Blood, as the New Covenant. Thus he brings us kinship with him, he makes us one body with him, identifies us with him.”³³

This is another reason why the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church’s life. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we come into unique and direct contact with the mystery of Christ. Everything becomes present: his humanity and divinity, his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection. When we receive the Eucharist, he himself comes to us and we become one with him. This is why the Eucharist is an altogether unique form of prayer, which cannot be replaced by any other.

Benedict stated that “we celebrate and live the liturgy well only if ... we remain in a prayerful attitude, uniting ourselves with the Mystery of Christ and with his conversation as Son with the Father.”³⁴

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says explicitly, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (John 6:56). This is true not only for each of us personally, but also for us as a community. John Paul II titled his encyclical letter on the Eucharist *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* – “the Church from the Eucharist.” That is, the Church comes into being through the Eucharist. When each individual is joined to Jesus in the Eucharist, we also become one with one another. We become the communion of the Church. As St. Paul writes, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17).

There is more: in the celebration of the Eucharist, not only is the present congregation made one in and through Jesus. The Eucharist binds together the Church of all times and places. It even binds together earth and heaven. The “Gloria” and the “Sanctus” that we pray during the Mass make this very clear. “Glory to God in the highest,” sang the heavenly host at the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:14). “Holy, holy, holy ... the whole earth is full of his glory,” cried the angels in the prophet Isaiah’s vision of God (Isaiah 6:3). In the prayers of the Mass, in which we take up the same words, the praying Church unites itself to the praise of the angels in heaven. The earthly liturgy is always our participation in the eternal praise of heaven. We call the Eucharist the “pledge of future glory”³⁵ because it is – already now – an anticipation of heavenly life.

In the Eucharist, we receive our whole “being in Christ,” personal union with him, the communion of the Church and heavenly life. Thus we have everything we need for our Christian life. In a way, this life is the continuation of what

we received in the Eucharist. Our life flows from the sacrament. This is why, at the end of the celebration of the Eucharist, we hear the words, “*Ite, missa est,*” in Latin – “Go, you are sent.”

We are, so to speak, equipped with everything we need to live our daily life in profound union with God. Then in our personal prayer, in union with Jesus whom we have received in the Eucharist, we can pray to the Father. According to Benedict, precisely this distinguishes Christian prayer: “In fact, only through Christ can we converse with God the Father as children, otherwise it is not possible, but in communion with the Son we can also say, as he did, ‘*Abba*’ [‘Father’]... In identifying with him, in being one with him, I rediscover my personal identity as a true son or daughter who looks to God as to a Father full of love.”³⁶

In the Eucharist, I thus enter into the deepest unity with Jesus and at the same time find my own deepest identity: to live as a child of God. The Eucharist strengthens my shared life with God. In doing so, it makes my prayer ever more trusting, intense and constant. Even in my everyday life, I will turn to God in childlike trust much more spontaneously. My attitude toward life changes. It is shaped more and more by a basic trust, by a sense of security, even when I am not explicitly and consciously praying.

In the end, I find myself drawing nearer and nearer to St. Paul’s exhortation to “pray without ceasing.” The more strongly the attitude of the “child of God” determines my life, the more my whole life becomes a prayer. At the same time, such prayer helps me in my everyday life to yearn for and live out the Eucharist as a personal encounter with God.

The Struggle of Prayer

In the Church's liturgy we have a rich treasury of words and experiences of prayer, which helps us to grow into prayer. Above all the sacrament of the Eucharist strengthens and continually revives our unity with Jesus. We need this support, because many difficulties can arise – and not only at the beginning of our life of prayer.

Even when we have already grown deeply in communion with God, prayer can become a struggle. We have trouble carving out the necessary time, embracing the discipline of regularity, finding the necessary motivation and concentration, or the right form and words for prayer. We shouldn't be surprised at this, since the truly valuable things in our life are never had easily. We have to fight for them! This is all the more true of prayer, which gives us the greatest good of all, life with God.

The *Catechism* tells us, “The great figures of prayer ... and [Christ] himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle.... The ‘spiritual battle’ of the Christian’s new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer.”³⁷ It is important for us to know this when we begin our path of prayer. We have to be clear that this path is not always a pleasant midday stroll. Only if we are prepared for times of struggle and decide not to allow ourselves to be held back by any obstacle will times like these not deter us from the path of prayer. To the contrary, they will even lead us into a more profound communion with God.

Benedict explained this with the Old Testament example of Jacob, who wrestles with God through the night (cf.

Genesis 32:23-33). First the pope emeritus referred us to the *Catechism*, which tells us that “the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance.”³⁸ Then, he continued, “The Bible text speaks to us about a long night of seeking God, of the struggle to learn his name and see his face; it is the night of prayer that, with tenacity and perseverance, asks God for a blessing.”³⁹

Yes, prayer is also a wrestling with God – when I don’t understand his ways, when I struggle to accept particular events in my life, when I no longer feel his presence, when doubt threatens my faith and temptations try to draw me away from a life with God, when I suffer from evil committed by others, or when I suffer from my own weakness and guilt and come near to despair. Then I must wrestle with God, often for a long time. If I remain faithful even in the night, then, like Jacob, I can have the experience of seeing God’s face in a new way and feeling his blessing over my life. Benedict said, “Dear brothers and sisters, our entire lives are like this long night of struggle and prayer, spent in desiring and asking for God’s blessing, which cannot be grabbed or won through our own strength but must be received with humility from him as a gratuitous gift that ultimately allows us to recognize the Lord’s face.”⁴⁰

In this struggle of prayer, we are never alone. We are always supported by the praying communion of the Church, by the angels and above all by Jesus himself, who walks the path of prayer with us. A glance at Jesus on the cross can give us trust and hope: “Jesus, who at the supreme moment of death entrusts himself totally to the hands of God the Father,

communicates to us the certainty that, however harsh the trial, however difficult the problems, however acute the suffering may be, we shall never fall from God's hands, those hands that created us, that sustain us and that accompany us on our way through life, because they are guided by an infinite and faithful love."⁴¹

A glance at Jesus also shows us that if we accept this path through the darkness and follow it with trust in God, we can bear rich fruit not only for ourselves but also for others. Jesus took on the darkness of Godforsakenness, bearing it for us. His exterior and interior Way of the Cross became our redemption. When we suffer dark and difficult times in prayer and bear these with Jesus and for others, we cooperate in the redemption. Thus the *Catechism* says that prayer "is a communion of love bearing life for the multitude, to the extent that it consents to abide in the night of faith."⁴²

Nonetheless, prayer does not effect good for others only in times of darkness. Prayer as such is a source of life – not only for the one praying but for all. In other words, prayer always possesses a missionary power.

Prayer: Always a Mission

In the person who prays, God's presence dwells in such a way that others can sense it. We often see this in cloistered contemplatives, but it is also true of spiritual people who live in the world. Even before they say anything, their eyes shine with a light and a joy that comes from the presence of God in them. This fascinates, it attracts, immediately prompting the desire in others, "I want to draw nearer to God, too." The

prophet Zechariah prophesied something like this when he said, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zechariah 8:23).

Jesus is the “Emmanuel” (Matthew 1:23), or “God with us.” Whoever prays, whoever lives in a constant union with Jesus, becomes a kind of magnet that draws others to God. And this before he does or says anything! If I unite myself with Jesus and draw nearer to God, I draw with me all those who are in my heart and to whom I am bound. This is true even before I pray explicitly for this or that person, just because of what prayer is.

The power of contemplative cloisters and monasteries lies here. Though contemplative monks and nuns live a life of prayer hidden from the world, they understand themselves to be profoundly missionary because they come before God on behalf of all people. Their prayer is meant to bring the whole world to God. The same thing is true of my personal prayer, if I pray in and with the communion that is the Church. Such prayer is already missionary in itself; it possesses a strong and effective missionary power.

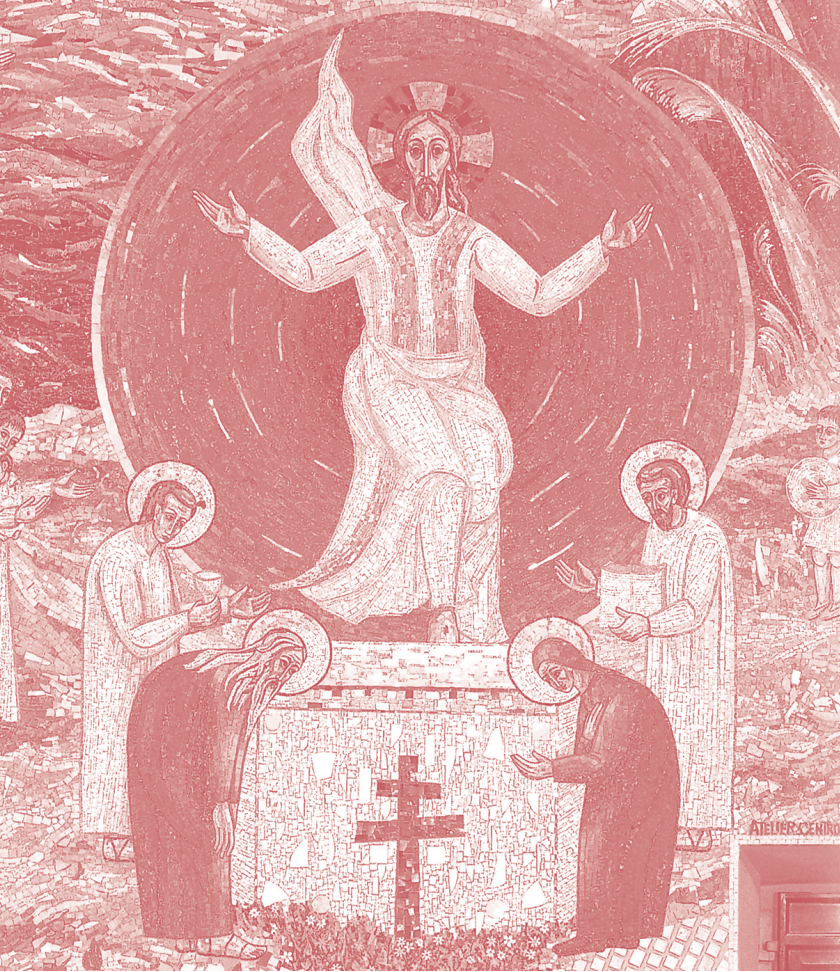
In his Wednesday catecheses, Benedict pointed to this decisive dimension of prayer: “In deep friendship with Jesus and living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows on God’s Heaven. Indeed, by taking the way of prayer ... we can help others to take it.”⁴³

Walking the Path of Prayer with Jesus

At this point, we have considered the many different dimensions of prayer. In conclusion, let us look once more at what Christian prayer essentially is: communion with Jesus. Here Christian prayer clearly differentiates itself from the prayer of other religions. For Christians, prayer is not only the human person's speaking to a God who is enthroned "up there" in heaven. In Jesus, God himself came to us. The Christian life consists in becoming one with Jesus and, in the Holy Spirit, learning how to speak with him to the Father.

So prayer is at the same time speaking with God and living and loving in God. Benedict wrote, "Prayer must lead Christians to knowledge and union in ever deeper love with the Lord, if they are to be able to think, act and love like him, in him and for him. Putting this into practice, learning the sentiments of Jesus, is the way of Christian life."⁴⁴

Such a profound unity with Jesus might still seem very far away from us. It might seem like a goal that we long for, but with the impression that we are still at the beginning. That might even be true. But that is precisely what Benedict encourages us to do: to set out on this path of prayer with joy and trust. In walking it, we will notice that the path opens up and leads us farther. "For Christian prayer too it is true that, in journeying on, new paths unfold."⁴⁵



Detail of the heavenly liturgy, with the glorified Christ as the high priest. Adam and Eve worship in the foreground, as two disciples hold symbols of the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Wall of *The Parousia*, Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

Appendix: Pope Benedict XVI on Prayer

Why We Need to Pray

This power, the grace of the Spirit, is not something we can merit or achieve, but only receive as pure gift. God's love can only unleash its power when it is allowed to change us from within. We have to let it break through the hard crust of our indifference, our spiritual weariness, our blind conformity to the spirit of this age. Only then can we let it ignite our imagination and shape our deepest desires. That is why prayer is so important: daily prayer, private prayer in the quiet of our hearts and before the Blessed Sacrament, and liturgical prayer in the heart of the Church. Prayer is pure receptivity to God's grace, love in action, communion with the Spirit who dwells within us, leading us, through Jesus, in the Church, to our heavenly Father. In the power of his Spirit, Jesus is always present in our hearts, quietly waiting for us to be still with him, to hear his voice, to abide in his love, and to receive "power from on high," enabling us to be salt and light for our world.

Homily at the Eucharistic Celebration on the Occasion of the 23rd World Youth Day, Sydney, Australia, July 20, 2008

I ask each of you, first and foremost, to look into your own heart. Think of all the love that your heart was made to receive, and all the love it is meant to give. After all, we were made for love. This is what the Bible means when it says that we are made in the image and likeness of God: we were made to know the God of love, the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to find our supreme fulfillment in that divine love that knows no beginning or end....

Every day we have to choose to love, and this requires help, the help that comes from Christ, from prayer and from the wisdom found in his word, and from the grace which he bestows on us in the sacraments of his Church....

I ask you to look into your hearts each day to find the source of all true love. Jesus is always there, quietly waiting for us to be still with him and to hear his voice. Deep within your heart, he is calling you to spend time with him in prayer. But this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day. Often it means waiting for the Lord to speak. Even amid the “busy-ness” and the stress of our daily lives, we need to make space for silence, because it is in silence that we find God, and in silence that we discover our true self. And in discovering our true self, we discover the particular vocation which God has given us for the building up of his Church and the redemption of our world.

Salute of the Holy Father to the Youth, Eucharistic Celebration at the Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Westminster, England, September 18, 2010

“We have come to worship him.” Before any activity, before the world can change there must be worship. Worship alone sets us truly free; worship alone gives us the criteria for our action.

Christmas Greetings to Members of the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005

The Special Gift of Eucharistic Adoration

The celebration of the Eucharist and the community that arises from it will be all the more full, the more we prepare ourselves for him in silent prayer before the Lord’s eucharistic presence.... Such adoration is always more than a general speaking with God. One could rightly raise the objection, I can pray in the woods, in nature. Certainly we can. But if that is all there is, then the initiative in prayer lies wholly with us. Whether God can and will answer remains an open question.

The Eucharist means: God has answered. Thus, in the space of eucharistic adoration, prayer reaches an entirely new level. Only then does it become reciprocal. Only then does it become truly decisive. In fact, it is not only reciprocal, but all-encompassing: When we pray in the presence of the Eucharist, we are never alone. The entire Church, which celebrates the Eucharist, prays with us. We pray in a space in which we are lifted up, for we pray in the space of the Lord’s death and resurrection. We pray there, where the real plea in all our requests has been heard: the plea for death to be overcome, the plea for a love that is stronger than death. In this prayer, we no longer stand before a God we have thought up ourselves. Rather, we stand before the God who has truly given

himself to us, who became communion for us and so freed us from our limitations, for communion – the God who leads us to the resurrection. We must seek this kind of prayer anew.

Joseph Ratzinger, Homily in the Cathedral of Our Lady, Munich, Germany, 1978

“Going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him” (Matthew 2:11). Dear friends, this is not a distant story that took place long ago. It is with us now. Here in the Sacred Host he is present before us and in our midst. As at that time, so now he is mysteriously veiled in a sacred silence; as at that time, it is here that the true face of God is revealed. For us he became a grain of wheat that falls on the ground and dies and bears fruit until the end of the world (cf. John 12:24).

He is present now as he was then in Bethlehem. He invites us to that inner pilgrimage which is called adoration. Let us set off on this pilgrimage of the spirit and let us ask him to be our guide. Amen.

Address at Youth Vigil, 22nd World Youth Day, Cologne, Germany, August 20, 2005

“We Have Come to Adore Him”:

Homily at World Youth Day, Cologne, 2005

Dear Young Friends,

Yesterday evening we came together in the presence of the Sacred Host, in which Jesus becomes for us the bread that

sustains and feeds us (cf. John 6:35), and there we began our inner journey of adoration. In the Eucharist, adoration must become union.

At the celebration of the Eucharist, we find ourselves in the “hour” of Jesus, to use the language of John’s Gospel. Through the Eucharist this “hour” of Jesus becomes our own hour, his presence in our midst. Together with the disciples he celebrated the Passover of Israel, the memorial of God’s liberating action that led Israel from slavery to freedom. Jesus follows the rites of Israel. He recites over the bread the prayer of praise and blessing.

But then something new happens. He thanks God not only for the great works of the past; he thanks him for his own exaltation, soon to be accomplished through the Cross and Resurrection, and he speaks to the disciples in words that sum up the whole of the Law and the Prophets: “This is my Body, given in sacrifice for you. This cup is the New Covenant in my Blood.” He then distributes the bread and the cup, and instructs them to repeat his words and actions of that moment over and over again in his memory.

What is happening? How can Jesus distribute his Body and his Blood?

By making the bread into his Body and the wine into his Blood, he anticipates his death, he accepts it in his heart, and he transforms it into an action of love. What on the outside is simply brutal violence – the Crucifixion – from within becomes an act of total self-giving love. This is the substantial transformation that was accomplished at the Last Supper and was destined to set in motion a series of trans-

formations leading ultimately to the transformation of the world when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28).

In their hearts, people always and everywhere have somehow expected a change, a transformation of the world. Here now is the central act of transformation that alone can truly renew the world: Violence is transformed into love, and death into life.

Since this act transmutes death into love, death as such is already conquered from within, the Resurrection is already present in it. Death is, so to speak, mortally wounded, so that it can no longer have the last word.

To use an image well known to us today, this is like inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being – the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world.

All other changes remain superficial and cannot save. For this reason we speak of redemption: What had to happen at the most intimate level has indeed happened, and we can enter into its dynamic. Jesus can distribute his Body, because he truly gives himself.

This first fundamental transformation of violence into love, of death into life, brings other changes in its wake. Bread and wine become his Body and Blood.

But it must not stop there; on the contrary, the process of transformation must now gather momentum. The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we ourselves will be

transformed in our turn. We are to become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood.

We all eat the one bread, and this means that we ourselves become one. In this way, adoration, as we said earlier, becomes union. God no longer simply stands before us as the One who is totally Other. He is within us, and we are in him. His dynamic enters into us and then seeks to spread outwards to others until it fills the world, so that his love can truly become the dominant measure of the world.

I like to illustrate this new step urged upon us by the Last Supper by drawing out the different nuances of the word “adoration” in Greek and in Latin. The Greek word is *proskynesis*. It refers to the gesture of submission, the recognition of God as our true measure, supplying the norm that we choose to follow. It means that freedom is not simply about enjoying life in total autonomy, but rather about living by the measure of truth and goodness, so that we ourselves can become true and good. This gesture is necessary even if initially our yearning for freedom makes us inclined to resist it.

We can only fully accept it when we take the second step that the Last Supper proposes to us. The Latin word for adoration is *ad-oratio* – mouth to mouth contact, a kiss, an embrace, and hence, ultimately love. Submission becomes union, because he to whom we submit is Love. In this way submission acquires a meaning, because it does not impose anything on us from the outside, but liberates us deep within.

Let us return once more to the Last Supper. The new element to emerge here was the deeper meaning given to Israel’s ancient prayer of blessing, which from that point on became the word of transformation, enabling us to partici-

pate in the “hour” of Christ. Jesus did not instruct us to repeat the Passover meal, which in any event, given that it is an anniversary, is not repeatable at will. He instructed us to enter into his “hour.”

We enter into it through the sacred power of the words of consecration – a transformation brought about through the prayer of praise which places us in continuity with Israel and the whole of salvation history, and at the same time ushers in the new, to which the older prayer at its deepest level was pointing.

The new prayer – which the Church calls the “Eucharistic Prayer” – brings the Eucharist into being. It is the word of power that transforms the gifts of the earth in an entirely new way into God’s gift of himself, and it draws us into this process of transformation. That is why we call this action “Eucharist,” which is a translation of the Hebrew word *beracha* – thanksgiving, praise, blessing, and a transformation worked by the Lord: the presence of his “hour.” Jesus’ hour is the hour in which love triumphs. In other words: it is God who has triumphed, because he is Love.

Jesus’ hour seeks to become our own hour and will indeed become so if we allow ourselves, through the celebration of the Eucharist, to be drawn into that process of transformation that the Lord intends to bring about. The Eucharist must become the center of our lives.

If the Church tells us that the Eucharist is an essential part of Sunday, this is no mere positivism or thirst for power. On Easter morning, first the women and then the disciples had the grace of seeing the Lord. From that

moment on, they knew that the first day of the week, Sunday, would be his day, the day of Christ the Lord. The day when creation began became the day when creation was renewed. Creation and redemption belong together. That is why Sunday is so important.

It is good that today, in many cultures, Sunday is a free day, and is often combined with Saturday so as to constitute a “week-end” of free time. Yet this free time is empty if God is not present.

Dear friends! Sometimes, our initial impression is that having to include time for Mass on a Sunday is rather inconvenient. But if you make the effort, you will realize that this is what gives a proper focus to your free time.

Do not be deterred from taking part in Sunday Mass, and help others to discover it too. This is because the Eucharist releases the joy that we need so much, and we must learn to grasp it ever more deeply, we must learn to love it.

Let us pledge ourselves to do this – it is worth the effort! Let us discover the intimate riches of the Church’s liturgy and its true greatness: It is not we who are celebrating for ourselves, but it is the living God himself who is preparing a banquet for us.

Through your love for the Eucharist you will also rediscover the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in which the merciful goodness of God always allows us to make a fresh start in our lives.

Anyone who has discovered Christ must lead others to him. A great joy cannot be kept to oneself. It has to be passed on.

In vast areas of the world today there is a strange forgetfulness of God. It seems as if everything would be just the same even without him.

But at the same time there is a feeling of frustration, a sense of dissatisfaction with everyone and everything.

People tend to exclaim: “This cannot be what life is about!” Indeed not. And so, together with forgetfulness of God there is a kind of new explosion of religion. I have no wish to discredit all the manifestations of this phenomenon. There may be sincere joy in the discovery. But to tell the truth, religion often becomes almost a consumer product. People choose what they like, and some are even able to make a profit from it.

But religion sought on a “do-it-yourself” basis cannot ultimately help us. It may be comfortable, but at times of crisis we are left to ourselves.

Help people to discover the true star which points out the way to us: Jesus Christ! Let us seek to know him better and better, so as to be able to guide others to him with conviction.

This is why love for Sacred Scripture is so important, and in consequence, it is important to know the faith of the Church which opens up for us the meaning of Scripture. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church as her faith grows, causing her to enter ever more deeply into the truth (cf. John 16:13).

Beloved Pope John Paul II gave us a wonderful work in which the faith of centuries is explained synthetically: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. I myself recently presented the *Compendium of the Catechism*, also prepared at the request of

the late Holy Father. These are two fundamental texts which I recommend to all of you.

Obviously books alone are not enough. Form communities based on faith!

In recent decades, movements and communities have come to birth in which the power of the Gospel is keenly felt. Seek communion in faith, like fellow travelers who continue together to follow the path of the great pilgrimage that the Magi from the East first pointed out to us. The spontaneity of new communities is important, but it is also important to preserve communion with the Pope and with the Bishops. It is they who guarantee that we are not seeking private paths, but instead are living as God's great family, founded by the Lord through the Twelve Apostles.

Once again, I must return to the Eucharist. "Because there is one bread, we, though many, are one body," says St Paul (1 Corinthians 10:17). By this he meant: since we receive the same Lord and he gathers us together and draws us into himself, we ourselves are one.

This must be evident in our lives. It must be seen in our capacity to forgive. It must be seen in our sensitivity to the needs of others. It must be seen in our willingness to share. It must be seen in our commitment to our neighbors, both those close at hand and those physically far away, whom we nevertheless consider to be close.

Today, there are many forms of voluntary assistance, models of mutual service, of which our society has urgent need. We must not, for example, abandon the elderly to their solitude, we must not pass by when we meet people who are

suffering. If we think and live according to our communion with Christ, then our eyes will be opened. Then we will no longer be content to scrape a living just for ourselves, but we will see where and how we are needed.

Living and acting thus, we will soon realize that it is much better to be useful and at the disposal of others than to be concerned only with the comforts that are offered to us.

I know that you as young people have great aspirations, that you want to pledge yourselves to build a better world. Let others see this, let the world see it, since this is exactly the witness that the world expects from the disciples of Jesus Christ; in this way, and through your love above all, the world will be able to discover the star that we follow as believers.

Let us go forward with Christ and let us live our lives as true worshippers of God! Amen.

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