

## 44. Prayer in the Newer Testament (Catechism n. 2598-2622)

## Jesus learned from his Mother

**n. 2599** ‘The Son of God who became Son of the Virgin learned to pray in his human heart.

He learns to pray from his mother, who kept all the great things the Almighty had done and treasured them in her heart (LUKE 1:49; 2:19; 2:51).

He learns to pray in the words and rhythms of the prayer of his people, in the synagogue at Nazareth and the Temple at Jerusalem.

But his prayer springs from an otherwise secret source, as he intimates at the age of twelve: “I must be in my Father’s house”(LUKE 2:49).

Here the newness of prayer in the fullness of time begins to be revealed: his filial prayer, which the Father awaits from his children, is finally going to be lived out by the only Son in his humanity, with and for us.’

Luke's description of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38; see Catechism n. 2617) is a portrayal of prayer.



## The Annunciation

One of Luke's main themes throughout the Gospel and Acts is that 'nothing will be impossible with God'. In the previous scene we saw that Elizabeth's sterility could not thwart God's purpose. It was the same with Sarai (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 29:31) and Samson's mother (Judges 13:2). With the mother of the Messiah we find something even more wonderful. It was the Spirit of God that brought creation into being. Now that same Spirit creates anew in the womb of a virgin. Mary conceives because the Holy Spirit comes upon her, and the Power of the Most High overshadows her. The Creator God is acting in human history.

- **overshadow** - the Tent of Meeting erected in the desert

Mary is drawn by God into God's embrace. She is surrounded by God's radiant glory, and the Spirit of God's love breathes life into her. This life is the fruit of God's love for Mary and her loving response.

- **virgin**. Her first love, therefore, is offered to God. It is out of this holy communion that the child is conceived. He is 'holy' and 'will be called Son of God'. When the prophets spoke of Israel as a 'virgin', they were saying that the people, because of their disobedience, were unable to give and nurture life. Not so with Mary. She is a 'servant of the Lord'. God offers her his love and she opens herself in complete trust to receive it. She believes in the word spoken to her, and responds with a simple and complete 'Yes'. Of herself she cannot conceive the life willed by God. This virgin, however, listens to God and obeys, and so God is able to make her a temple for his Word, a dwelling for his glory.

While nothing can thwart God's loving design, love will not force itself. With all her heart, Mary delights in being God's servant, and freely opens herself to the love which is offered to her. She is presented by Luke as the perfect model of prayer. God, as always, takes the initiative. When Mary is overawed by God's greeting coming to her through the angel, God comforts her, calling her by name. He then goes on to tell her of his special love for her and of the mission he has for her. He promises to draw her into his glory and to make fruitful their mutual love. All that is asked of her is that she believes in his love and allow him to carry out his loving design through her. The whole scene illustrates the essence of prayer.

## Jesus' Baptism (Catechism n. 2600)

Jesus' Baptism is also portrayed by Luke (3:21-22) as a prayer scene.



The picture it gives us of Jesus is one that Luke wishes to remain before our eyes throughout the gospel. We would expect it to be striking, as indeed it is. The Spirit that brought about Jesus' conception (1:35) here comes down upon him from heaven, anoints him as the Messiah, and commissions him to bring about the fulfilment of God's promises.

Here, at the beginning of his entry into public life, we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking John's 'baptism of repentance'(3:3), Jesus must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself — so those who knew him tell us — was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims.



Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness, as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of religious practices that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way, and so, hearing of John, he joined the pilgrims who listened to John's preaching and accepted his baptism.

Our attention is riveted on Jesus. Luke does not describe the baptism and does not even mention John. His interest is in the communication between God and his Son. Luke tells us that Jesus was praying. The divine revelation made to Zechariah was also at a time of prayer (1:9-11). It was the same for Anna (2:37-38).

Luke will return, again and again, to Jesus' prayer (5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28-29; 10:21; 11:1-2; 22:41-42; 23:34; 23:46). This focus on prayer is found also in Acts (Acts 9:11-12; 10:2-6, 10:9-16; 13:2; 22:17-21).

To capture for his readers the essence of Jesus' experience, Luke drew on the thirty or more years of prayerful reflection of those who had watched Jesus closely, and had come to know him intimately. We can assume that Jesus had known a special intimacy in his prayer from his childhood (see Luke 2:49). His practice, even as an adult, of calling God 'Abba', a word he would have used as a child in speaking to Joseph, would seem to indicate that.

On the day of his baptism, however, he was to experience this intimacy in such a way that it caused him to go out to share with others what he had come to know. Only now, in his early thirties, was he ready for his mission to preach, teach and heal. Only now is he ready to challenge his contemporaries and to take the side of the poor against their oppressors. He had been waiting on God; or rather God had been waiting on him: waiting for the moment when his heart was broken enough, open enough, to receive the fullness of the Spirit that his Father was wanting to pour out upon him.

The moment comes at the Jordan River when Jesus is overwhelmed by an experience of profound intimacy with God. It is an experience of being in a special way the son of the God whom he had come to address as 'my Father'(2:49), of being loved and delighted in by the Transcendent One for whom he yearns.

Jesus recognised that his baptism experience was not simply meant for himself. Yes, he was the beloved son of God, and God did delight in him. But he realised that this experience was one that was meant for everyone. The verdict passed by God on the people of this broken and discouraged world was that each and every person is a son or daughter of God, and that the God who creates us does delight in us.

When we shrink back from communion with God we harm ourselves and others. God wants to delight in us, as a father/mother delights, and he continues to offer his love unconditionally to us. What Jesus knew is that the reason for much of the sin in the world and much of the despondency that he witnessed was that people did not know how deeply loved they were. It was his determination to tell them so, and his conviction that God was sending him to demonstrate God's love to them, that provided the energy behind his public ministry. Jesus wanted others to know what he came to realise so powerfully that day at the Baptism. He wanted, as John has already promised, to baptise them, as he had been baptised, with the Holy Spirit (3:11).

## Jesus' Ministry

Mark has a beautiful scene of Jesus' prayer in his portrayal of a day in the life of Jesus: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do"'(Mark 1:35-38).

Before Jesus chooses the Twelve he withdraws to be alone in prayer: 'During those days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles'(Luke 6:12).

Jesus' parables reveal something of the way in which he sees God present and active in nature and in people. His compassion reaches out to the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd. He nourishes them with his presence, his word, his love. He nourishes them by the gift of himself. The Gospel writers knew that his gift of self flowed from his communion with God. Luke writes: 'Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and praised God. He broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd'(Luke 9:16).



Just after Jesus has spoken for the first time of what awaits him in Jerusalem, we are taken onto a mountain where we join Peter, James and John (the same disciples who will be with him in garden of agony), and see Jesus transformed in prayer

‘About eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.



Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone’(Luke 9:28-35).

On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is gazing on God's face and listening to God's voice. His whole being is caught up in God's glory. He transcends the Law and the Prophets, for he is God's 'Son', God's 'Chosen'. It is to him that they are to listen (compare Deuteronomy 18:15, which Luke quotes in Acts 3:22 and 7:37). So it is that, once the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. Moses and the Prophets prepared the way for Jesus. Now, God's word is revealed fully in him.

Paul treats of the same subject in a number of places. We might recall here his words to the community at Corinth (c.56AD):

‘To this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’(2Corinthians 3:15-18).

The glory-cloud reminds us of the cloud that was a symbol of God leading his people through the desert (see Exodus 13:21). It was from within this cloud that God spoke to Moses ‘that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after’(Exodus 19:9). Luke is portraying Jesus as the new Moses to whom we must listen.

## The mystery of a unique intimacy

Luke reminds us that we can come to know the Father only if we listen to and are in communion with the Son: only if we share in his prayer:

‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’(Luke 10:21-24).

The 'Our Father' (see the final reflection n. 48).

'Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them,

"When you pray, say: Father

hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”(Luke 11:1-13).

## Jesus' final days

At Lazarus's tomb, Jesus assured those around that his Father always hears his prayer (see John 11:41-42).



At the Last Supper we are invited into the depths of Jesus' intimacy with God. While offering himself to his friends as he offers the broken bread and the poured out wine, we are told that he offered thanks to his Father (Luke 22:14-20). The Greek verb for 'offer thanks' is eucharisteô (from which our word 'Eucharist')



Facing betrayal, and the prospect of a cruel death, Jesus could still find it in his heart to look to his Father with gratitude: for life, for love, for friends. Can we learn to do the same? He sees Peter's weakness, but assures him that he has prayed for him that his faith not fail (Luke 22:32).



In the garden we see him break down. He must have felt that he had let his Father down and had failed in his mission. He asks for more time, but through his prayer he comes to the point of complete acceptance. He knows that all he is to do is to do his Father's will (Luke 22:42; see Hebrews 5:7-9; Catechism n. 2606). He knows that the way forward for him is to carry on as his Father had inspired him to do: keep loving, keep standing up for the truth; keep confronting injustice; keep doing the truth in love. That way there cannot be failure – whatever others may choose to do or not do. Assured of his Father's love, he leaves Gethsemane to face whatever may come.



**Catechism n. 2605** ‘When the hour had come for him to fulfill the Father's plan of love, Jesus allows a glimpse of the boundless depth of his filial prayer, not only before he freely delivered himself up (“Abba . . . not my will, but yours”, Luke 22:42)



**Catechism n. 2605** ‘but even in his last words on the Cross, where prayer and the gift of self are but one: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"(Luke 23:34); "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise"(Luke 23:43), "Woman, behold your son"—"Behold your mother"(John 19:26-27); "I thirst"(John 19:28); "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"(Mark 15:34); "It is finished"(John 19:30); "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"(Luke 23:46) until the "loud cry" as he expires, giving up his spirit (see Mark 15:37; John 19:30).’

n. 2607-2615

## Jesus teaches us to pray

Jesus teaches, not only by example, but also by his words. Jesus offers a parable ‘about the need to pray always and not to lose heart’(Luke 18:1). If an unjust judge can be worn down by the persistent pleas of a widow, will not the just God respond (and respond quickly) to our persistent pleas that come from the heart?

**Catechism n. 2604** ‘The Giver is more precious than the gift; he is the “treasure”; in him abides his Son’s heart; the gift is given “as well”.’

As Jesus says in relation to another parable: ‘Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also ... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well’(Matthew 6:21, 33).

n. 2608 'Jesus insists on **conversion of heart**:

- reconciliation with another before presenting an offering at the altar
- love of enemies
- prayer for persecutors
- prayer to the Father in secret
- not heaping up empty phrases
- prayerful forgiveness from the depths of the heart
- purity of heart
- seeking the Kingdom before all else.

This filial conversion is entirely directed to the Father.'

n. 2609

‘Once committed to **conversion**, the heart learns to pray in faith. Faith is a filial adherence to God beyond what we feel and understand. It is possible because the beloved Son gives us access to the Father. He can ask us to “seek” and to “knock”, since he himself is the “way” and the “door”.’



- n. 2610** Filial boldness (confidence and courage).
- n. 2611** Readiness to do God's will
- n. 2612** Being watchful
- n. 2614** We are to ask in Jesus' name. 'Faith in the Son introduces the disciples into the knowledge of the Father, because Jesus is "the way and the truth and the life". Faith bears its fruit in love; it means keeping the word and the commandments of Jesus, in means abiding with him in the Father who, in him, so loves us that he abides with us. In this new covenant the certitude that our petitions will be heard is founded on the prayer of Jesus.'
- n. 2615** 'In the Holy Spirit, Christian prayer is a communion of love with the Father, not only through Christ but also in him: "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full"(John 16:24).'



It's no longer I  
who am living

words and music Brian Boniwell  
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It's no longer I  
who am living,  
for I have been given up  
for you.

I cannot say where I am going.  
I cannot see  
what lies before me.  
I only know my hope in you  
to light the darkness  
before me.



It's no longer I  
who am living,  
for I have been given up  
for you.

To you is my being  
surrendered.  
To you is my heart given over.  
I have been wooed  
by the One who is Love.  
I lay my life down before Him.



It's no longer I  
who am living,  
for I have been given up  
for you.

It's not for me to be anxious.  
It's not for me to be afraid.  
Why need I care  
what life has to bring,  
when I am lost  
in the heart of my Creator.