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Retreat at the Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word  
Irondale, Alabama  
“Pope Benedict XVI and Prayer”  
March 16-18, 2012

Saturday morning conference

1. Prayer in the life of Jesus — Jesus teaches us how to pray in four principle ways:
  - a. By his own example of constant prayer. We see him praying:
    - i. before his Father's witness to him during his baptism, for 40 days in the desert.
    - ii. before his Transfiguration,
    - iii. before his own fulfillment of the Father's plan of love by his Passion.
    - iv. before his election and call of the Twelve,
    - v. before Peter's confession of him as "the Christ of God,"
    - vi. before his healing of Lazarus,
    - vii. that the faith of the chief of the Apostles may not fail when tempted.
    - viii. Jesus' prayer before the events of salvation that the Father has asked him to fulfill is a humble and trusting commitment of his human will to the loving will of the Father.
    - ix. Jesus says to us here, as he does in many other circumstances, “Follow me!”
  - b. By his own prayers said aloud and recorded to God the Father
  - c. By what he revealed to us about the proper dispositions to pray:
    - i. Conversion of heart
    - ii. Reconciliation with others
    - iii. Praying to the Father in secret
    - iv. Not multiplying words — Lord, Lord — but doing the will of the Father
    - v. Prayerful forgiveness
    - vi. Purity of heart
    - vii. Seeking the kingdom of God above all else
    - viii. Confidence
    - ix. Perseverance
    - x. Humility
    - xi. Praying in his name
  - d. By the prayer he taught us when the disciples asked him to teach us how to pray, by the Our Father.
2. In his catechesis on prayer, Pope Benedict focuses fundamentally on the second of these four ways that Jesus teaches us how to pray. Since he has always strived to have us enter into the personal dynamism of the one praying, he wants to help us enter into Jesus’ prayer, because it is Jesus through his incarnation — as we talked about earlier — who enters us into the eternal internal dialogue of the persons of the Blessed Trinity. Entering into Jesus’ prayer is the point of Christian prayer.
3. Cardinal Ratzinger had said in a work entitled *Journey toward Easter*, “[Since] prayer is central to the person of Jesus, sharing his prayer is the prerequisite for knowing and understanding him.”
4. In his introduction to his cycle on Jesus’ prayer, he said:
  - a. I would like to begin to look at Jesus, at his prayer that flows through the whole of his life like a secret channel that waters existence, relationships and actions and guides them, with progressive firmness, to the total gift of self in accordance with the loving plan of God the Father. Jesus is also our Teacher in prayer, indeed he is our active and fraternal support on every occasion that we address the Father. Truly, “prayer”, as it is summed up in a heading in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “is fully revealed and realized in Jesus” (nn. 541-547).
5. Difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus
  - a. (Journey toward Easter) To know someone on a personal basis requires an ability to enter into the other, to be sensitive and responsive to the revelation the other makes of him/herself. Jesus often refers to his intimacy with the Father: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him” (Mt. 11: 27). There must be a “sympathy” (a feeling with) a spiritual connaturality that opens the way to understanding

the other. Mere discursive knowledge will not be sufficient for this. In entering into Jesus' prayer our prayer becomes the vehicle by which we enter into the mind and heart of Christ, his revealing the Father to us.

- b. Ratzinger assures us: "Effective advances in Christology [in truly knowing the mystery that is Jesus Christ] cannot ever derive from purely academic theology...important as academic studies are... [they] are not enough: we also need the theology of the Saints, the theology which derives from a concrete experience of divine reality. All the effective advances in theological knowledge have their origin in the eye of love, in the strength of its gaze ...**Coexistence with [Jesus'] person...derives from participation in his prayer** [and] constitutes that wider coexistence which Paul terms 'the body of Christ'. Therefore the Church, the 'body of Christ', is the true subject of knowledge of Jesus.
6. In his catechesis on the Prayer of Jesus, which concluded ten days ago, he focused on various episodes in Jesus' prayer:
    - a. His prayer at the beginning of his public ministry
    - b. His "cry of exultation," giving the Father praise for revealing things to the childlike
    - c. His prayers for miracles of healing
    - d. His prayer instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper
    - e. His priestly prayer on Holy Thursday
    - f. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane
    - g. His prayer from the Cross
    - h. His prayer in silence
  7. We'll take them in turn, enter into Jesus' prayer, so that we come to know him and learn interiorly from him how to remain in his prayer.
  8. Jesus' prayer at the beginning of his public ministry
    - a. "When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (Lk 3:21-22). The fact that he "was praying", in conversation with the Father, illuminated the act he had carried out along with so many of his people who had flocked to the banks of the Jordan. By praying, he gave his action, baptism, an exclusively personal character.
    - b. At the moment when, through prayer, Jesus was experiencing the depth of his own sonship and God's fatherhood (cf. Lk 3:22b), the Holy Spirit, whom he was to pour out after being raised on the Cross (cf. Jn 1:32-34; 7:37-39), descended upon him (cf. Lk 3:22a) and guided him in his mission that he might illuminate the Church's action. In prayer, Jesus lived in uninterrupted contact with the Father in order to fulfill completely his plan of love for mankind.
    - c. In recounting the episode of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers (cf. Lk 2:42-52), Luke the Evangelist makes us understand that Jesus, who was praying after his baptism in the Jordan, had a long-standing habit of intimate prayer to God the Father.
    - d. Jesus did not begin to pray after emerging from the waters of the Jordan, but continued in his ongoing, customary relationship with the Father; and it was in this close union with the Father that he stepped out of the hidden life in Nazareth into his public ministry.
    - e. In the Gospel narrative, the settings of Jesus' prayer are always placed half-way between insertion into his people's tradition and the newness of a unique personal relationship with God. The "lonely place" (cf. Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16), to which he often withdrew, "the hills" he climbs in order to pray (cf. Lk 6:12; 9:28), "the night" that affords him solitude (cf. Mk 1:35; 6:46-47; Lk 6:12) recall moments in the process of God's revelation in the Old Testament, pointing out the continuity of his saving plan. Yet, at the same time, they mark moments of special importance for Jesus who fits consciously into this plan, completely faithful to the Father's will
    - f. **In our prayer too we must learn, increasingly, to enter this history of salvation of which Jesus is the summit, to renew before God our personal decision to open ourselves to his will, to ask him for the strength to conform our will to his will, throughout our life, in obedience to his design of love for us.**

- g. Jesus' prayer penetrates all the phases of his ministry and all his days. Difficulties do not obstruct it. The Gospels, on the contrary, allow us a glimpse of Jesus' habit of spending part of the night in prayer.
  - h. When decisions became urgent and complicated his prayers grew longer and more intense. Just before he chose the Twelve Apostles, for example, Luke emphasizes the nocturnal duration of Jesus' preparatory prayer: "In those days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: (Lk 6:12-13).
  - i. In looking at Jesus' prayers, a question must arise within us: how do I pray? How do we pray? How much time do I give to my relationship with God? Are people today given sufficient education and formation in prayer? And who can teach it?
  - j. Jesus' exemplary experience itself shows that his prayer, enlivened by the fatherhood of God and by communion with the Spirit, was deepened and prolonged in faithful practice, up to the Garden of Olives and to the Cross.
  - k. **Today Christians are called to be witnesses of prayer** precisely because our world is often closed to the divine horizon and to the hope that brings the encounter with God. **In deep friendship with Jesus and living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows on God's Heaven.** Indeed, by taking the way of prayer, attaching no importance to human things, we can help others to take it. For Christian prayer too it is true that, in journeying on, new paths unfold.
  - l. Dear brothers and sisters, **let us train ourselves in an intense relationship with God**, with prayer that is not occasional but constant, full of faith, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus taught us. And let us ask him to enable us to communicate to people who are close to us, to those whom we meet on our way, the joy of the encounter with the Lord, Light for our existence.
9. Cry of Exultation
- a. Luke 10:21 At that very moment he rejoiced [in] the holy Spirit and said, "I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. 22 All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him."
  - b. Jesus addresses God by calling him "Father". This word expresses Jesus' awareness and certainty of being "the Son" in intimate and constant communion with him, and this is the central focus and source of every one of Jesus' prayers. We see it clearly in the last part of the hymn, which illuminates the entire text. Jesus said: "All things have been delivered 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 any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Lk 10:22). Jesus was therefore affirming that only "the Son" truly knows the Father.
  - c. All the knowledge that people have of each other — we all experience this in our human relationships — entails involvement, a certain inner bond between the one who knows and the one who is known, at a more or less profound level: we cannot know anyone without a communion of being. In the *Cry of Exultation* — as in all his prayers — Jesus shows that true knowledge of God presupposes communion with him. Only by being in communion with the other can I begin to know him; and so it is with God: only if I am in true contact, if I am in communion with him, can I also know him.
  - d. The name "Father" is followed by a second title, "Lord of heaven and earth". With these words, Jesus sums up faith in creation.
  - e. Let us now ask ourselves: to whom does the Son want to reveal God's mysteries? At the beginning of the Hymn Jesus expresses his joy because the Father's will is to keep these things hidden from the learned and the wise and to reveal them to little ones (cf. Lk 10:21). Thus in his prayer, Jesus manifests his communion with the Father's decision to disclose his mysteries to the **simple of heart**: the Son's will is one with the Father's.
  - f. Divine revelation is not brought about in accordance with earthly logic, which holds that cultured and powerful people possess important knowledge and pass it on to simpler people, to little ones.

**God used a quite different approach: those to whom his communication was addressed were, precisely, “babes”. This is the Father’s will, and the Son shares it with him joyfully.**

- g. Jesus, in this “Cry of Exultation”, **expresses his will to involve in his own filial knowledge of God all those whom the Father wishes to become sharers in** it; and those who welcome this gift are the **“little ones”**.
- i. But what does “being little” and simple mean? What is the “littleness” that opens man to filial intimacy with God so as to receive his will? What must the fundamental attitude of our prayer be? Let us look at “The Sermon on the Mount”, in which Jesus says: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). It is purity of heart that permits us to recognize the face of God in Jesus Christ; it is having a simple heart like the heart of a child, free from the presumption of those who withdraw into themselves, thinking they have no need of anyone, not even God.
  - h. In Matthew, preceded by “blessed is he who takes no offense at me” and the disbelief of the lake cities where his miracles were done. In Luke, during the joy of the 72 who had accepted Jesus’ word and mission.
  - i. Luke the Evangelist introduces the prayer with the annotation: Jesus **“rejoiced in the Holy Spirit”** (Lk 10:21). Jesus rejoiced from the depths of his being, in what counted most: his unique communion of knowledge and love with the Father, the fullness of the Holy Spirit. By involving us in his sonship, Jesus invites us too to open ourselves to the light of the Holy Spirit, since — as the Apostle Paul affirms — “we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words... according to the will of God” (Rom 8:26-27), and reveals the Father’s love to us.
  - j. In Matthew’s Gospel, following the *Cry of Exultation*, we find one of Jesus’ most heartfelt appeals: **“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”** (Mt 11:28). Jesus asks us to go to him, for he is true Wisdom, to him who is “gentle and lowly in heart”. He offers us “his yoke”, the way of the wisdom of the Gospel which is neither a doctrine to be learned nor an ethical system but rather a Person to follow: he himself, the Only Begotten Son in perfect communion with the Father.
  - k. Dear brothers and sisters, we have experienced for a moment the **wealth of this prayer of Jesus**. With the gift of his Spirit we too can turn to God in prayer with the confidence of children, calling him by the name Father, “Abba”. However, **we must have the heart of little ones**, of the “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3) in order to recognize that we are not self-sufficient, that we are unable to build our lives on our own but need God, that we need to encounter him, to listen to him, to speak to him. Prayer opens us to receiving the gift of God, his wisdom, which is Jesus himself, in order to do the Father’s will in our lives and thus to find rest in the hardships of our journey.
10. Jesus praying in healing
- a. This is a form of prayer which, once again, demonstrates **his unique relationship of knowledge and communion with the Father**, while Jesus lets himself be involved with deep human participation in the hardships of his friends.
  - b. Healing of deaf mute
    - i. The central point of this episode however is the fact that when Jesus, was about to work the healing, he directly sought his relationship with the Father. Indeed the account relates that “looking up to heaven, he sighed” (v. 34). Jesus’ attention and treatment of the sick man are linked by a profound attitude of prayer addressed to God. Moreover, his sighing is described with a verb that, in the New Testament, indicates the aspiration to something good which is still lacking (cf. Rom 8:23).
    - ii. Thus, as a whole, the narrative shows that it was his human involvement with the sick man that prompted Jesus to pray. His unique relationship with the Father and his identity as the Only Begotten Son surface once again. God’s healing and beneficial action become present in him, through his Person. It is not by chance that the people’s last remark after the miracle has been performed is reminiscent of the evaluation of the Creation at the beginning of the Book of Genesis: “He has done all things well” (Mk 7:37). Prayer clearly entered the healing action of Jesus as he looked up to heaven. The power that healed the deaf mute was certainly

elicited by compassion for him but came from recourse to the Father. These two relationships interact: the human relationship of compassion with the man enters into the relationship with God, and thus becomes healing.

- c. Healing of Lazarus — In the Johannine narrative of the raising of Lazarus this same dynamic is testified by an even greater proof (cf. Jn 11:1-44) Here too are interwoven, on the one hand, Jesus' bond with a friend and with his suffering and, on the other, his filial relationship with the Father.
- i. The event, from the outset, is interpreted by Jesus in relation to his own identity and mission and to the glorification that awaits him. In fact on hearing of Lazarus' illness he commented: "The illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (Jn 11:4).
  - ii. Jesus also hears the news of his friend's death with deep human sadness but always with a clear reference to his relationship with God and with the mission that God has entrusted to him; he says: "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe" (Jn 11:14-15). The moment of Jesus' explicit prayer to the Father at the tomb was the natural outlet for all that had happened, which took place in the **double key of his friendship with Lazarus and his filial relationship with God.**
  - iii. Here too, the two relationships go hand in hand. "And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me'" (Jn 11:41): **it was a eucharist.** The sentence shows that Jesus did not cease, even for an instant, his prayer of petition for Lazarus' life. This prayer continued, indeed, it reinforced his ties with his friend and, at the same time strengthened Jesus' decision to remain in communion with the Father's will, with his plan of love in which Lazarus' illness and death were to be considered as a place for the manifestation of God's glory.
  - iv. In reading this account each one of us is called to understand that in our prayers of petition to the Lord we must not expect an immediate fulfillment of what we ask, of our own will. **Rather, we must entrust ourselves to the Father's will,** interpreting every event in the perspective of his glory, of his plan of love, which to our eyes is often mysterious. For this reason we too must join in our prayers, petitions, praise and thanksgiving, even when it seems to us that God is not responding to our real expectations.
  - v. Abandoning ourselves to God's love that always precedes and accompanies us is one of the basic attitudes for our dialogue with him. On Jesus' prayer in the account of the raising of Lazarus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments: "Jesus' prayer, characterized by thanksgiving, reveals to us how to ask: before the gift is given, Jesus commits himself to the One who in giving gives himself. 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' (cf. Mt 6:21, 33)" (n. 2604). **To me this seems very important: before the gift is given, committing ourselves to the One who gives. The Giver is more precious than the gift. For us too, therefore, over and above what God bestows on us when we call on him, the greatest gift that he can give us is his friendship, his presence and his love. He is the precious treasure to ask for and to preserve for ever.**
  - vi. The prayer that Jesus prays as the rock was rolled away from the entrance to Lazarus' tomb thus has a special and unexpected development. In fact, after thanking God the Father, he adds: "I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn 11:42). With his prayer Jesus wanted to lead people back to faith, to total trust in God and in his will. And he wanted to show that this God who so loved man and the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son (cf. Jn 3:16). He is the God of Life, the God who brings hope and can reverse humanly impossible situations. Therefore a believer's trusting prayer is a living testimony of God's presence in the world, of his concern for humankind, of his action with a view to bringing about his plan of salvation.
  - vii. Jesus' two prayers on which we have meditated just now and which accompany the healing of the deaf mute and the raising of Lazarus, reveal that the deep connection between the love of God and love of one's neighbour must also come into our own prayer. In Jesus, true

God and true man, attention to others, especially if they are needy and suffering, compassion at the sight of the sorrow of a family who were his friends, led him to address the Father in that fundamental relationship which directed his entire life. However, the opposite is also true: communion with the Father, constant dialogue with him, spurred Jesus to be uniquely attentive to practical human situations so as to bring God's comfort and love to them. Human relationships lead us toward the relationship with God, and the relationship with God leads us back to our neighbour.

viii. Dear brothers and sisters, our prayer opens the door to God who teaches us to come out of ourselves constantly, to make us capable of being close to others to bring them comfort, hope and light, especially at moments of trial. May the Lord grant us to be capable of increasingly more intense prayer, in order to strengthen our personal relationship with God the Father, to open our heart to the needs of those beside us and to feel the beauty of being "sons in the Son", together with a great many brothers and sisters.

d. Prayer of the Last Supper

- i. Jesus looks at his Passion, death and Resurrection with full awareness. He wishes to spend with his disciples this Supper, that has a quite special character and is different from other meals; it is his Supper, in which he gives something entirely new: himself. In this way Jesus celebrates his Pasch, anticipating his Cross and his Resurrection.
- ii. What then is the key to this Supper? It is in the gestures of breaking bread, of distributing it to his followers and of sharing the cup of wine, with the words that accompany them, and in the context of prayer in which they belong; it is the institution of the Eucharist, it is the great prayer of Jesus and of the Church.
- iii. The New Testament traditions of the Institution of the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-25; Lk 22: 14-20; Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29), point to the prayer that introduces Jesus' acts and words over the bread and over the wine, by using two parallel and complementary verbs. **Paul and Luke speak of *eucaristia*/thanksgiving:** "And he took bread, and when *he had given thanks* he broke it and gave it to them" (Lk 22:19).
- iv. Mark and Matthew, however, emphasize instead the aspect of ***eulogia*/blessing:** "he took bread, and *blessed*, and broke it, and gave it to them" (Mk 14:22). Both these Greek terms, *eucaristeîn* and *enlogeîn*, refer to the Hebrew *berakha*, that is, the great prayer of thanksgiving and blessing of Israel's tradition which inaugurated the important feasts. The two different Greek words indicate the two intrinsic and complementary orientations of this prayer. *Berakha*, in fact, means primarily thanksgiving and praise for the gift received that rise to God: at the Last Supper of Jesus, it is a matter of bread — made from the wheat that God causes to sprout and grow in the earth — and wine, produced from the fruit that ripens on the vine. **This prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is raised to God returns as a blessing that comes down from God upon the gift and enriches it.** Thanking and praising God thus become blessing and the offering given to God returns to man blessed by the Almighty. The words of the Institution of the Eucharist fit into this context of prayer; in them the praise and blessing of the *berakha* become the blessing and transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.
- v. Jesus offers and communicates himself in the bread and in the wine. But how can all this happen? How can Jesus give himself at that moment? Jesus knows that his life is about to be taken from him in the torture of the cross.... With the gift of the bread and of the wine that he offers at the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates his death and his Resurrection, bringing about what he had said in his Good Shepherd Discourse: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:17-18). He therefore offers in anticipation the life that will be taken from him and in this way transforms his violent death into a free act of giving himself for others and to others. The violence he suffered is transformed into an active, free and redemptive sacrifice.

- vi. In contemplating Jesus' actions and words on that night, we see clearly that it is in this close and constant relationship with the Father that he carries out his act of bequeathing to his followers and to each one of us the sacrament of love, the "Sacramentum caritatis".
- vii. Luke the Evangelist has retained a further precious element of the events of the Last Supper that enables us to see the moving depth of Jesus' prayer for his own on that night: his attention to each one. Starting with the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, Jesus arrives at the Eucharistic gift, the gift of himself, and, while he is giving the crucial sacramental reality, he addresses Peter. At the end of the meal, he says: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:31-32). Jesus' prayer, when his disciples were about to be put to the test, helps them to overcome their weakness in their effort to understand that the way of God passes through the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection, anticipated in the offering of the bread and the wine. The Eucharist is the food of pilgrims that also becomes strength for those who are weary, worn-out and bewildered. And the prayer was specially for Peter, so that once he had turned again he might strengthen his brethren in the faith.
- viii. Dear brothers and sisters, by participating in the Eucharist, we experience in an extraordinary manner the prayer that Jesus prayed and prays ceaselessly for every person so that the evil which we all encounter in life may not get the upper hand and that the transforming power of Christ's death and Resurrection may act within us.
- ix. In the Eucharist the Church responds to Jesus' commandment: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22,19; cf. 1 Cor 11, 24-26); she repeats the prayer of thanksgiving and praise and, with it, the words of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Our Eucharists are: being attracted at this moment of prayer, being united ever anew to Jesus' prayer. From the outset, the Church has understood the words of consecration as part of the prayer prayed together to Jesus; as a central part of the praise filled with gratitude, through which the fruits of the earth and the work of man come to us anew, given by God as the Body and Blood of Jesus, as the self-giving of God himself in his Son's self-emptying love (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part Two, p. 128). Participating in the Eucharist, nourishing ourselves with the Flesh and Blood of the Son of God, we join our prayers to that of the Paschal Lamb on his supreme night, so that our life may not be lost despite our weakness and our unfaithfulness, but be transformed. Dear friends, let us ask the Lord that after being duly prepared, also with the sacrament of Penance, our participation in his Eucharist, indispensable to Christian life, may always be the highest point in all our prayer. Let us ask that we too, profoundly united in his offering to the Father, may transform our own crosses into a free and responsible sacrifice of love for God and for our brethren.
- e. Priestly Prayer of Jesus
  - i. On that night Jesus addresses the Father at the moment when he is offering himself. He, priest and victim, prays for himself, for the Apostles and for all those who will believe in him and for the Church of all the time (cf. Jn 17:20).
  - ii. The prayer that Jesus prays for himself is the request for his glorification, for his "exaltation" in his "Hour". In fact, it is more than a prayer of petition, more than the declaration of his full willingness to enter, freely and generously, into the plan of God the Father, which is fulfilled in his being consigned and in his death and resurrection. This "Hour" began with Judas' betrayal (cf. 13:31) and was to end in the ascension of the Risen Jesus to the Father (Jn 20:17).
  - iii. Jesus comments on Judas' departure from the Upper Room with these words: "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified" (Jn 13:31). It is not by chance that he begins his priestly prayer saying: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you" (Jn 17:1). The glorification that Jesus asks for himself as High Priest, is the entry into full obedience to the Father, an obedience that leads to his fullest filial condition: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made" (Jn 17:5). This readiness and this request are the first act of the

- new priesthood of Jesus, which is a total gift of himself on the Cross and on the Cross itself — the supreme act of love — he is glorified because love is the true glory, the divine glory.
- iv. The **second moment of this prayer** is the intercession that Jesus makes for the disciples who have been with him. They are those of whom Jesus can say to the Father: “I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word” (Jn 17:6). This “manifesting God’s name to men” is the fulfillment of a new presence of the Father among the people, for humanity. This “manifesting” is not only a word, but is reality in Jesus; God is with us, and so his name — his presence with us, his being one of us — is “fulfilled”. This manifestation is thus realized in the Incarnation of the Word. In Jesus God enters human flesh, he becomes close in a new and unique way. And this presence culminates in the sacrifice that Jesus makes in his Pasch of death and Resurrection.
  - v. At the centre of this prayer of intercession and of expiation in favor of the disciples is the **request for consecration;** Jesus says to the Father: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (Jn 17:16-19).
  - vi. I ask: what does “consecrate” mean in this case? First of all it must be said that really only God is “consecrated” or “holy”. “To consecrate” therefore means “to transfer” a reality – a person or a thing – to become the property of God. And two complementary aspects are present in this: on the one hand, removing them from ordinary things, segregating, “setting them apart” from the context of personal human life so that they may be totally given to God; and on the other, this segregation, this transferal into God’s sphere, has the very meaning of “sending”, of mission: precisely because he or she is given to God, the reality, the consecrated person, exists “for” others, is given to others. Giving to God means no longer existing for oneself, but for everyone. Whoever, like Jesus, is segregated from the world and set apart for God with a view to a task is for this very reason, fully available to all. For the disciples the task will be to continue Jesus’ mission, to be given to God and thereby to be on mission for all. The Risen One, appearing to his disciples on Easter evening, was to say to them: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21).
  - vii. The third part of this priestly prayer extends to the end of time. In it Jesus turns to the Father in order to intercede for all those who will be brought to the faith through the mission inaugurated by the Apostles and continued in history: “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their world”. Jesus prays for the Church of all time, he also prays for us (Jn 17:20).
  - viii. The central request of the priestly prayer of Jesus dedicated to his disciples of all epochs is that of the future unity of those who will believe in him. This unity is not a worldly product. It comes exclusively from the divine unity and reaches us from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Jesus invokes a gift that comes from Heaven and has its effect — real and perceptible — on earth. He prays “that they may all be one; even as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).
  - ix. Christian unity, on the one hand, is a secret reality that is in the heart of believers. But, at the same time, it must appear with full clarity in history, it must appear so that the world may believe, it has a very practical and concrete purpose, it must appear so that all may really be one. The unity of future disciples, in being united with Jesus— whom the Father sent into the world — is also the original source of the efficacy of the Christian mission in the world.
  - x. **“We can say that the founding of the Church takes place” in the priestly prayer of Jesus...** In this very place, in the act of the Last Supper, Jesus creates the Church. “For what else is the Church, if not the community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ as the one sent by the Father”, receives his unity and is involved in Jesus’ mission to save the world, leading it to knowledge of God? Here we really find a true definition of the Church. “The Church is born from Jesus’ prayer. But this prayer is more than words; it is the act by



which he ‘sanctifies’ himself, that is to say, he ‘sacrifices’ himself for the life of the world’ (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, p. 101).

- xi. Jesus prays that his disciples may be one. By virtue of this unity, received and preserved, the Church can walk “in the world” without being “of the world” (cf. Jn 17:16) and can live the mission entrusted to her so that the world may believe in the Son and in the Father who sent him. Therefore the Church becomes the place in which the mission of Christ itself continues: to lead the “world” out of man’s alienation from God and out of himself, out of sin, so that it may return to being the world of God.
  - xii. Dear brothers and sisters, we have grasped a few elements of the great richness of the priestly prayer of Jesus, which I invite you to read and to meditate on so that it may guide us in dialogue with the Lord and teach us to pray. Let us too, therefore, in our prayers, ask God to help us to enter, more fully, into the design he has for each one of us. **Let us ask him to be “consecrated” to him**, to belong to him more and more, to be able to love others more and more, those who are near and far; **let us ask him to be able always to open our prayer to the dimensions of the world**, not closing it to the request for help with our problems but remembering our neighbour before the Lord, learning the beauty of interceding for others; let us ask him for the gift of visible unity among all believers in Christ let us pray to be ever ready to answer anyone who asks us to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15).
- f. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane
- i. Today I would like to talk about Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Olives at Gethsemane. The scenario of the Gospel narrative of this prayer is particularly significant. Jesus sets out for the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper while he is praying together with his disciples. The Evangelist Mark says: “when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mk 14:26).
  - ii. This is probably an allusion to singing one of the *Hallel* Psalms, with which thanks are given to God for the liberation of the People from slavery and his help is asked for the ever new difficulties and threats of the present. The walk to Gethsemane is punctuated by Jesus’ remarks that convey a sense of his impending death and proclaim the imminent dispersion of the disciples.
  - iii. Having reached the grove on the Mount of Olives, that night too Jesus prepares for personal prayer. However, this time something new happens: it seems that he does not want to be left alone. Jesus would often withdraw from the crowd and from the disciples themselves “to a lonely place” (Mk 1:35) or he would go up “into the hills”, St Mark says (cf. Mk 6:46). Instead at Gethsemane he invites Peter, James and John to stay closer to him. They are the disciples he called upon to be with him on the Mount of the Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2-13). This closeness of the three during his prayer in Gethsemane is important. On that night too Jesus was going to pray to the Father “apart”, for his relationship with the Father is quite unique: It is the relationship of the Only-Begotten Son. Indeed, one might say that especially on that night no one could really have come close to the Son, who presented himself to the Father with his absolutely unique and exclusive identity.
  - iv. Yet, although Jesus arrives “alone” at the place in which he was to stop and pray, he wants at least three disciples to be near him, to be in a closer relationship with him. This is a spacial closeness, a plea for solidarity at the moment in which he feels death approaching, but above all it is **closeness in prayer**, in a certain way to express harmony with him at the moment when he is preparing to do the Father’s will to the very end; and **it is an invitation to every disciple to follow him on the Way of Cross.**
  - v. Mark the Evangelist recounts: “he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them ‘*My soul is very sorrowful*, even to death; remain here, and watch” (14:33-34).
  - vi. In the words he addresses to the three, Jesus once again expresses himself in the language of the Psalms: “*My soul is very sorrowful*”, an expression borrowed from Psalm 43 (cf. Ps 43[42]:5). The firm determination “unto death” thus calls to mind a situation lived by many

of those sent by God in the Old Testament and which is expressed in their prayers. Indeed, following the mission entrusted to them frequently means encountering hostility, rejection and persecution.

- vii. What Jesus says to the three disciples whom he wants near him during his prayer at Gethsemane shows that he feels fear and anguish in that “Hour”, experiencing his last profound loneliness precisely while God’s plan is being brought about. Moreover Jesus’ fear and anguish sums up the full horror of man in the face of his own death, the certainty that it is inescapable and a perception of the burden of evil that touches our lives.
- viii. After the invitation to stay with him to watch and pray which he addresses to the three, Jesus speaks to the Father “alone”. Mark the Evangelist tells us that “going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him” (14:35). Jesus fell prostrate on the ground: a position of prayer that expresses obedience to the Father and abandonment in him with complete trust. This gesture is repeated at the beginning of the celebration of the Passion, on Good Friday, as well as in monastic profession and in the ordination of deacons, priests and bishops in order to express, in prayer, corporally too, complete entrustment to God, trust in him. Jesus then asks the Father, if this be possible, to obtain that this hour pass from him. It is not only man’s fear and anguish in the face of death, but is the devastation of the Son of God who perceives the terrible mass of evil that he must take upon himself to overcome it, to deprive it of power.
- ix. Dear friends, in prayer we too should be able to lay before God our labours, the suffering of certain situations, of certain days, the daily commitment to following him, to being Christian, and also the weight of the evil that we see within ourselves and around us, so that he may give us hope and make us feel his closeness and give us a little light on the path of life.
- x. Jesus continues his prayer: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36).
- xi. In this invocation there are three revealing passages.
  1. At the beginning we have the double use of the word with which Jesus addresses God: “Abba! Father!” (Mk 14:36a). We know well that the Aramaic word *Abbā* is the term that children use to address their father and hence that it expresses Jesus’ relationship with God, a relationship of tenderness, affection, trust and abandonment.
  2. The second element is found in the central part of the invocation: awareness of the Father’s omnipotence: “all things are possible to you”, which introduces a request in which, once again, the drama of Jesus’ human will appears as he faces death and evil: “remove this cup from me!”.
  3. However, there is the third expression in Jesus’ prayer, and it is the crucial one, in which the human will adheres to the divine will without reserve. In fact, Jesus ends by saying forcefully: “yet not what I will but what you will” (Mk 14:36c). In the unity of the divine person of the Son, the human will finds its complete fulfillment in the total abandonment of the I to the You of the Father, called Abba.
- xii. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus brings the human will back to the unreserved “yes” to God; in him the natural will is fully integrated in the orientation that the Divine Person gives it. Jesus lives his life in accordance with the centre of his Person: his being the Son of God. His human will is drawn into the I of the Son who abandons himself totally to the Father. Thus Jesus tells us **that it is only by conforming our own will to the divine one that human beings attain their true height, that they become “divine”**; only by coming out of ourselves, only in the “yes” to God, is Adam’s desire — and the desire of us all — to be completely free. It is what Jesus brings about at Gethsemane: in transferring the human will into the divine will the true man is born and we are redeemed.
- xiii. Dear brothers and sisters, every day in the prayer of the *Our Father* we ask the Lord: “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). In other words we recognize that there is a will of God with us and for us, a will of God for our life that must become every day, increasingly, the reference of our willing and of our being; we recognize moreover that “heaven” is where God’s will is done and where the “earth” becomes “heaven”, a place

where love, goodness, truth and divine beauty are present, only if, on earth, God's will is done.

- xiv. In Jesus' prayer to the Father on that terrible and marvellous night in Gethsemane, the "earth" became "heaven"; the "earth" of his human will, shaken by fear and anguish, was taken up by his divine will in such a way that God's will was done on earth. And this is also important in our own prayers: we must learn to entrust ourselves more to divine Providence, to ask God for the strength to come out of ourselves to renew our "yes" to him, to say to him "thy will be done", so as to conform our will to his. It is a prayer we must pray every day because it is not always easy to entrust ourselves to God's will, repeating the "yes" of Jesus, the "yes" of Mary.
  - xv. The Gospel accounts of Gethsemane regretfully show that the three disciples, chosen by Jesus to be close to him, were unable to watch with him, sharing in his prayer, in his adherence to the Father and they were overcome by sleep. Dear friends, let us ask the Lord to enable us to keep watch with him in prayer, to follow the will of God every day even if he speaks of the Cross, to live in ever greater intimacy with the Lord, in order to bring a little bit of God's "heaven" to this "earth".
- g. Jesus on the Cross
- i. Today I would like to reflect with you on the prayer of Jesus when death was imminent, pausing to think about everything St Mark and St Matthew tell us. The two Evangelists record the prayer of the dying Jesus not only in Greek, in which their accounts are written but, because of the importance of these words, also in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. In this way they have passed down not only the content but also the sound that this prayer had on Jesus' lips: let us really listen to Jesus' words as they were. At the same time, the Evangelists describe to us the attitude of those present at the crucifixion who did not understand — or did not want to understand — this prayer.
  - ii. St Mark wrote, as we have heard: "When the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'" which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (15:33-34). In the structure of the account, the prayer, Jesus' cry, is raised at the end of the three hours of darkness that shrouded all the earth from midday until three o'clock in the afternoon. These three hours of darkness are in turn the continuation of a previous span of time, also of three hours, that began with the crucifixion of Jesus.
  - iii. The Evangelist Mark, in fact, tells us that "it was the third hour, when they crucified him" (15:25). All the times given in the narrative, Jesus' six hours on the Cross are divided into two parts of equal length.
  - iv. The mockery of various groups which displays their skepticism and confirms their disbelief fits into the first three hours, from nine o'clock in the morning until midday. St Mark writes: "Those who passed by derided him" (15:29); "So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes" (15:31); "those who were crucified with him also reviled him" (15:32). In the following three hours, from midday until "the ninth hour" [three o'clock in the afternoon], the Evangelist spoke only of the darkness that had come down over the entire earth; only darkness fills the whole scene without any references to people's movements or words. While Jesus is drawing ever closer to death, there is nothing but darkness that covers "the whole land".
  - v. The cosmos also takes part in this event: the darkness envelops people and things, but even at this moment of darkness God is present, he does not abandon them. In the biblical tradition darkness has an ambivalent meaning: it is a sign of the presence and action of evil, but also of a mysterious presence and action of God who can triumph over every shadow.
  - vi. Returning to St Mark's narrative, in the face of the insults of various categories of people, in the face of the pall of darkness that shrouds everything, at the moment when he faces death, Jesus, with the cry of his prayer, shows that with the burden of suffering and death in which there seems to be abandonment, the absence of God, Jesus is utterly certain of the closeness of the Father who approves this supreme act of love, the total gift of himself, although the

voice from on high is not heard, as it was on other occasions.

- vii. In reading the Gospels we realize that in other important passages on his earthly existence Jesus had also seen the explanatory voice of God associated with the signs of the Father's presence and approval of his journey of love.
- viii. Thus in the event that follows the Baptism in the Jordan, at the opening of the heavens, the words of the Father had been heard: "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). Then in the Transfiguration, the sign of the cloud was accompanied with these words: "this is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mk 9:7). Instead, at the approach of the death of the Crucified One, silence falls, no voice is heard but the Father's loving gaze is fixed on his Son's gift of love.
- ix. However, what is the meaning of Jesus' prayer, of the cry he addresses to the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?": doubt about his mission, about the Father's presence? Might there not be in this prayer the knowledge that he had been forsaken? The words that Jesus addresses to the Father are the beginning of Psalm 22[21], in which the Psalmist expresses to God his being torn between feeling forsaken and the certain knowledge of God's presence in his People's midst. He, the Psalmist, prays: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (vv. 3-4). The Psalmist speaks of this "cry" in order to express the full suffering of his prayer to God, seemingly absent: in the moment of anguish his prayer becomes a cry.
- x. This also happens in our relationship with the Lord: when we face the most difficult and painful situations, when it seems that God does not hear, we must not be afraid to entrust the whole weight of our overburdened hearts to him, we must not fear to cry out to him in our suffering, we must be convinced that God is close, even if he seems silent.
- xi. Repeating from the Cross the first words of Psalm 22[21] "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*" — "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46); uttering the words of the Psalm, Jesus prays at the moment of his ultimate rejection by men, at the moment of abandonment; yet he prays, with the Psalm, in the awareness of God's presence, even in that hour when he is feeling the human drama of death.
- xii. However a question arises within us: how is it possible that such a powerful God does not intervene to save his Son from this terrible trial? It is important to understand that Jesus' prayer is not the cry of one who meets death with despair, nor is it the cry of one who knows he has been forsaken. At this moment Jesus makes his own the whole of Psalm 22[21], the Psalm of the suffering People of Israel. In this way he takes upon himself not only the sin of his people, but also that of all men and women who are suffering from the oppression of evil and, at the same time, he places all this before God's own heart, in the certainty that his cry will be heard in the Resurrection: "The cry of extreme anguish is at the same time the certainty of an answer from God, the certainty of salvation — not only for Jesus himself, but for 'many'" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, pp. 213-214 Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011).
- xiii. In this prayer of Jesus are contained his extreme trust and his abandonment into God's hands, even when God seems absent, even when he seems to be silent, complying with a plan incomprehensible to us. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: "in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (n. 603). His is a suffering in communion with us and for us, which derives from love and already bears within it redemption, the victory of love.
- xiv. The bystanders at the foot of the Cross of Jesus fail to understand, thinking that his cry is a supplication addressed to Elijah. In the scene they seek to assuage his thirst in order to prolong his life and to find out whether Elijah will truly come to his aid, but with a loud cry Jesus' earthly life comes to an end, as well as their wish.
- xv. At the supreme moment, Jesus gives vent to his heart's grief, but at the same time makes clear the meaning of the Father's presence and his consent to the Father's plan of salvation

of humanity.

- xvi. We too have to face ever anew the “today” of suffering of God’s silence — we express it so often in our prayers — but we also find ourselves facing the “today” of the Resurrection, of the response of God who took upon himself our sufferings, to carry them together with us and to give us the firm hope that they will be overcome (cf. Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, nn. 35-40).
- xvii. Dear friends, let us lay our daily crosses before God in our prayers, in the certainty that he is present and hears us. Jesus’ cry reminds us that in prayer we must surmount the barriers of our “ego” and our problems and open ourselves to the needs and suffering of others.
- xviii. May the prayer of Jesus dying on the Cross teach us to pray lovingly for our many brothers and sisters who are oppressed by the weight of daily life, who are living through difficult moments, who are in pain, who have no word of comfort; let us place all this before God’s heart, so that they too may feel the love of God who never abandons us.
- xix. I would like to reflect on the account we find in St Luke’s Gospel. The Evangelist has passed down to us three words spoken by Jesus on the Cross, two of which — the first and the third— are prayers explicitly addressed to the Father. The second, instead, consists of the promise made to the so-called “good thief”, crucified with him; indeed, in response to the thief’s entreaty, Jesus reassures him: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk 23:43).
- xx. Thus in Luke’s narrative the two prayers that the dying Jesus addresses to the Father and his openness to the supplication addressed to him by the repentant sinner are evocatively interwoven. Jesus calls on the Father and at the same time listens to the prayer of this man who is often called *latro poenitens*, “the repentant thief”.
- xxi. Let us reflect on these three prayers of Jesus.
1. He prays the first one immediately after being nailed to the Cross, while the soldiers are dividing his garments between them as a wretched reward for their service. In a certain sense the process of the Crucifixion ends with this action. St Luke writes: “When they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’. And they cast lots and to divide his garments” (23:33-34). The first prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father is a prayer of intercession; he asks for forgiveness for his executioners. By so doing, Jesus is doing in person what he had taught in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: “I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6:27); and he had also promised to those who are able to forgive: “your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High” (v. 35). Now, from the Cross he not only pardons his executioners but he addresses the Father directly, interceding for them. Jesus’ attitude finds a moving “imitation” in the account of the stoning of St Stephen, the first martyr. Indeed Stephen, now nearing his end, “knelt down and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’”. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60): these were his last words. The comparison between Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness and that of the protomartyr is significant. St Stephen turns to the Risen Lord and requests that his killing — an action described clearly by the words “this sin” — not be held against those who stoned him. Jesus on the Cross addresses the Father and not only asks forgiveness for those who crucify him but also offers an interpretation of what is happening. According to what he says, in fact, the men who are crucifying him “know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). He therefore postulates ignorance, “not knowing”, as a reason for his request for the Father’s forgiveness, because it leaves the door open to conversion, as, moreover, happens in the words that the centurion was to speak at Jesus’ death: “Certainly this man was innocent” (v. 47), he was the Son of God. “It remains a source of comfort for all times and for all people that both in the case of those who genuinely did not know (his executioners) and in the case of those who did know (the people who

condemned him), the Lord makes ignorance the motive for his plea for forgiveness: he sees it as a door that can open us to conversion” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011], p. 208).

2. The second word spoken by Jesus on the Cross recorded by St Luke is a word of hope, it is his answer to the prayer of one of the two men crucified with him. The good thief comes to his senses before Jesus and repents, he realizes he is facing the Son of God who makes the very Face of God visible, and begs him; “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (v. 42). The Lord’s answer to this prayer goes far beyond the request: in fact he says: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). Jesus knows that he is entering into direct communion with the Father and reopening to man the way to God’s paradise. Thus, with this response, he gives the firm hope that God’s goodness can also touch us, even at the very last moment of life, and that sincere prayer, even after a wrong life, encounters the open arms of the good Father who awaits the return of his son.
  3. However, let us consider the last words of Jesus dying. The Evangelists tells us: “it was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’. And having said this he breathed his last” (vv. 44-46).
- xxii. Certain aspects of this narrative differ from the scene as described in Mark and in Matthew. The three hours of darkness in Mark are not described, whereas in Matthew they are linked with a series of different apocalyptic events such as the quaking of the earth, the opening of the tombs, the dead who are raised (cf. Mt 27:51-53). In Luke, the hours of darkness are caused by the eclipse of the sun, but the veil of the temple is torn at that moment. In this way Luke’s account presents two signs, in a certain way parallel, in the heavens and in the temple. The heavens lose their light, the earth sinks while in the temple, a place of God’s presence, the curtain that protects the sanctuary is rent in two. Jesus’ death is characterized explicitly as a cosmic and a liturgical event; in particular, it marks the beginning of a new form of worship, in a temple not built by men because it is the very Body of Jesus who died and rose which gathers peoples together and unites them in the sacrament of his Body and his Blood.
- xxiii. At this moment of suffering Jesus’ prayer, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit”, is a loud cry of supreme and total entrustment to God. This prayer expresses the full awareness that he had not been abandoned. The initial invocation — “Father” — recalls his first declaration as a 12-year-old boy. At that time he had stayed for three days in the Temple of Jerusalem, whose veil was now torn in two. And when his parents had told him of their anxiety, he had answered: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49).
- xxiv. From the beginning to the end, what fully determines Jesus’ feelings, words and actions, is his unique relationship with the Father. On the Cross he lives to the full, in love, this filial relationship he has with God which gives life to his prayer.
- xxv. The words spoken by Jesus after his invocation, “Father”, borrow a sentence from Psalm 31[30]: “into your hand I commit my spirit” (Ps 31[30]:6). **Yet these words are not a mere citation but rather express a firm decision: Jesus “delivers” himself to the Father in an act of total abandonment.** These words are a prayer of “entrustment” total trust in God’s love. Jesus’ prayer as he faces death is dramatic as it is for every human being but, at the same time, it is imbued with that deep calmness that is born from trust in the Father and from the desire to commend oneself totally to him.
- xxvi. In Gethsemane, when he had begun his final struggle and his most intense prayer and was about to be “delivered into the hands of men” (Lk 9:44), his sweat had become “like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). **Nevertheless his heart was fully obedient to the Father’s will**, and because of this “an angel from heaven” came to strengthen him (cf. Lk 22:42-43). Now, in his last moments, Jesus turns to the Father, telling

- him **into whose hands he really commits his whole life.**
- xxvii. Before starting out on his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus had insisted to his disciples: “Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men” (Lk 9:44).
- xxviii. Now that life is about to depart from him, he seals his last decision in prayer: Jesus let himself be delivered “into the hands of men”, but it is into the hands of the Father that he places his spirit; thus — as the Evangelist John affirms — all was finished, the supreme act of love was carried to the end, to the limit and beyond the limit.
- xxix. **Dear brothers and sisters, the words of Jesus on the Cross at the last moments of his earthly life offer us demanding instructions for our prayers,** but they also open us to serene trust and firm hope. Jesus, who asks the Father to forgive those who are crucifying him, invites us to take the difficult step of also praying for those who wrong us, who have injured us, ever able to forgive, so that God’s light may illuminate their hearts; and he invites us to live in our prayers the same attitude of mercy and love with which God treats us; “forgive us our trespasses and forgive those who trespass against us”, we say every day in the Lord’s prayer.
- xxx. At the same time, Jesus, who at the supreme moment of death entrusts himself totally to the hands of God the Father, communicates to us the certainty that, however harsh the trial, however difficult the problems, however acute the suffering may be, we shall never fall from God’s hands, those hands that created us, that sustain us and that accompany us on our way through life, because they are guided by an infinite and faithful love.
- h. Jesus’ silence from the Cross
- i. In a previous series of catecheses I spoke about the prayer of Jesus, and I would not wish to conclude this reflection without briefly pausing to consider the theme of Jesus’ silence, which is so important in our relationship with God.
  - ii. In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I made reference to the role that silence assumes in the life of Jesus, especially on Golgotha: “Here we find ourselves before the “word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18). The word is muted; it becomes mortal silence, for it has “spoken” exhaustively, holding back nothing of what it had to tell us (n. 12). Faced with this silence of the cross, St. Maximus the Confessor places upon the lips of the Mother of God this touching phrase: “Wordless is the Word of the Father, who made every creature which speaks; lifeless are the eyes of the one at whose word and whose nod all living things move”. (*The Life of Mary*, no. 89: *Marian texts of the first millennium*, 2, Rome 1989, p. 253).
  - iii. The cross of Christ not only portrays the silence of Jesus as His final word to the Father; it also reveals that God *speaks* through the *silence*: “The silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (*Mark* 15:34; *Matthew* 27:46). Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father. He commended himself to him at the moment of passage, through death, to eternal life: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (*Luke* 23:46)” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 21). The experience of Jesus on the cross speaks deeply of the situation of the man who prays and of the culmination of prayer: after having heard and acknowledged God’s Word, we must also measure ourselves by God’s silence, which is an important expression of the same divine Word.
  - iv. **The interplay of word and silence** that marks the prayer of Jesus during his entire earthly life -- especially on the cross -- **also touches our own lives of prayer, in two ways.**
    1. The first concerns our welcoming of God’s Word. Interior and exterior silence are necessary in order that this word may be heard. And this is especially difficult in our own day. In fact, ours is not an age which fosters recollection; indeed, at times one has the impression that people have a fear of detaching themselves, even for a moment, from the barrage of words and images that mark and fill our days. For this reason, in the already mentioned Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I recalled the necessity

of our being educated in the value of silence: “Rediscovering the centrality of God’s word in the life of the Church also means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence” (n. 21). This principle – that without silence we neither hear nor listen nor receive the word – applies above all to personal prayer, but it also pertains to our liturgies: in order to facilitate an authentic listening, they must also be rich in moments of silence and unspoken receptivity. St. Augustine’s observation forever holds true: *Verbo crescente, verba deficient* -- “When the Word of God increases, the words of men fail” (cf. *Sermon* 288; 5: *PL* 38, 1307; *Sermon* 120,2: *PL* 38,677). The Gospels often present Jesus -- especially at times of crucial decisions -- withdrawing alone to a place set apart from the crowds and from his own disciples, in order to pray in the silence and to abide in his filial relationship with God. Silence is capable of excavating an interior space in our inmost depths so that God may abide there, so that his Word may remain in us, so that love for him may be rooted in our minds and in our hearts and animate our lives. The first way, then: to learn silence, [to learn] the openness to listening that opens us to the other, to the Word of God.

2. However, there is a second important element in the relation of silence with prayer. For in fact there exists not only our silence, which disposes us to listening to God’s Word; often in our prayer, we find ourselves before the silence of God; we experience a sense of abandonment; it seems to us that God is not listening and that He does not respond. But this silence of God - as Jesus also experienced - is not a sign of His absence. The Christian knows well that the Lord is present and that he is listening, even in the darkness of suffering, rejection and solitude. Jesus reassures the disciples and each one of us that God knows well our needs at every moment of life. He teaches the disciples: “In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:7-8): an attentive, silent, open heart is more important than many words. God knows us intimately, more deeply than we know ourselves, and He loves us: and knowing this should suffice. In the Bible, Job’s experience is particularly significant in this regard. This man quickly loses everything: family, wealth, friends, health; it seems that God’s attitude towards him is precisely one of abandonment, of total silence. And yet Job, in his relationship with God, speaks with God, cries out to God; in his prayer, despite everything, he preserves his faith intact and, in the end, he discovers the value of his experience and of God’s silence. And thus, in the end, turning to his Creator, he is able to conclude: “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee” (Job 42:5): nearly all of us know God only through hearsay, and the more we are open to His silence and to our silence, the more we begin to know Him truly. This supreme confidence, which opens way to a profound encounter with God, matures in silence. St Francis Severio prayed, saying to the Lord: I love you, not because you can give me heaven or condemn me to hell, but because you are my God. I love You, because You are You.

- v. As we approach the conclusion of our reflections on the prayer of Jesus, a number of the teachings from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* come to mind: “The drama of prayer is fully revealed to us in the Word who became flesh and dwells among us. To seek to understand his prayer through what his witnesses proclaim to us in the Gospel is to approach the holy Lord Jesus as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray in order to know how he hears our prayer” (n. 2598).
- vi. And how does Jesus teach us to pray? In the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* we find a clear answer: “Jesus teaches us to pray not only with the *Our Father*” -- certainly the central act in his teaching on how we are to pray -- “but also when [He himself] prays. In



this way he teaches us, in addition to the content, the dispositions necessary for every true prayer: purity of heart that seeks the Kingdom and forgives one's enemies, bold and filial faith that goes beyond what we feel and understand, and watchfulness that protects the disciple from temptation" (n. 544).

- vii. In surveying the Gospels, **we saw how the Lord is the interlocutor, friend, witness and teacher of our prayer.** In Jesus the newness of our dialogue with God is revealed: filial prayer, which the Father awaits from His children. And we learn from Jesus how constant prayer helps us to interpret our lives, to make decisions, to recognize and accept our vocation, to discover the talents that God had given us, to daily fulfill His Will, which is the only path to attaining fulfillment in our lives.
- viii. The prayer of Jesus indicates to us who are often preoccupied by the efficiency of our work and the concrete results we achieve that we need to stop and to experience moments of intimacy with God, "detaching ourselves" from the daily din in order to listen, to go to the "root" that supports and nourishes life. One of the most beautiful moments in the prayer of Jesus is precisely the moment when he -- in order to face the disease, distress and limitations of his interlocutors -- turns to his Father in prayer, thus teaching those around him where the source of hope and salvation is to be sought.
- ix. I already recalled the moving example of Jesus' prayer at the tomb of Lazarus. The Evangelist John recounts: "So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" (*John* 11:41-43).
- x. But Jesus reaches the heights of the depth of his prayer to the Father during his Passion and Death, when he pronounces his supreme "yes" to the plan of God and reveals how the human will finds its fulfillment precisely in adhering fully to the divine will, rather than the opposite. In Jesus' prayer, in his cry to the Father on the Cross, "all the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history are summed up ... Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion the drama of prayer in the economy of creation and salvation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2606).
- xi. Dear brothers and sisters, with trust let us ask the Lord to enable to live out the journey of our filial prayer, by learning day by day from the Only Begotten Son made man for us how to turn to God. The words of St. Paul on the Christian life apply also to our own prayer: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).