



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *San Damaso courtyard*

Wednesday, 26 May 2021 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Catechesis on prayer: 35. *The certainty of being heard*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Good morning!

There is a radical objection to prayer, which derives from an observation that we all make: we pray, we ask, and yet sometimes our prayers seem to go unheard: what we have asked for — for ourselves or for others — is not fulfilled. We often have this experience. If the reason for which we prayed was noble (such as intercession for the health of a sick person, or for the end of a war, for instance), the non-fulfilment seems scandalous. For example, for wars: we are praying for wars to end, these wars in so many parts of the world. Think of Yemen, think of Syria, countries that have been at war for years, for years. Countries ravaged by wars; we pray, and they do not come to an end. But how can this be? “Some even stop praying because they think their petition is not heard” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2734). But if God is Father, why does he not listen to us? He who assured us that he gives good things to his children who ask for them (cf. Mt 7:10), why does he not respond to our requests? We have all experienced this: we have prayed, prayed, for the illness of a friend, of a father, of a mother, and then they were gone. But God did not grant our request! It is an experience we have all had.

The *Catechism* offers us a good summary of the matter. It puts us on guard against the risk of not living an authentic experience of faith, but of transforming the relationship with God into something magical. Prayer is not a magic wand: it is a dialogue with the Lord. Indeed, when we pray we can fall into the risk that it is not we who serve God, but we expect it to be He who serves us (cf. 2735). This is, then, a prayer that is always demanding, that wants to direct events according to our own design, that admits no plans other than our own desires. Jesus, on the other hand, had great wisdom in teaching us the *Lord’s Prayer*. It is a prayer of questions only, as we know, but the first ones we utter are all on God’s side. They ask for the fulfilment not of our plan, but of his will

for the world. Better to leave it to him: “Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done” (*Mt* 6:9-10).

And the Apostle Paul reminds us that we do not even know what is appropriate to ask (cf. *Rm* 8:26). We ask for our necessities, our needs, things that we want: “But is this more appropriate or not?” Paul tells us, we do not even know what we ought to ask. When we pray, we need to be humble: this is the first attitude for going to pray. Just as there is the habit in many places that, before going to pray in a church, women don a veil or people use holy water as they begin to pray, so too we must tell ourselves before praying what is most appropriate; may God give me what is most appropriate. He knows. When we pray we must be humble, so that our words may actually be prayers and not just idle talk that God rejects. We can also pray for the wrong reasons: such as to defeat the enemy at war, without asking ourselves what God thinks of such a war. It is easy to write “God is with us” on a banner; many are eager to ensure that God is with them, but few bother to check whether they are actually with God. In prayer, it is God who must convert us, not we who must convert God. It is humility. I go to pray but You, Lord, convert my heart so that it will ask for what is appropriate, for what will be best for my spiritual health.

However, the scandal remains: when people pray with a sincere heart, when they ask for things that correspond to the Kingdom of God, when a mother prays for her sick child, why does it sometimes seem that God does not listen to them? To answer this question, we have to meditate calmly on the Gospels. The accounts of Jesus’ life are full of prayers: many people wounded in body and in spirit ask him to be healed; there are those who pray for a friend who can no longer walk; there are fathers and mothers who bring him their sick sons and daughters. They are all prayers imbued with suffering. It is an immense chorus that invokes: “Have mercy on us!”

We see that at times Jesus’ response is immediate, whereas in some other cases it is delayed: it seems that God does not answer. Think of the Canaanite woman who begs Jesus for her daughter: this woman has to insist for a long time to be heard (cf. *Mt* 15:21-28). She even has the humility to hear a word from Jesus that seems a little offensive towards her: we must not throw bread to the dogs, to the pooches. But humiliation does not matter to this woman: her daughter’s health is what matters. And she goes on: “Yes, but even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table”, and Jesus likes this. Courage in prayer. Or think of the paralytic brought by his four friends: Jesus initially forgives his sins and only later heals his body (cf. *Mk* 2:1-12). On some occasions, therefore, the solution to the problem is not immediate. In our life too, each one of us has this experience. Let us look back a little: how many times have we asked for a grace, a miracle, let’s say, and nothing has happened. Then, over time, things have worked out but in God’s way, the divine way, not according to what we wanted in that moment. God’s time is not our time.

From this point of view, the healing of Jairus’ daughter is worthy of particular attention (cf. *Mk* 5:21-33). There is a father who is rushing, out of breath: his daughter is ill and for this reason he asks for Jesus’ help. The Master immediately accepts, but on their way home another healing

occurs, and then news arrives that the girl has died. It seems to be the end, but instead Jesus says to the father: “Do not fear, only believe” (Mk 5:36). “Continue to have faith”: because it is faith that sustains prayer. And indeed, Jesus will awaken that child from the sleep of death. But Jairus had to walk in the dark for some time, with only the flame of faith. Lord, give me faith! May my faith grow! Ask for this grace, to have faith. Jesus, in the Gospel, says that faith moves mountains. But, having real faith. Jesus, before the faith of his poor, of his people, is won over; he feels special tenderness, before that faith. And he listens.

The prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father in Gethsemane also seems to go unheard. “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me”. It seems that the Father does not listen to him. The son must drink fully from the cup of the passion. But Holy Saturday is not the final chapter, because on the third day, Sunday, is the Resurrection. Evil is lord of the penultimate day: remember this well. Evil is never lord of the last day, no: the penultimate, the moment when the night is darkest, just before the dawn. There, on the penultimate day, there is temptation, when evil makes us think it has won: “Did you see? I won!”. Evil is lord of the penultimate day: on the last day there is the Resurrection. But evil is never lord of the last day: God is the Lord of the last day. Because that belongs to God alone, and it is the day when all human longings for salvation will be fulfilled. Let us learn this humble patience, of waiting for the Lord’s grace, waiting for the final day. Very often, the penultimate day is very hard, because human sufferings are hard. But the Lord is there. And on the last day, he resolves everything.

Special Greetings

I cordially greet the English-speaking faithful. United in this month of May with Our Blessed Lady, may we grow in the certainty that our heavenly Father always hears our prayers. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord. May God bless you!

Lastly, as usual, my thoughts turn to *the elderly*, to *young people*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*. I exhort you to nurture prayer because only with it can we nourish faith, in the light of which, everything can be understood and welcomed.

Summary of the Holy Father's words:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our continuing catechesis on prayer, we now consider those times when our prayers appear to go unanswered. We think, for example, of the heartfelt prayers we offer for our sick children, or for our friends who experience great pain. In our disappointment, we may feel that God is deaf to our pleas; we may even be tempted to stop praying. Jesus, our great teacher of prayer, taught us in the *Our Father* to ask for many things, but above all that God’s will be done. A mature faith trusts in the Lord’s providence, his greater plan for our lives and our world,

yet we naturally feel deep disappointment when our petitions seem to go unheard. Jesus shows us by his own example that God understands our sufferings, yet does not always immediately grant our wishes. In Gethsemane, Jesus offered a prayer that seemed to go unanswered; yet his complete trust in the Father's will led to our salvation and the glory of the resurrection. Evil never has the last word. If there are times when we walk in the dark, guided only by the light of faith, may we never abandon our trust in the Father's will to make all things work together for our ultimate good.