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Retreat on Living Religiously By Faith in the Year of Faith
Sisters of Jesus our Hope, Bloomsbury, New Jersey
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Ex 32:15-24; 30-34; Ps 106; Lk 10:38-42

Faith and Prayer

- Introduction
 - On this Feast Day of St. Ignatius, in which we're focused on the pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in the field, let us ask God for the grace to help us to choose his love and grace above all other goods in the words St. Ignatius himself taught us, "Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me."
 - Today we focus on one of the principal ways God has deigned to give us that love and grace, through prayer. Prayer, as Pope-emeritus Benedict often said, is faith in action. And one of the reasons why we need a Year of Faith is because we have not been putting our faith into action in prayer.
 - One of the main crises facing the Church today is the crisis of prayer. Many Christians pray very rarely. Others may pray each day, but barely pray, saying a few prayers before they go to bed. Others pray regularly but they misunderstand what prayer is and so are not really transformed by prayer in the way God wants to do. I hate to say it but many priests and religious don't pray anywhere near as much as everyone expects we do and should. We don't grow in prayer. Many times the reason is because, like Martha, we're so caught up in activity that we lose our priorities. But on other occasions, it's because we're afraid of God, we don't want to pray because we know there's an obstacle to our relationship with him and we know that if we do more than vocal prayers, if we slow down and listen to him, he's going to ask us to change and we don't want to yet. But it's key for us not to take prayer for granted, even among priests and religious. It's crucial for us to take prayer seriously so that we can become the models and master-teacher of prayer to others, because others look to us to show them not only how to pray but the joy that comes from union with God.
 - Blessed John Paul II talked about the importance of prayer in his in his tremendous 2001 apostolic exhortation with the pastoral plan for the Church in this new Christian millennium.
 - NMI 34. It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but "Christians at risk". They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of "substitutes", accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions. It is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning
 - NMI 32. This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer.... . We well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (Lk 11:1). Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: "Abide in me and I in you" (Jn 15:4). This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father's face. Learning this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church's life, but also in personal experience, is the secret of a truly vital Christianity.

- Our whole life is meant to be distinguished above all by the “art of prayer.” Pope Benedict said of St. John Vianney that his life could be summarized as “an existence made prayer.” His whole life was prayer. And as John Paul II said this is Trinitarian art. This is a Trinitarian existence. The Year of Faith is meant to help our Christians lives come alive and that’s why we need to learn the Trinitarian shape of Christian Prayer. What is the Trinitarian shape of Christian Prayer? The future Pope Benedict wrote about it in a book called *Feast of Faith* back in the early 1980s. There are four steps to the “formal structure of Christian prayer,” which is one of the deepest things I’ve ever read:
 - God is an internal dialogue of persons — The basic reason why man can speak with God arises from the fact that God himself is speech, word. His nature is to speak, to hear, to reply.... Only because there is already speech, “Logos,” in God can there be speech, “logos,” to God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in communication with God.”
 - Our human nature enters into that conversation of persons through the Incarnation — In God, there is speech and the intercourse of partners in dialogue. Man could speak with God if he himself were drawn to share in this internal speech. And this is what the Incarnation of the Logos means; he who is speech, Word, Logos, in God and to God, participates in human speech. This has a reciprocal effect, involving man in God’s own internal speech. ... As a result of the Incarnation, human speech has become a component in divine speech; it has been taken up, unconfusedly and inseparably, into that speech which is God’s inner nature.
 - The Holy Spirit incorporates us into the body of Christ — Through the Spirit of Christ, who is the Spirit of God, we can share in the human nature of Jesus Christ; and in sharing in his dialogue with God, we can share in the dialogue who God *is*. This is prayer, which becomes a real exchange between God and man.
 - The Holy Spirit does that in the Church — The locus of this identification with Christ, facilitated by the Spirit, which necessarily implies that those involved are also identified with one another in Christ, is what we call “Church.” We could in fact define “Church as the realm of man’s discovery of his identity through the identification with Christ that is its source.
- In May 2011, Pope-emeritus Benedict began a year and a half long catechesis on prayer because he recognized how much Catholics across the globe needed to learn this Trinitarian Shape of Prayer.
 - He said, alluding to priests and religious, “We know well, in fact, that prayer should not be taken for granted. It is necessary to learn how to pray, as it were acquiring this art ever anew; even those who are very advanced in spiritual life always feel the need to learn from Jesus, to learn how to pray authentically.”
 - For Benedict, prayer is not a “technique” but an “art.” There’s a pacific ocean of difference between the two. A *techne* is just a way of doing something, something that even machines often can do. An art begins with inspiration and there’s a certain creativity that flows from love.
 - Jesus is the master artist of prayer. He’s the one who teaches us how to pray, not merely by putting words on our lips but by showing us how to turn to the Father with humility, perseverance and trust, crying out with the help of the Holy Spirit, “Abba, Father.”
 - Many have seemed to have lost this art in a world that is becoming far more “technical” and reductively scientific, in which prayer has become a less common and practiced art
 - We are now facing the crisis of secularism, which means living “*si Deus non daretur*,” as if God were not a given, as if God didn’t exist. So many people, even those who believe in God, live as practical atheists, in which God is not a meaningful part of their day-to-day existence
 - In a catechesis on St. Angela of Foligno, Pope Benedict said, “Today we all risk living as though God did not exist; he seems so distant from daily life.”

- It affects many of those who work very hard in the Church:
 - DCE 37. It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and the growing secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable work.
 - This is the problem of Saint Martha, which we alluded to yesterday.
 - About his own prayer, Benedict said in *Light of the World* (16): “I am no mystic. But it is correct that as Pope one has even more cause to pray and to entrust oneself entirely to God. For I see very well that almost everything I have to do is something I myself cannot do at all. That fact already forces me, so to speak, to place myself in the Lord’s hands and say to him: ‘You do it, if you want it!’ In this sense prayer and contact with God are now even more necessary and also even more natural and self-evident than before.”
 - The Popes have forcefully been calling on the Church to return to prayer and for all those with the responsibility of passing on the faith to others — bishops, pastors, religious, parents, godparents, catechists, Catholic school teachers, and baptized and confirmed Catholics — to be models, masters and teachers of prayer. Every parish is supposed to be a “school of prayer.” Every convent is called to a true house of prayer. And this is the greatest gift we priests and religious have to give to the world.
 - In Warsaw in 2006, Pope Benedict, in speaking to priests, said words that apply equally to religious,, “The faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God. The priest is not asked to be an expert in economics, construction or politics. He is expected to be an expert in the spiritual life. ... In the face of the temptations of relativism or the permissive society, there is absolutely no need for the priest to know all the latest, changing currents of thought; what the faithful expect from him is that he be a witness to the eternal wisdom contained in the revealed word.”
 - In the midst of secularism, which is a dangerous practical atheism in which people live most of their lives as if God doesn’t exist, the greatest antidote is living by faith, living together with the Lord in the midst of our ordinary duties, and if we’re living together with God and conversing with him throughout the day, it’s then that we will be carrying out Jesus’ command to pray always. This need to beef up not only our understanding of prayer but also our commitment to prayer is the single greatest objective of this Year of Faith.
 - And so in this conference I want to look at how we can put our faith into action through making our prayer more faithful and praying more faithfully. Like with all the rest of the conferences, I would like to structure the talk by using the eight descriptions of faith in *Lumen Fidei* as prisms to examine the subject of our prayer, so that we can learn some practical ways to grow in faith as we grow in prayer. By no stretch of the imagination will these applications be the last word, but I hope they’re a solid first word that begins a book that God will continue to write in us until, God-willing, our names are inscribed in ink in the Book of Life.
- Faith is a personal entrustment to God
 - The first prism is about our total commitment to God who makes a total commitment to us.
 - Prayer isn’t an exchange of words or ideas but fundamentally an exchange of persons. God gives himself to us and we give ourselves to him. We already spoke about this to some degree in the discussion about the Trinitarian shape of prayer.
 - This involves two moments:
 - First, God gives himself. As we hear in St. Luke’s Gospel, the Father always responds to petitions by giving himself, by giving the Holy Spirit.
 - Second, we pray by entering into God and committing ourselves entirely to him. Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in *Feast of Faith*, “To pray is to put oneself on the side of God’s love causality acting in the world, the causality of freedom. As Christians, as those who pray, this is our very highest task.”

- This involves on God's part, pure grace and love; on our part, loving trust and total abandonment:
 - B16 on St. Francis de Sales: “The 20-year-old Francis found peace in the radical and liberating love of God: loving him without asking anything in return and trusting in divine love; no longer asking what will God do with me: I simply love him, independently of all that he gives me or does not give me. He simply loved God and abandoned himself to his goodness. And this was to be the secret of his life...
 - B16 on abandonment (in his catechesis on the prayer at the healing of Lazarus): 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.**
 - We learn how to entrust ourselves to God through Jesus:
 - B16 on how Jesus prays in complete trust and total submission to the Father (Garden of Gethsemane)
 - 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.
 - B16 on Jesus' last words from the Cross
 - 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.
 - 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.**
- This mutual exchange of selves brings about a life-changing encounter for us.
 - B16 at a May 3, 2009 ordination in Rome: “This “knowing” and “being known” in Christ and, through him, in the Most Holy Trinity, is none other than the most true and deep reality of prayer.”
 - Quoting St. Gregory of Nazianzen, B16 said, “He says: “It is necessary to remember God **more often than one breathes**” (*Orationes* 27, 4: PG 250, 78), **because prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with our thirst. God is thirsting for us to thirst for him** “

- It's the reality of a friendship. B16 said with regard to Teresa of Avila: "Praying, she says, 'means being on terms of friendship with God frequently conversing in secret with him who, we know, loves us'" (*Vida* 8, 5). St Teresa's idea coincides with Thomas Aquinas' definition of theological charity as "amicitia quaedam hominis ad Deum", a type of human friendship with God, who offered humanity his friendship first; it is from God that the initiative comes (*cf. Summa Theologiae* II-II, 23, 1). ... She teaches us truly to feel this thirst for God that exists in the depths of our hearts, this desire to see God, to seek God, to be in conversation with him and to be his friends. This is the friendship we all need that we must seek anew, day after day."
- Faith is a light
 - The second prism we have is how faith is a light and therefore in the faith-in-action constitutive of prayer we see to see things with God's own light, with the eyes of God.
 - The whole process of prayerful discernment, which isn't a one-time thing but is meant to be a constant in the Christian life as we pray about decisions facing us, is to try to help us to see with God's light what he's asking.
 - The very practice of prayer, which seeks a transforming union with God, is meant to be a purification of our vision.
 - The illumination that comes from prayer was one of the chief teachings in the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross. Pope Benedict XVI said that the life of faith "is not something that would make our burden even heavier but something quite different. It is a **light**, a power that helps us to bear it. If a person bears great love in himself, this love gives him wings, as it were, and he can face all life's troubles more easily because he carries in himself this **great light**; **this is faith**: being loved by God and letting oneself be loved by God in Jesus Christ. **Letting oneself be loved in this way is the light that helps us to bear our daily burden. And holiness is not a very difficult action of ours but means exactly this "openness": opening the windows of our soul to let in God's light, without forgetting God because it is precisely in opening oneself to his light that one finds strength, one finds the joy of the redeemed**
 - This light allows us to interpret what's happening today from God's perspective. B16, in giving a catechesis on some of the symbols used in the Book of Revelation, said something very important about prayer in general. Such symbols, he said, "remind us of the way to take to be able to interpret the events of history and of our own life. By raising our gaze to God's Heaven, in a constant relationship with Christ, opening our hearts and minds to him in personal and community prayer, we learn to see things in a new light and to perceive their truest meaning. **Prayer is, as it were, an open window that enables us to keep our gaze turned to God, not only to remember the destination towards which we are bound but also to let God's will illuminate our earthly pilgrimage and help us live it with intensity and commitment...** How can we develop in this Christian interpretation of reality? The Book of Revelation tells us that **prayer nourishes this vision of light and of deep hope in each one of us and in our communities: it invites us not to let ourselves be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good, to look at the Crucified and Risen Christ who associates us with his victory. The Church lives in history, she does not withdraw into herself but courageously continues on her journey through difficulty and suffering, forcefully asserting that in the end evil does not overcome good, that darkness does not conceal God's splendour. **This is an important point for us; as Christians we can never be pessimistic; we know well that on our journey through life we often encounter violence, falsehood, hatred and persecution, but this does not discourage us. Prayer teaches us above all to see God's signs, his presence and his action, indeed, to be lights of goodness ourselves, spreading hope and showing that the victory is God's.****
 - The traditional practice of mental prayer allows us access to that light.
 - Meditation is a type of vision in which we see ourselves within the a scene.
 - Meditation is a prayerful quest engaging thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. Its goal is to make our own in faith the subject considered, by confronting it with the reality of our own life

- It occurs when we “chew” or “ruminate” on particular texts or items that we break down to understand them, by placing ourselves in the midst of them.
- To meditate on what we read helps us to make it our own by confronting it with ourselves, by reflecting its light on the book of life. We pass from thoughts to reality
- There are many and varied methods of meditation
 - Composition of time and place by St. Ignatius is what I’ve used. Involve all five senses, in putting ourselves in a scene, seeing our involvement with Christ and how that experience illumines not only his life but the other experiences of our life.
 - Lectio Divina, in which we, pondering the word of God, see how our life stacks up against that word, what we need to en flesh it, and imagine ourselves putting that word into practice, so that we may in fact do just that.
- Contemplation is an even deeper form of vision
 - The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. “I look at him and he looks at me,” as someone said to the Curé D’Ars (Louis Chaffangeon) about praying before the tabernacle.
 - Contemplative prayer seeks him “whom my soul loves,” Jesus, and in him, the Father. To desire God is the beginning of love and is done through faith. In this inner prayer, we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.
 - Focus on Jesus involves a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart. The light of his face illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything and everyone in the light of his truth and mercy. We’ll return to this insight more below.
 - Contemplation turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ and learns the “interior knowledge of the Lord,” to love and follow him.
 - Contemplative prayer is union with Christ’s prayer insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery, which the Holy Spirit brings alive.
 - Contemplative prayer is a gift that can be accepted only in humility and poverty. It is a love that consents to abide in the night of faith. To achieve the Resurrection, we first need the agony and the tomb. It allows us to abide in the night with the light of purified faith.
- Faith is a new way of hearing
 - The third prism is through hearing. Faith comes, as St. Paul famously tells us, from hearing about God from others. In prayer we make our own the great advice Eli gave to the young Samuel, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”
 - This is a very important point because for many people prayer is not about hearing, it’s about speaking to God, about “saying one’s prayers.” One of the reasons why many don’t listen is because they haven’t been taught how to listen, how God normally speaks back.
 - We remember the great scene of Elijah on Mt. Horeb, where God spoke to him, not in hurricane, not in the earthquake, not in flashes of fire, but in a gentle breeze (cf. 1 Kings 19:11-13). The truth is that God seldom speaks at all in any way that would register on a decibel meter. He normally speaks through insights, through light bulbs going off, in mental prayer. He speaks to us through events. He speaks to us through others, especially those whom he has placed over us to guide us. And he speaks to us through his holy Word, a voice whose frequency we all need to tune into much more.
 - B16 said, **“The first school of prayer ... is the Word of God, Sacred Scripture.** Sacred Scripture is an ongoing dialogue between God and man, a progressive dialogue in which God shows himself ever closer, in which we can become ever better acquainted with his face, his voice, his being; and man learns to accept to know God and to talk to God.”

- St. Jerome wrote to a young Roman noble woman about how pondering the Word of God gets us out of the habit of doing all the talking in prayer: **“If you pray, you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you”** (*Ep.* 22, 25).
- In a 2011 address to Seminarians in Freiburg, Germany, Pope B16 stressed about how in learning to pray we must learn how to listen to God in Sacred Scripture. Seminary, like novitiate, like retreats, like our normal times of daily prayer, is meant to be “a time for being with him, a time for praying, for listening to him. Listening, truly learning to listen to him – in the word of sacred Scripture, in the faith of the Church, in the liturgy of the Church – and learning to understand the present time in his word. In exegesis we learn much about the past: what happened, what sources there are, what communities there were, and so on. This is also important. But more important still is that from the past we should learn about the present, we should learn that he is speaking these words now, and that they all carry their present within them, and that over and above the historical circumstances in which they arose, they contain a fullness which speaks to all times. And it is important to learn this present-day aspect of his word – to learn to listen out for it – and thus to be able to speak of it to others. ... If I live with the word, then I see that it is not at all remote, it is highly contemporary, it is right here, it concerns me and it concerns others. And then I also learn how to explain it. But for this, **a constant inner journey with the word of God is needed.**”
- Part of that journey, he continues, is communal. He wants us to learn how to listen to Sacred Scripture together with others: “I sometimes say that Saint Paul wrote: ‘Faith comes from hearing’ – not from reading. It needs reading as well, but it comes from hearing, that is to say from the **living word**, addressed to me by the other, whom I can hear, addressed to me by the Church throughout the ages, from her contemporary word, **spoken to me the priests, bishops and my fellow believers.** ... towards the great “we” that is the Church of all times and places: it.”
- Prayer involves a dialogue, one in which we, too, speak to God, but the new type of hearing that is meant to take root in us during this Year of Faith gives us a new vocabulary to use in speaking to the Lord.
 - VD 24: The word of God draws each of us into a conversation with the Lord: the God who speaks teaches us how to speak to him. Here we naturally think of the *Book of Psalms*, where God gives us words to speak to him, to place our lives before him, and thus to make life itself a path to God. In the Psalms we find expressed every possible human feeling set masterfully in the sight of God: joy and pain, distress and hope, fear and trepidation: here all find expression. Along with the Psalms we think too of the many other passages of sacred Scripture which express our turning to God in intercessory prayer (cf. *Ex* 33:12-16), in exultant songs of victory (cf. *Ex* 15) or in sorrow at the difficulties experienced in carrying out our mission (cf. *Jer* 20:7-18). In this way our word to God becomes God’s word, thus confirming the dialogical nature of all Christian revelation and our whole existence becomes a dialogue with the God who speaks and listens, who calls us and gives direction to our lives. Here the word of God reveals that our entire life is under the divine call.
- To listen well to the Word of God, we must hear it as a word to be done.
 - Jesus praised his mother for being among those who heard the word of God, treasured it and put it into practice.
 - He says we will become his brothers and sisters not just by hearing his words but by doing the will of the Father, making his words the solid rock on which we build our life.
 - There’s no distinction in Hebrew between the words to “hear” and to “obey.” Likewise in Latin, obedience (ob-audire) is merely an intensification of the practice of hearing (audire).
 - Most of the time we don’t listen to the Word of God this way, as a word to be done, a word that has the power to change us 30, 60 or 100 fold. We can’t even remember what the first reading, the psalm or the Gospel was from Mass in the morning, or from yesterday, or from Sunday, because we didn’t listen to it with that type of attention, as most people would if they thought it was really important and meant to change their lives forever.

- The great saints listened to the Word of God in this way. They were the ones who heard the word of God as a word to be lived.
 - VD 48. The interpretation of sacred Scripture would remain incomplete were it not to include listening to those who have truly lived the word of God: namely, the saints. Indeed, “*viva lectio est vita bonorum*”.¹⁶³ The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation. ...
 - I am thinking for example of Saint Anthony the Abbot, who was moved by hearing Christ’s words: “if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (*Mt 19:21*)....
 - Saint Francis of Assisi – we learn from Thomas of Celano – “upon hearing that the disciples of Christ must possess neither gold, nor silver nor money, nor carry a bag, nor bread, nor a staff for the journey, nor sandals nor two tunics ... exulting in the Holy Spirit, immediately cried out: “This is what I want, this is what I ask for, this I long to do with all my heart!””.
 - Saint Clare of Assisi shared fully in the experience of Saint Francis: “The form of life of the Order of Poor Sisters – she writes – is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”. ...
 - Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus discovered that love was her personal vocation by poring over the Scriptures, especially Chapters 12 and 13 of the *First Letter to the Corinthians*;¹⁷² the same saint describes the attraction of the Scriptures: “No sooner do I glance at the Gospel, but immediately I breathe in the fragrance of the life of Jesus and I know where to run”.
 - We can certainly add St. Augustine, who, upon hearing the words “tolle and lege” picked up Sacred Scripture, read about how he was no longer to give into his debauchery and changed right then. We’re all called to take up the Sacred Scriptures and read in this way.
- In order for us to listen effectively, we must cultivate silence.
 - In an August 10, 2011 catechesis, Pope Benedict said:
 - Silence is the environmental condition most conducive to contemplation, to listening to God and to meditation. The very fact of enjoying silence and letting ourselves be “filled”, so to speak, with silence, disposes us to prayer...
 - God speaks in silence, but we must know how to listen. This is why monasteries are oases in which God speaks to humanity; and in them we find the cloister, a symbolic place because it is an enclosed space yet open to Heaven.
 - In *Verbum Domini* (66), Benedict wrote, “In their interventions, a good number of Synod Fathers insisted on the importance of silence in relation to the word of God and its reception in the lives of the faithful. The word, in fact, can only be spoken and heard in silence, outward and inward. Ours is not an age that fosters recollection; at times one has the impression that people are afraid of detaching themselves, even for a moment, from the mass media. For this reason, it is necessary nowadays that the People of God be 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.
 - We learn from this silence how to pass from the words of God to God himself and to know him truly. Benedict likes to use the expression of St. Augustine, “Verbo crescent, verba deficient,” “When the Word of God increases, the words of men fail.” To allow God to grow, we must allow silence to grow. “This silence of God - as Jesus also experienced - is not a sign of His absence,” Pope Benedict says. “The Christian knows well

that the Lord is present and that he is listening, even in the darkness of suffering, rejection and solitude.”

- 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..
- Faith is a deep mutual touch of the heart
 - The next prism on prayer is a deep mutual touch of the heart.
 - When Pope Benedict went to England in 2010 to beatify Cardinal Newman, he focused on the new Blessed’s episcopal motto: “Cardinal Newman’s motto, *Cor ad cor loquitur*, or ‘Heart speaks unto heart,’ gives us an insight into his understanding of the Christian life as a call to holiness, experienced as the profound desire of the human heart to enter into intimate communion with the Heart of God. He reminds us that faithfulness to prayer gradually transforms us into the divine likeness. As he wrote in one of his many fine sermons, “a habit of prayer, the practice of turning to God and the unseen world in every season, in every place, in every emergency – prayer, I say, has what may be called a natural effect in spiritualizing and elevating the soul. A man is no longer what he was before; gradually ... he has imbibed a new set of ideas, and become imbued with fresh principles” (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, iv, 230-231). (Birmingham, Beatification of Cardinal Newman Sept 19, 2010)
 - It’s key for us to hear with the ears of the heart, to see with the eyes of the heart, to be touched by God in the heart and to touch him back in the intimate interpersonal exchange that is prayer. .
 - St. Cyprian said, “**God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart** (*non vocis sed cordis auditor est*)” (3-4). Pope Benedict, commenting on this expression said, “Cyprian placed himself at the root of that fruitful theological and spiritual tradition that sees the "heart" as the privileged place for prayer. Indeed, in accordance with the Bible and the Fathers, the heart is the intimate depths of man, the place in which God dwells. **In it occurs the encounter in which God speaks to man, and man listens to God; man speaks to God and God listens to man.**”
 - For us to pray well, we need a renewed heart.
 - Prayer begins with the conversion of heart, a taking of the planks from our eyes, leading toward a purity of heart that leads to seeing God.
 - CCC 2608 From the Sermon on the Mount onwards, Jesus insists on conversion of heart: reconciliation with one's brother before presenting an offering on the altar, love of enemies, and prayer for persecutors, prayer to the Father in secret, not heaping up empty phrases, prayerful forgiveness from the depths of the heart, purity of heart, and seeking the Kingdom before all else. This filial conversion is entirely directed to the Father.
 - For us to see God in prayer, we need to be pure of heart (Mt 5:8).
 - Prayer helps effectuate this heart transplant by helping us make God our treasure, our priority, putting time with him above other tasks: “**Matt. 6:21** For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.”
 - Prayer ultimately helps us to learn how to love with the love of God
 - B16 on St. John of the Cross: The long and difficult process of purification demands a personal effort, but the real protagonist is God: all that the human being can do is to “prepare” himself, to be open to divine action and not to set up obstacles to it. ... When it reaches this goal, the soul is immersed in Trinitarian life itself, so that St John affirms that it has reached the point of loving God with the same love with which he loves it, because he loves it in the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Mystical Doctor maintains that there is no true union of love with God that does not culminate in Trinitarian union. In this supreme state the holy soul knows everything in God and no longer has to pass through creatures in order to reach him. The soul now feels bathed in divine love and rejoices in it without reserve.”
 - That’s brought about by a prayer that extends fully into life.
- Faith is a form of memory, a memory of the future

- The fifth prism for growing in faith through prayer is our memory. This is one of the ways that Mary taught the early Church how to pray with faith and how she wants to teach us. Pope Benedict said last year in a catechesis of how the Church learned how to pray through the pre-Pentecost novena with Mary, “The presence of the Mother of God with the Eleven following the Ascension is not, then, a simple historical annotation regarding a thing of the past; rather, it assumes a meaning of great value, for she shares with them what is most precious: the living memory of Jesus, in prayer; and she shares this mission of Jesus: to preserve the memory of Jesus and thereby to preserve His presence.”
- At a very practical level, in prayer we remember our past:
 - Remembering our blessings and thanking God for them.
 - Remembering our sins, and sorrowfully begging God for mercy.
 - Remembering others, and interceding for them
- Our prayer is also a remembrance of the future:
 - Our call to eternal communion that fills us with hope
 - Our dependence on God’s providence, which gives us trust
- Faith is a journey
 - The sixth prism is that faith is a journey that begins in baptism and leads until the eschaton. This itinerant reality of the Christian life is also part of Christian prayer. Prayer is a journey.
 - Pope Francis, in a 2009 Chrism Mass, explicitly referred to prayer as a journey of faith. He said, “To be immersed in the Truth, in Christ – part of this process is prayer, in which we exercise our friendship with him and also come to know him: his way of being, of thinking, of acting. Praying is a journey in personal communion with Christ, setting before him our daily life, our successes and failures, our struggles and our joys – in a word, it is to stand in front of him.”
 - The history of spirituality has featured many attempts to describe this journey.
 - One of the most famous is St. Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, “The Itinerary of the Soul to God.” Pope Benedict, who wrote one of his two dissertations on St. Bonaventure, described in a catechesis how it happens by a counter-intuitive way:
 - *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, [*The Mind's Road to God*], is a "manual" for mystical contemplation. This book was conceived in a deeply spiritual place: Mount La Verna, where St Francis had received the stigmata. In the introduction the author describes the circumstances that gave rise to this writing: "While I meditated on the possible ascent of the mind to God, amongst other things there occurred that miracle which happened in the same place to the blessed Francis himself, namely the vision of the winged Seraph in the form of a Crucifix. While meditating upon this vision, I immediately saw that it offered me the ecstatic contemplation of Fr Francis himself as well as the way that leads to it."
 - The six wings of the Seraph thus became the symbol of the six stages that lead man progressively from the knowledge of God, through the observation of the world and creatures and through the exploration of the soul itself with its faculties, to the satisfying union with the Trinity through Christ, in imitation of St Francis of Assisi. The last words of St Bonaventure's *Itinerarium*, which respond to the question of how it is possible to reach this mystical communion with God, should be made to sink to the depths of the heart:
 - "If you should wish to know how these things come about, (the mystical communion with God)
 - seek grace, not instruction;
 - desire, not intellect;
 - the cry of prayer, not pursuit of study;
 - the spouse, not the teacher;
 - God, not man;
 - darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that inflames all and transports to God with fullest unction and burning affection....

- Let us then... pass over into darkness; let us impose silence on cares, concupiscence, and phantasms; let us pass over with the Crucified Christ from this world to the Father, so that when the Father is shown to us we may say with Philip, "*It is enough for me*" (cf. *ibid.*, VII 6)
- For St Bonaventure the whole of our life is a "journey", a pilgrimage, an ascent to God. But with our own strength alone we are incapable of climbing to the loftiness of God. God himself must help us, must "pull" us up. Thus prayer is necessary. Prayer, says the Saint, is the mother and the origin of the upward movement - "*sursum actio*", an action that lifts us up, Bonaventure says. Accordingly I conclude with the prayer with which he begins his "Journey": "Let us therefore say to the Lord Our God: "Lead me forth, Lord, in thy way, and let me step in thy truth; let my heart be glad, that it fears thy name
- Another famous description of the journey of faith in prayer was given to us by St. John Climacus (c. 600) about the "Ladder" of faith, hope and love. It focuses not merely on prayer but on the spiritual life, but describes the journey that takes place in prayer. Pope Benedict mentioned its stages in a catechesis:
 - Work the Ladder is **a complete treatise of spiritual life in which John describes the monk's journey from renunciation of the world to the perfection of love.** This journey according to his book covers 30 steps, each one of which is linked to the next. **The journey may be summarized in three consecutive stages:**
 - The first is expressed in **renunciation of the world** in order to return to a state of evangelical childhood. Thus, the essential is not the renunciation but rather the connection with what Jesus said, that is, **the return to true childhood in the spiritual sense**, becoming like children. John comments: "A good foundation of three layers and three pillars is: innocence, fasting and temperance. Let all babes in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3: 1) begin with these virtues, taking as their model the natural babes" (1, 20; 636). Voluntary detachment from beloved people and places permits the soul to enter into deeper communion with God. This renunciation leads to obedience that is the way to humility through humiliations which will never be absent on the part of the brethren. John comments: "Blessed is he who has mortified his will to the very end and has entrusted the care of himself to his teacher in the Lord: indeed he will be placed on the right hand of the Crucified One!" (4, 37; 704)
 - The second stage of the journey consists in **spiritual combat against the passions.** Every step of the ladder is linked to a principal passion that is defined and diagnosed, with an indication of the treatment and a proposal of the corresponding virtue. All together, these steps of the ladder undoubtedly constitute the most important treatise of spiritual strategy that we possess. The struggle against the passions, however, is steeped in the positive it does not remain as something negative thanks to the image of the "fire" of the Holy Spirit: that "all those who enter upon the good fight (cf. 1 Tm 6: 12), which is hard and narrow,... may realize that they must leap into the fire, if they really expect the celestial fire to dwell in them" (1,18; 636). The fire of the Holy Spirit is the fire of love and truth. The power of the Holy Spirit alone guarantees victory. However, according to John Climacus it is important to be aware that the passions are not evil in themselves; they become so through human freedom's wrong use of them. If they are purified, the passions reveal to man the path towards God with energy unified by ascesis and grace and, "if they have received from the Creator an order and a beginning..., the limit of virtue is boundless" (26/2, 37; 1068).
 - The last stage of the journey is **Christian perfection** that is developed in the last seven steps of the *Ladder*. These are the highest stages of spiritual life, which can be experienced by the "Hesychasts": the solitaries, those who have attained quiet and inner peace; but these stages are also accessible to the more fervent cenobites. Of the first three simplicity, humility and discernment John, in line with the Desert Fathers, considered the ability to discern, the most important. Every type of behaviour must be subject to discernment; **everything, in fact, depends on one's deepest motivations**, which need to be closely examined. Here one enters into the soul of the person and it is a question of reawakening

in the hermit, in the Christian, spiritual sensitivity and a "feeling heart", which are gifts from God: "After God, we ought to follow our conscience as a rule and guide in everything," (26/1,5; 1013). In this way one reaches tranquillity of soul, *hesychia*, by means of which the soul may gaze upon the abyss of the divine mysteries. The state of quiet, of inner peace, prepares the Hesychast for prayer which in John is twofold: **"corporeal prayer" and "prayer of the heart"**. The former is proper to those who need the help of bodily movement: stretching out the hands, uttering groans, beating the breast, etc. (15, 26; 900). The latter is spontaneous, because it is an effect of the reawakening of spiritual sensitivity, a gift of God to those who devote themselves to corporeal prayer. In John this takes the name "Jesus prayer" (*Ieson enche*), and is constituted in the invocation of solely Jesus' name, an invocation that is continuous like breathing: "May your remembrance of Jesus become one with your breathing, and you will then know the usefulness of *hesychia*", inner peace (27/2, 26; 1112). At the end the prayer becomes very simple: the word "Jesus" simply becomes one with the breath.

- The last step of the ladder (30), suffused with **"the sober inebriation of the spirit"**, is dedicated to the supreme "trinity of virtues": faith, hope and above all charity. John also speaks of charity as *eros* (human love), a symbol of the matrimonial union of the soul with God, and once again chooses the image of fire to express the fervour, light and purification of love for God. The power of human love can be reoriented to God, just as a cultivated olive may be grafted on to a wild olive tree (cf. Rm 11: 24) (cf. 15, 66; 893). John is convinced that an intense experience of this *eros* will help the soul to advance far more than the harsh struggle against the passions, because of its great power. **Thus, in our journey, the positive aspect prevails.** Yet charity is also seen in close relation to hope: "Hope is the power that drives love. Thanks to hope, we can look forward to the reward of charity.... Hope is the doorway of love.... The absence of hope destroys charity: our efforts are bound to it, our labours are sustained by it, and through it we are enveloped by the mercy of God" (30, 16; 1157). The conclusion of the *Ladder* contains the synthesis of the work in words that the author has God himself utter: "May this ladder teach you the spiritual disposition of the virtues. I am at the summit of the ladder, and as my great initiate (St Paul) said: "*So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13: 13)*!" (30, 18; 1160).
- What do we learn from him? **We see that the monastic life is only a great symbol of baptismal life, of Christian life.** It shows, so to speak, in capital letters what we write day after day in small letters. It is a prophetic symbol that reveals what the life of the baptized person is, in communion with Christ, with his death and Resurrection. **The fact that the top of the "ladder", the final steps, are at the same time the fundamental, initial and most simple virtues** is particularly important to me: faith, hope and charity. **These are not virtues accessible only to moral heroes; rather they are gifts of God to all the baptized: in them our life develops too.** The beginning is also the end, the starting point is also the point of arrival: **the whole journey towards an ever more radical realization of faith, hope and charity. The whole ascent is present in these virtues.** Faith is fundamental, because this virtue implies that I renounce my arrogance, my thought, and the claim to judge by myself without entrusting myself to others. **This journey towards humility, towards spiritual childhood is essential.** It is necessary to overcome the attitude of arrogance that makes one say: I know better, in this my time of the 21st century, than what people could have known then. Instead, it is necessary to entrust oneself to Sacred Scripture alone, to the word of the Lord, to look out on the horizon of faith with humility, in order to enter into the enormous immensity of the universal world, of the world of God. In this way our soul grows, the sensitivity of the heart grows toward God. Rightly, John Climacus says that hope alone renders us capable of living charity; hope in which we transcend the things of every day, we do not expect success in our earthly days but we look forward to the revelation of God himself at last. It is only in this extension of our soul, in this self-transcendence, that our life becomes great and that we

are able to bear the effort and disappointments of every day, that we can be kind to others without expecting any reward. Only if there is God, this great hope to which I aspire, can I take the small steps of my life and thus learn charity. **The mystery of prayer, of the personal knowledge of Jesus, is concealed in charity: simple prayer that strives only to move the divine Teacher's heart.** So it is that one's own heart opens, one learns from him his own kindness, his love. Let us therefore use this "ascent" of faith, hope and charity. In this way we will arrive at true life.

- Faith is a form of building
 - The penultimate prism is that faith is a form of building, and there is a construction project involved in prayer.
 - This happens in two senses.
 - First the building up of the individual through prayer. This is what St. Teresa of Avila described in her famous work *Interior Castle*. She described how mansion by mansion, one is built from a creature of sin toward a total transforming union with God as a Bride of Christ. There are seven successive mansions, which continue the thought of the stages of growth in prayer we first encountered in the preceding section. She wrote, "I began to think of the soul as a castle ... in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions."
 - First Mansion — The journey begins by entering the room "where humility is acquired."
 - Second Mansion — The soul seeks every opportunity for growth: sermons, holy conversations, prayer.
 - Third Mansion — The soul has attained a high standard of discipline and charity, and distrust his own strength, but is not yet motivated fully by love and haven't submitted totally. Progress is slow and there's aridity.
 - Fourth Mansion — The soul no longer depends on its own efforts but on God. Prayer of Quiet. Breaks bonds hindering it through detachment to the world and doesn't shrink from trials.
 - Fifth Mansion — Prayer of union, a new magnitude of contemplation, where soul is completely possessed by God, by short duration when faculties are asleep.
 - Sixth Mansion — Bride and Groom could see each for a long time. Soul receives favors and crosses, crosses so strong they can seem like Hell.
 - Seventh Mansion — Spiritual Marriage, like heaven, like two lighted candles joined as one or falling rain entering the river.
 - The second is that there is a building up of the Church through prayer.
 - Cardinal Ratzinger in Feast of Faith said, the "Middle Ages taught that the aim of prayer was that through it man should become a personal embodiment of the Church," an *anima ecclesiastica*.
 - B16 catechesis on prayer in the early Church at the time of Peter's liberation taught that one of the reasons St. James speaks of jealousies and contentions is because of a "lack of prayer" or a kind of prayer that cannot truly qualify. He writes: "The second is the lack of prayer — "you do not ask" (Jas 4:2b) — or a kind of a prayer that cannot qualify as such — **You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions**" (Jas 4:3). This situation would change, according to St James, if the community all spoke together with God, truly praying assiduously and unanimously. In fact, even talking about God runs the risk of losing inner strength and the testimony dries up if they are not animated, sustained and accompanied by prayer, by continuity of a living dialogue with the Lord. An important reminder also for us and our communities, both the small ones like the family and the bigger ones like the parish, the diocese and the entire Church. And it makes me think that they prayed in this community of St James,

but prayed wrongly, solely for their own passions. We must always learn again how to pray properly, truly pray, moving towards God and not towards our own good.

- Faith is a mother
 - Our last prism is faith as a mother. We learn to pray as children.
 - Cardinal Ratzinger said in Feast of Faith, “We learn to speak together with our mother and her words become our words.”
 - He expanded on this by saying that the fundamental word of prayer is “Abba!” together with Christ. This is something we learn through the Church: “How can I learn to pray? In communion. Prayer is always praying *with* someone. No one can pray to God as an isolated individual and in his own strength. Isolation and the loss of a basic sense of fellowship in prayer constitute a major reason for the lack of prayer. I learn to pray by praying with others, with my mother, by following her words, which are gradually filled out with meaning for me as I speak, live and suffer in fellowship with her. Naturally I must be always asking what these words mean. ... And that is precisely why it is impossible to start a conversation with Christ alone, cutting out the Church: a Christological form of prayer that excludes the Church also excludes the Spirit and the human being himself.”
 - Prayer, as I mentioned yesterday, is more “mystagogy” than “pedagogy.”
 - This is the way St. Teresa of Avila taught us how to pray, those who read her works learn how to pray by praying with them.
 - Jesus was the master mystagogue of prayer, teaching us his own prayer to the Father and revealing the mysteries of the kingdom to the simple, to the “merest of babes.” We see this in the Our Father, which is a perfect example of filial and familial prayer.
 - This mystagogy is the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - Mary likewise teaches us how to pray, like she taught the early Church. Pope Benedict described this at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007: “Just as the Apostles, together with Mary, “went up to the upper room” and there, “with one accord devoted themselves to prayer” (*Acts* 1:13-14), so too we are gathered here today at the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, which at this time is our “upper room” where Mary, Mother of the Lord, is in our midst. Today it is she who leads our meditation; it is she **who teaches us to pray**. It is she who shows us the way to open our minds and hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit, who comes to fill the whole world. ... Mary Most Holy, the pure and immaculate Virgin, is for us a **school of faith destined** to guide us and give us strength on the path that leads us to the Creator of Heaven and Earth. The Pope has come to Aparecida with great joy so as to say to you first of all: “Remain in the school of Mary.”
 - The Church mothers us in the growth of faith by serving as a school of prayer
 - We see it first in vocal prayers. Vocal prayers are those prayers we have learned that we say aloud, the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Creed, the Rosary, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, the Memorare, the Prayer of Consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Act of Contrition, the Prayer to Jesus Christ Crucified, the Stations of the Cross, etc. Jesus himself prayed aloud the vocal prayers of the synagogue, but also raised his voice to express his personal prayer, from blessing the Father to the agony of the Garden
 - But this formation in the art of prayer happens in various ways.
 - Back in 2007, in response to the question of a brother priest in the Diocese of Rome during a 2007 question-and-answer session, Pope Benedict described four different “dimensions” of prayer. This is different from what the catechism describes as the different forms of prayer (blessing and adoration, petition, intercession, praise and thanksgiving), or the fonts of prayer, or the guides for prayer, or the expressions of prayer (like vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation). I think it’s very interesting how he frames it.
 - Personal — one on one, as we see in Mary’s Magnificat, speaking personally with the Lord, pondering his words in our lives and hearts.

- Liturgical — Church teaches us how to pray through the Eucharistic prayer. The Liturgy is prayer, a listening and a response, but must be done with a prayerful attitude.
- Popular Piety — These are prayers rooted deeply in people’s hearts. Included is Eucharistic adoration.
- Charity — Benedict focused on St. Augustine’s second conversion to illustrated this point: “A little while ago I read what St Augustine said in Book X of his *Confessions*: ‘I was tempted and I now understand that it was a temptation to enclose myself in contemplative life, to seek solitude with you, O Lord; but you prevented me, you plucked me from it and made me listen to St Paul's words: ‘Christ died for us all. Consequently, we must die with Christ and live for all.’ I understood that I cannot shut myself up in contemplation; you died for us all. Therefore, with you, I must live for all and thus practise works of charity. True contemplation is expressed in works of charity. Therefore, the sign for which we have truly prayed, that we have experienced in the encounter with Christ, is that we exist "for others"”.
- Conclusion
 - Prayer is faith in action. In each of these eight ways we have looked at ways to enhance our prayer so that we might in turn grow in faith.
 - To say, “adauge nobis fidem” is to say, “Lord, increase our prayer” and “teach us to pray.”
- One of the greatest teacher of prayer was St. Ignatius of Loyola. As we prepare to expose Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the prayer of loving adoration, we learn from Ignatius how to open ourselves up to receive the graces and love Jesus most wants to give us: “Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. Good Jesus, hear me. Within the wounds, shelter me. From turning away, keep me. From the evil one, protect me. At the hour of my death, call me. Into your presence lead me to praise you with all your saints forever and ever. Amen.”