

Prayer Today: A Challenge to Overcome

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Preface by Pope Francis

NOTES ON PRAYER

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Contents

Preface by Pope Francis	5
Introduction...A Must-Read!	9
Three Authoritative Reminders on the Need for Prayer	14
Lord, Teach Us to Pray!	23
St Francis of Assisi	51
Mother Teresa of Calcutta	69

Sample

Preface by Pope Francis

Prayer is the breath of faith, its most proper expression. It's like a silent cry that comes out from the heart of whoever trusts and believes in God. It's not easy to find words to express this mystery. How many definitions of prayer we can gather from the saints and masters of spirituality, as well as from the reflections of theologians! Nevertheless, it is always and only in the simplicity of those who live prayer that prayer finds expression. The Lord, moreover, warned us that, when we pray, we must not waste words, deluding ourselves that thus we will be heard. He taught us rather to prefer silence and to entrust ourselves to the Father, who knows the kind of things we need even before we ask for them (see *Matt 6:7-8*).

The Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 is already at the door. How to prepare ourselves for this event, so important for the life of the Church, if not by means of prayer? The year 2023 was set aside for a rediscovery of the conciliar teachings, contained especially in the four Constitutions of Vatican II. It is a way of keeping alive the mandate that

the Fathers gathered at the Council wished to place in our hands, so that by means of its implementation, the Church might recover its youthful face and proclaim, in a language adapted to the men and women of our time, the beauty of the faith.

Now is the time to prepare for the year 2024, a year that will be dedicated entirely to prayer. In our own time the need is being felt more and more strongly for a true spirituality capable of responding to the great questions which confront us every day of our lives, questions caused by a global scenario that is far from serene. The ecological-economic-social crisis aggravated by the recent pandemic; wars, especially the one in Ukraine, which sow death, destruction, and poverty; the culture of indifference and waste that tends to stifle aspirations for peace and solidarity and keeps God at the margins of personal and social life... These phenomena combine to bring about a ponderous atmosphere that holds many people back from living with joy and serenity. What we need, therefore, is that our prayer should rise up with greater insistence to the Father so that He will listen to the voice of those who turn to Him, confident of being heard.

This year dedicated to prayer is in no way intended to affect the initiatives which every particular Church considers it must plan for its own daily pastoral commitment. On the contrary, it aims to recall the foundation on which the various pastoral plans should be developed and find consistency. This is a time when,

as individuals or communities, we can rediscover the joy of praying in a variety of forms and expressions. A time of consequence enabling us to increase the certainty of our faith and trust in the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the saints. In short, a year in which we can have the experience almost of a “school of prayer”, without taking anything for granted, (or at cut-rate,) especially with regard to our way of praying, but making our own every day the words of the disciples when they asked Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray” (*Luke 11:1*).

In this year we are invited to become more humble and to leave space for the prayer that flows from the Holy Spirit. It is He who knows how to put into our hearts and onto our lips the right words so that we will be heard by the Father. Prayer in the Holy Spirit is what unites us with Jesus and allows us to adhere to the will of the Father. The Spirit is the interior Teacher who indicates the way to follow. Thanks to Him the prayer of even just one person can become the prayer of the entire Church, and vice versa. There is nothing like prayer according to the Spirit to make Christians feel united as the one family of God. It is God who knows how to recognise everyone’s needs and how to make those needs become the invocation and intercession of all.

I am certain that bishops, priests, deacons, and catechists will find more effective ways this year of placing prayer at the basis of the announcement of hope which the 2025 Jubilee intends to make resonate in this troubled

time. For this reason, the contribution of consecrated persons will be of great value, particularly communities of contemplative life. I hope that in all the Shrines of the world, privileged places for prayer, initiatives should be increased so that every pilgrim can find an oasis of serenity and return with a heart filled with consolation. May prayer, both personal and communal, be unceasing, without interruption, according to the will of the Lord Jesus (see *Luke* 18:1), so that the Kingdom of God may spread, and the Gospel reach every person seeking love and forgiveness.

As an aid for this Year of Prayer, some short texts have been produced which, with their simple language, will make possible entry into the various dimensions of prayer. I thank the authors for their contribution and willingly place into your hands these 'notes' so that everyone can rediscover the beauty of trusting in the Lord with humility and joy. And don't forget to pray also for me.

Vatican City
27 September 2023

Franciscus

Introduction... A Must-Read!

As a preface, or rather, as an introduction to these pages on the fascinating and quite timely theme of prayer, I thought I would present to you the account of a singular experience of the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. In 1962 he published his first novel and gave it the title *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

It was the euphoric period of de-Stalinisation. Khrushchev himself, before an assembly of intellectuals, judged Solzhenitsyn's work as one of those which "help the people in their struggle for the new society, unite and strengthen their forces."

The Russian writer's narrative tells us of one of the 3,653 days that Ivan Denisovich Shukhov must spend in the concentration camp, while pointing out that for the poor convict it is "a beautiful, almost happy day."

It is easy to guess that this poor Ivan is the author himself, who summarises, in this "beautiful, almost happy day," all the horror that was aroused in him by that place, where "a man can be turned inside out like a

glove”; where, “after a day of wind, of frost, of hunger, a ladleful of cabbage soup counts more than the freedom of all past life and all future life and where, in the evening, the prisoner can be happy to have managed to survive.”

Forced labour, being counted and recounted like sheep, the awareness of being at the mercy of a tyrant and not of justice, lead to the spiritual annihilation of man, to the undoing of his moral sense, making him evil, cruel, ruthless and selfish, to the point that “the prisoner’s worst enemy is the prisoner himself.”

But in the gloomy night of oppression, in what seems like the dominion of wolves, a small flame shines and gives hope: it is the Faith of a prisoner who has guarded, defended and propagated it; that of the young Alyoshka, who “looks at the sun and rejoices” and “has a smile on his lips,” in spite of everything.

He has managed to bring with him, into that hell, a copy of the New Testament: the Gospels and the Letters of the Apostles; has, so far, spared it from the constant searches, and is happy. Every evening, in the dim light of the lamp that remains lit in the cold barracks, he reads and prays. Ivan listens to him, his bunk being right above his. That evening he hears him say:

“After all, Ivan Denisovich, your soul wants to pray to God. Why don’t you let it have its way?”

Shukhov gave Alyoshka a sidelong glance. His eyes were glowing like two candles. He sighed. “Because,

Alyoshka, prayers are like our written complaints. They either don't make it through, or they come back rejected."

"...Prayer must be persistent! And if you have faith, and you tell that mountain to move, it will move."

Shukhov grinned and rolled himself another cigarette. He got a light from one of the Estonians.

"Stop your chatter, Alyoshka!... In the Caucasus you prayed with your whole Baptist club, but did you move even one mountain?"

The poor yokels. They prayed to God, and what was the nuisance? Yet what they got for themselves, all of them, was twenty-five years apiece. Because that was how it was: twenty-five years for everybody.

"But we didn't pray for that, Denisovich," Alyoshka insisted. He came closer to Shukhov and held the Gospel up to his face. "The Lord has commanded us that of all earthly and passing things, we are to pray only for our daily bread: 'Give us this day our daily bread.'"

"The ration, you mean?" Shukhov said.

Alyoshka kept trying to persuade him, with his eyes more than his words, and he pressed and stroked his hand.

"Ivan Denisovich! You mustn't pray to get a package in the mail or an extra portion of gruel. What people esteem is vile to God! We must pray for the spirit, that the Lord may remove the scum of wickedness from our hearts..."

Shukhov lay down again... Lost in his own thoughts, he didn't hear what Alyoshka was mumbling about. "All in all," he finally said, "no matter how much you pray, they won't reduce your sentence. You'll have to serve it from reveille to lights out."

"But that's not to be prayed for!" Alyoshka was horrified. "What do you want with freedom? In freedom what's left of your faith will be choked with thorns! Be glad you're in prison! Here you have time to think about your soul..."

Shukhov looked up at the ceiling in silence. He himself didn't know whether he wanted freedom or not.... And where his life would be better – in here or on the outside – there was no telling....

Alyoshka wasn't lying when he said he was glad to be in prison. You could tell by his voice and his eyes....

"Look, Alyoshka," Shukhov explained, "you're onto something: Christ ordered you to prison, and for the sake of Christ you are here. But why am *I* here?"...

The question was left unanswered, interrupted by yet another nighttime check with its tally. And yet the answer had already been given: "We must pray for the spirit, that the Lord may remove the scum of wickedness from our hearts."

Wickedness is the true evil of man. To free himself from this is his task, without a doubt, but this is impossible for him without God's help: this is the great

reason why man needs prayer. And wherever we may be, we must make Alyoshka's prayer our own: "Lord, remove the scum of wickedness from our hearts!"

How beautiful, how consoling, how true and quite timely is the testimony of this prisoner of a far-flung concentration camp of immense Russia! His lesson is also valid for us at this time: and, in particular, in this year dedicated to prayer.

ANGELO CARD. COMASTRI