

THE APOSTOLATE OF PRAYER

Prayer in the Bible and the Church History

The first mention of prayer in the Bible is in Genesis 4:26: "To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD". Since then the mentions of the prayer exercises are numerous in the whole Bible. "For as many as 400 times in the Bible – said Blessed James Alberione – the command to pray is repeated" (Pauline Spirituality p. 284).

From this point on, there are countless times that the Bible presents situations and moments of prayer: from the Patriarchs (cf. for example, Gen 18:23-33; Ex 32:11-12) to the Prophets (cf. Jer 14:7-9; 20:7-18), passing through Solomon (1 Kings 8:10-16), Ezekiel (2 Kings 19:15-16, Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15)...

The Gospels, in particular that of Luke, tell us that Jesus often retired to pray to the Father, especially at the most important moments of his ministry. "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mk 1:35). "In these days he went out into the hills to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12).

"Great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed." (Lk 5:15-16). He prayed for Peter (Lk 22:32), for his own (Jn 17:9), for future disciples (Jn 17:20), even for the executioners (Lk 23:34), and continued to pray for his own in glory (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). He urges his disciples to pray and teaches them to pray (Mt 6:9-10; Lk 11:2-3), with faith (Mt 17:19-20); Mk 9,23), humility (Lk 18,9-14), perseverance (Lk 11,5-8) and trust (Lk 11,9), assuring that he will heed those who turn to him (Mt 7,7-8; 18,19; 21,22; Mk 11,24; Lk 11,9; Jn 14,13-14; 15,7. 16; 16,23-24).

And we know that God hears and answers our prayers (cf. Ps 34:17; Ps 91:15); "Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

The disciples of Jesus understood the importance of coming together for the prayer of intercession for the needs of the community: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (Acts 1,14). Later, in the same book of the Acts of the Apostles, we find the Church praying continually for Peter (Acts 12:5).

Saint Paul also recommends prayer at all times (Rom 1:10; Eph 6:18; Col 1:9; 4:2; 1Tm 3:8; 2 Tm 1:3.11) as intercession, thanksgiving and supplication (Phil 4:6; 1Tm 2:1). These are some of the many possible quotations.

Throughout the history of the Church, this conviction has been kept alive, and the examples would be endless. "First of all, then, I urge", writes Saint Paul to Timothy, "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high

positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:1-5).

The Apostolate of Prayer

On 3 December 1844, on the initiative of the Jesuit Father Francis Xavier Gautrelet, as a proposal for an apostolic spirituality for a group of scholastics (seminarians) of the Society of Jesus in Vals near Le Puy, France, “The Apostolate of Prayer” was born, which then received great encouragement from another Jesuit, Father Enrico Ramière.

The young Jesuits of Vals listened with delight to the missionaries returning from their ministry, especially from India, despite the fact that it provoked discouragement and pessimism in them, comparing so much bravery with their monotonous and boring lives. Fr Gautrelet then proposed to the young people a way to overcome their sense of frustration by becoming apostles and missionaries in their everyday life. How? By uniting with Christ everything they did during the day, through prayer.

Thus, was born “the Apostolate of Prayer”, which proposed to all Christians to collaborate in the redemptive work of Jesus through prayer, and the offering of the day, committing themselves to be available to Christ in fulfilling their daily commitments, in their case particularly their obligations as students.

It immediately spread to the various sections of the Church and by the end of the 19th century there were already 35,000 local Centres, (parish or religious institutes) with more than 13 million members spread all over the world.

Today the Apostolate of Prayer is present throughout the world - 98 countries - and has at least 45 million members; it is estimated that a hundred million people practice the Prayer of Offering. The Holy Father, Pope Francis, on 27 March 2018, established the Apostolate of Prayer – now called the “Pope’s Worldwide Network of Prayer” – as a pontifical work, with its registered office in Vatican City State.

The Apostolate of Prayer in the Pauline Tradition

Among these members, was also young James Alberione, who in 1953 completed his manuscripts compiled in *Abundantes divitiae gratiae suae*, thanking the Lord for the abundant riches of grace he had received, “especially the apostolate of prayer” to which he had subscribed since 1902.

It is understandable for a missionary spirit, like that of Fr Alberione, this proposal was extremely appealing and enthusiastic. He lived this spirit deeply in the first person and did not

hesitate to introduce it into his foundations. The inclusion of the prayer “Sacred Heart of Jesus” among the prayers to be recited every morning by the Paulines is proof of this. Then, as was habitual in him, he made some modifications to adapt it to the spirit of the specific charism; but it still remains in effect in the book of Prayers of the Pauline Family.

Everyone is well aware of the importance the prayer always had in the life and work of Blessed James Alberione. And not just any prayer, but the apostolic prayer. He was always conscious of the need to base apostolic action on the spirit of prayer. “Considering the vastness of our undertakings,” said the Founder in 1960, “we would feel overwhelmed were there to be a lack of faith in the mission entrusted to us by God. The first means, therefore, is prayer which is the outcome of great faith” (UPS III, p. 209). It was precisely from this need for prayer to sustain the apostolate that the Disciples of the Divine Master were born.

All his sons and daughters, on their way to canonization, were distinguished by the spirit of prayer: Timothy Giaccardo, Maestra Thecla, Mother Scholastica; Andrea M. Borello, Maggiorino... All of them have united with intense prayer the spirit of reparation so instilled by the Founder.

Since “spiritual energy is grace”, he affirmed that “when there were all the perfect machines in our printing house, but no electricity was available, the machines, however beautiful and new, would be useless. But it is such a small thread that you can hardly see it! Well, try doing without it, if you can!” (Exercises and retreats I, p. 110).

The importance of this apostolate of prayer was already expressed by the Founder in 1947 when he said: The apostolate of prayer precedes Baptism, conversions and obtains them. We all have the duty of this apostolate... Everyone can pray for the conversion of the world. Our word can be dead if there is no grace to enliven it (Notes for Meditations... *Ipsium Audite* I, p. 45). Thus, Fr Alberione could say without hesitating: “The person who fails to give pride of place to prayer does not merit the name of Religious; indeed, he is not...To set prayer aside in order to do more work is a makeshift solution. Work done at the expense of prayer is of no use either to us or to others; it deprives God of his due” (UPS II, p. 9).

Therefore, it can be said that the apostolate of prayer is the most important of all apostolates. And then, together with that of reparation, it has an advantage over other forms of apostolate: it is what everyone and always can do, because “among the apostolates, the simplest, easiest is that of prayer” (Sermons... 5, p. 69). Moreover, all the other various forms of apostolate can end for various reasons, because of age, illness... The apostolate of prayer can always be done, right up to the last moment of life.

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