

Conversion Is Not Possible Without Prayer

Following is the text of Pope John Paul II's address given at the general audience on March 14.

During Lent, the words prayer, fasting and almsgiving often reach our ears. We are accustomed to think of them as pious and good works which every Christian must carry out, particularly in this period.



This way of thinking is correct but not complete. Prayer, almsgiving and fasting need to be understood more deeply, if we want to integrate them more thoroughly into our lives and not to consider them just as passing practices which demand only something momentary from us or deprive us of something only momentarily. With this way of thinking we would not yet arrive at the real meaning and the real

power that prayer, fasting and almsgiving have in the process of conversion to God and of our spiritual development. One keeps pace with the other. We mature spiritually by being converted to God, and conversion takes place by means of prayer, as also by means of fasting and almsgiving, adequately understood.

It should perhaps be said at once that it is not a question here only of momentary practices, but of constant attitudes which give our conversion to God a lasting form. Lent as a liturgical time lasts only 40 days a year; we must, on the other hand, strain always towards God; this means that it is necessary to be continually converted. Lent must leave a strong and lasting mark on our lives. It must renew in us awareness of our union with Jesus Christ, who makes us see the necessity of conversion and indicates to us the ways to reach it. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving are precisely the ways that Christ indicated to us.

In the following meditations we will try to glimpse how deeply these ways penetrate into man: what they mean for him. The Christian must understand the real meaning of these ways if he wants to follow them.

First, then, *the way of prayer*. I say first because I wish to speak of it before the others. But saying first I want to add today that in the complete work of our conversion, that is of our spiritual development, prayer is not isolated from the other two ways which the Church defines with the evangelical term of "fasting and almsgiving." The way of prayer is perhaps more familiar to us. We understand more easily, perhaps, that, without it, it is not possible to be converted to God, to remain in union with him, in that communion which makes us mature spiritually. There are certainly among you who are listening now a great many who have their own experience of prayer, who know its

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various aspects, and can make others share it. We learn to pray, in fact, by praying. The Lord Jesus taught us to pray first of all by himself praying: "all night he continued in prayer;" another day, as St. Matthew writes, "he went upon the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone." Before his passion and death he went to the Mount of Olives and encouraged the apostles to pray; and he himself knelt down and prayed. A prey to anguish, he prayed more intensely. Only once, when requested by the disciples "Lord, teach us to pray," he gave them the simplest and the deepest content of his prayer: the "Our Father."

Since it is impossible to include in a short speech all that can be said or has been written on the subject of prayer, I would like to stress only one thing today. All of us, when we pray, *are disciples of Christ*, not because we repeat the words that he once taught us — sublime words, the complete content of prayer — we are the disciples of Christ even when we do not use these words. We are his disciples only *because we pray*: "Listen to the Master praying; learn to pray. He prayed, in fact for this reason, to teach people to pray," St. Augustine affirms. And a modern author writes: "Since the end of the way of prayer is lost in God, and no one knows the way but the One who comes from God, Jesus Christ, it is necessary . . . to fix our eyes on him only. He is the way, the truth and the life. Only he has travelled along the way in both directions. We must put our hand in his and start out."

To pray means speaking to God — I would venture to say even more — to pray means finding oneself again in that One eternal Word through which the Father speaks, and which speaks to the Father. This Word became flesh, so that it would be easier for us to find our selves again in him even with our human word of prayer. This word may sometimes be very imperfect, sometimes we may even lack it, but this incapacity of our human words is continually completed in the Word that became flesh in order to speak

to the Father with the fulness of that mystical union which every man who prays forms with him, which all those who pray form with him. In this particular union with the Word lies the greatness of prayer, its dignity, and in some way, its definition.

It is necessary, above all, to understand clearly the fundamental greatness and dignity of prayer. The prayer of every man. And also of the whole praying Church. The Church reaches, so to speak, as far as prayer, wherever there is a man who prays.

It is necessary to pray taking this essential concept of prayer as our basis. When the disciples asked the Lord Jesus, "Teach us to pray," he replied with the words of the prayer Our Father, thus creating a concrete model that is at the same time universal. In fact, all that can and must be said to the Father is contained in those seven requests, which we all know by heart. There is such a simplicity in them, that even a child can learn them, and also such a depth that a whole life can be spent meditating on the meaning of each of them. Is this not so? Does not each of them speak to us, one after the other, of what is essential for our existence, directed completely to God, to the Father? Does it not speak to us of our daily bread, of forgiveness of our trespasses as we also forgive them, and at the same time of preservation from temptation and deliverance from evil?

When in answer to the request of the disciples, "Teach us to pray," Christ utters the words of his prayer he teaches not only the words but he teaches that in *our talk with the Father there must be complete sincerity and full openness*. Prayer must embrace everything that is part of our life. It cannot be something additional or marginal. Everything must find in it its true voice. Even everything that burdens us; things of which we are ashamed; what by its very nature separates us from God. This above all. It is prayer that always, first of all, and essentially, demolishes the barrier which sin and evil may have raised between us and God.

Through prayer, the whole world finds its rightful reference: that is, reference to God: my interior world and also the objective world, the one in which we live, and as we know it. If we are converted to God everything in us is directed to him. Prayer is precisely the expression of this being directed to God; and that is, at the same time, our continual conversion: our life.

Holy Scripture says:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

More Opinions

The Purpose Of Baptism

Editor:

Father Hohman (3-21) explains that the statements in the first five chapters of the Book of Genesis cannot all be taken literally. Catholics do not consider that it is necessary to believe that the universe was created in just six days. Pope Leo XIII gave us the guidelines when he declared that the Scriptures were given to teach us about divinely revealed truth rather than natural truths which can be known through the experimental sciences.

On Adam and Eve, the Church teaches very clearly that there were a first man and woman, whether they are spoken of "Adam and Eve" or "Jim Jones" and "Mary Brown." There could hardly have been second man and woman if there had not been a first man and woman. Science clearly tells us that all human beings

form one human family. Members of the human family are readily distinguishable from the animal creation because of the spiritual attributes of reason and understanding.

Evolution has not been established as a proven fact in relation to the human race but if ever it can be shown that man physically has developed from a lower form of life, it will still be quite obvious that there must have been a divine intervention at some time to confer on man those attributes which constitute him a human being; namely, reason and understanding.

It is not necessary to believe that the first sin was committed by literally eating the fruit of a particular tree which grew in a particular spot but it is readily understandable that after the first man had been endowed by God with reason and understanding, he in some way acted against the natural law of his being and thus committed the first sin — original sin. In some way

woman became involved in this sin thus involving the "human race."

The guilt of original sin is quite different from that of personal, or actual, sin. When God endowed man with understanding, thus creating him a responsible being, he also endowed him with a supernatural life, a sharing in his own divine life — sanctifying grace. Man through his disobedience lost this gift of the divine life. As a result we are born into the world as merely human children, not God's children. This is disgrace. We call it the stain of original sin. Because we do not share the divine life at the moment of birth, it is essential that we regain this divine life if we are to live with God as his children. Normally, this is done through baptism of water. The Lord has said, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5.)

The Church has always taught that children who die without baptism enjoy a natural happiness but do not share the Beatific Vision, i.e., union with God. If a

child dies without the life of God in its soul, there is no way in which that divine life can be attained after the physical death of the body. It would seem that might be the reason instituted the Sacrament of Baptism.

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Dogmas Quoted

Editor:

Re The Open Window (3-21), I would like to express the opinion of the Catholic Church regarding our first parents, Adam and Eve, and other matters related to original sin.

1. "If anyone says that the entire human race did not take its origin from one single parent, Adam, let him be anathema." (Canon 4, Ch. 2, Schema of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Principal Mysteries of the Faith.)

2. On the first three chapters of Genesis "the literal historical sense may

not be questioned." (The Biblical Commission, June 30, 1909.)

3. "Original sin is the result of a sin committed, in actual historical fact, by an individual man named Adam." (Humani Generis, Denzinger 2328.)

4. The Council of Trent, in the Decree on Original Sin, defined the following:

a. "The first man Adam immediately lost the justice and holiness . . . in the Garden of Paradise." (Ch. 1, P Denzinger 2328.)

b. "If anyone asserts that Adam's sin was injurious only to Adam and not to his descendants . . . let him be anathema." (Ch. 2, Denzinger 789.)

c. "If anyone says that this sin of Adam, which is one by origin and which is communicated to all men by propagation not by imitation, and which is in all men and proper to each, is taken away either through the powers of human nature or through a remedy other than the merit of the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ who reconciled us to God in his blood, having

become for us justice, and sanctification, and redemption; or, if anyone says that, through the sacrament of Baptism rightly conferred in the form of the Church, this merit of Christ Jesus is not applied to adults and to infants alike: let him be anathema." (Ch. 3, Denzinger 790.)

d. "If anyone denies that newly born infants are to be baptized, even though they may have been born of baptized parents, or say that they are indeed baptized for the remission of sins but that they do not contract from Adam any original sin that must be expiated in the bath of regeneration to obtain eternal life: let him be in anathema." (Ch. 4, Denzinger 791.)

I sincerely hope that the reader fully realizes that these excerpts from The Decree of Original Sin are definitions, and are not open for further discussion lest they lose the reward of eternal life guaranteed solely through the Ark of salvation, The Holy Roman Catholic Church.

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