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PRAYER

"When You Pray . . . "

Blessed Charles de Foucauld on the gift of prayer.



What makes a man give up worldly pleasures and ambitions for a life of heroic virtue and self-denial? For Charles de Foucauld, the French priest and missionary who was beatified in 2005 and whose canonization was recently approved by Pope Francis, it was the realization that he was loved by God, whose very existence he had doubted.

The discovery set his heart aflame with love. Charles developed an intense prayer life and spent four years in Nazareth, praying before the Eucharist and meditating on the events of Jesus' life. From there, he traveled to the Sahara to live as a contemplative witness to the Arab and Muslim nomads of Tamanrasset. He was living out his calling there when he was murdered in 1916.

The following Scripture meditations come from the prayer journal that Charles de Foucauld kept during his Nazareth years. He wrote them as aids to his prayer, with no thought of publication. In some, he wrote as if Jesus were speaking directly to him, and in others, he recorded his own observations and desires. As you read these reflections, you will see why John Paul II called Blessed Charles a teacher of prayer: he "invites all the faithful to draw from the contemplation of Christ . . . new strength to nourish their spiritual life and to proclaim the gospel to the people of our time."

### **To Pray Is to Love**

The best prayer is that in which there is the most love. The more heavily the soul's glances are charged with love, the more tenderly, the more lovingly, the soul behaves in the presence of God, the more perfect its love is.

"My children: in prayer, do what I would have you do—love, love, love. Besides the time you should devote every day solely to prayer, you should lift up your soul toward me as often as possible throughout the rest of the day. Depending on the nature of your work you may be able to do so by thinking continually of me (this is possible in certain manual occupations); or you may only be able to lift up your eyes towards me from time to time. At least, let it be as frequently as possible.

"Keep the thought of me as actively before your mind as you can and as the nature of your work permits, lifting up the eyes of your soul towards me as often and as lovingly as possible. Then you will be praying to me as ceaselessly and continually as it is possible for human beings to do.

"Prayer is primarily thinking of me with love—the more anyone loves me, the more they pray. Prayer is the attention of the soul lovingly fixed on me. The more loving that attention is, the better is the prayer."

### **How to Pray**

*Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. (Matthew 6:6)*

In addition to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and common prayer, when our Lord stands in the midst of those met together to pray to him, we should love and practice daily private and secret prayer. No one sees us but our heavenly Father in this prayer, when we are all alone with him and no one else knows we are praying to him. This is the prayer of intimacy, a delightful secret in which we freely unfold our hearts, far from all prying eyes, at the knees of our Father.

*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want. (Matthew 26:39)*

Our Lord is teaching us to pray. First, we should ask God for what we want, doing so with the simplicity of a child asking something of its father. Then we should add: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

This then is what we must do. There must be nothing indirect in our prayers. They must be completely simple. We should ask for what our hearts desire, without wasting time wondering if we should do better to ask for something different. We must pray straightforwardly in all simplicity, asking for what we want and adding, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

*He went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)*

Our Lord prayed alone and during the night. This was his custom. The Gospel tells us many times, "and at night he went alone to pray."

Following his example, we should love to pray at night and alone, cherishing such prayer and making a practice of it. We all find it pleasant to be alone with one we love in the midst of silence, when all the world is asleep and darkness covers the earth. How much more pleasant it is, then, to go and spend these hours alone with God. Then are the hours when, while everything is silent and asleep, while everything is drowned in darkness, I live at the feet of my God, pouring out my heart in love of him. I tell him I love him, while he tells me I shall never love him as much as he loves me, however great my love may be. Those nights are blessed which my God allows me to spend in intimate communication with him. O my Lord and my God, let me realize the value of such moments as fully as I should! Make me "delight in the Lord" (Psalm 37:4).

*Sit here while I go over there and pray. (Matthew 26:36)*

What did our Lord do during the last hours before his arrest and the beginning of his passion? He went apart alone to pray. So we, too, when we have a grave trial to undergo or danger or suffering to face, should spend the last moments, the last hour separating us from it, in solitary prayer. When we are faced with any serious happening in our lives, this is what we should do. We should prepare ourselves for it, seeking strength, enlightenment, and grace to behave well in it by using the last hour, the last moment between us and it in prayer, in praying alone.

*In his anguish he prayed more earnestly. (Luke 22:44)*

O God, I beseech you, let us follow your example. The more we suffer and the more we are tempted, the more we should pray. In prayer is our only help, our only strength, our only consolation. We pray that the pain and power of temptation will not paralyze our prayer. The devil puts forth all his strength to stop it at such times. But far from yielding to this temptation, far from yielding to the natural weakness that would like to see the soul absorbed in its pain and conscious of nothing else, we must look for our Savior who is there, close to us, and we must talk with him. He is before us, looking lovingly upon us, straining to hear us, telling us to speak to him, telling us that he is there, that he loves us. . . . Let us gaze on him, talking to him constantly, as one does when one is in love, as our Lord is doing now to his Father. The deeper into agony we fall, the more necessary it is for us to throw ourselves into the embrace of our Beloved, pressing ourselves against him in uninterrupted prayer.

*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. (Luke 23:46)*

This was the last prayer of our Master, our Beloved. May it also be ours. And may it be not only that of our last moments, but also of our every moment. "Father, I put myself in your hands. Father, I abandon myself to you, I entrust myself to you. Father, do with me as it pleases you. Whatever you do with me, I will thank you for it. I put myself unreservedly in your hands. I put myself in your hands with infinite confidence, because you are my Father."