

24. March 2025

MEDITATIONS FOR LENT

“The prayer of the heart”

“Pray always in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18).

We are coming to the end of St Paul's advice for spiritual warfare. Surely all believers know how essential prayer is, without which there can be no spiritual life. If we neglect prayer, we are always in danger that temptations will overcome us more easily, that distractions will increase and that the temptations of the world will have a greater influence on us. We will also be weaker and more vulnerable when it comes to fighting the battle that has been entrusted to us with the appropriate weapons.

On the other hand, if we take advantage of the Lord's opportunities to pray, our souls will be prepared and docile to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through prayer we will be able to conquer strongholds with the Lord.

Yesterday I ended the meditation by quoting part of a Starez's exhortation on the prayer of Jesus. He was clear that this prayer is a special weapon against the power of the devil. The full quote is:

"My children, I beseech you, for the love of God, never for a moment cease to utter the prayer of our Christ. Your lips must unceasingly invoke the name of Jesus, which destroys the devil and all his machinations. Just as one cannot approach and grasp an iron when it is red-hot, so it is with a soul that prays fervently. The demons will not approach him. Indeed, how could they? Because if they come near him, they will be consumed by the divine fire contained in the name of Jesus. Whoever prays is enlightened. Those who do not pray are darkened. Prayer makes us partakers of the divine light. Therefore, whoever prays well is completely enlightened and the Spirit of God dwells in him".

It was above all monks and hermits who tried to put into practice St. Paul's exhortation: 'Pray at all times'. This is how the so-called 'Jesus Prayer' came into being, which consists of constantly calling on the name of the Lord until the prayer itself resounds in the heart through the action of the Holy Spirit.

If we were to explain it in the terms commonly used in the Catholic world, we could say that the 'prayer of the heart' is the systematic repetition of an ejaculatory prayer. It has a certain resemblance to long litanies in which, for example, the name of Jesus is invoked.

If we apply 'discretion' to our spiritual life - that is, taking into account our circumstances - this prayer will be immensely valuable in spiritual warfare. Of course, most of the people who listen to me are not monks or hermits. But we can learn from their wisdom and experience, adapting wisely (with 'discretion') what is fruitful for our path.

Why is this prayer of the heart of which the Starez speaks so valuable?

He himself underlines an essential dimension: We know that Jesus came "*to destroy the works of the devil*" (1 Jn 3:8). By repeatedly calling on His name, the devil is reminded of the Lord's victory. That is why, as the Starez says, the demons dare not approach those who fervently invoke the name of Jesus, because they would be exposed to the divine light.

Next, the Starez says another important sentence: "*He who prays is enlightened; he who does not pray is darkened.*" We should pay close attention to these words in order to watch over our prayer times zealously and not to waste them.

As we approach the great feast of the Lord's Resurrection, I would like to remind you once again of the aim of these Lenten meditations: to become better disciples of the Lord and to assume the responsibility that the Lord of the Church entrusts to us in these difficult times.

Without neglecting the other forms of prayer that the Church teaches us, which we will discuss later, I would like to emphasise the great spiritual benefits of the prayer of the heart, even if we cannot practise it with the same intensity as monks.

The classic ejaculatory prayer that is repeated over and over again is: "*Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" It is very simple and can be repeated in times of silence and contemplation, as well as in any ordinary circumstance of life. When our soul becomes

accustomed to the prayer of the heart, it will begin to long for it and seek it more and more. It will then begin to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves in daily life to practise this prayer. I am thinking, for example, of the long journeys we have to make by car or other means of transport, which can be used very well to practise the prayer of the heart. It could also help us to reduce other unnecessary habits, such as excessive use of mobile phones or all kinds of news and messages. In this way our hearts will be more open to the Lord.

Of course, prayer of the heart is not a magic wand that works automatically. For it to bear fruit, it must be integrated into our efforts to follow the Lord in all areas. It will then accompany our spiritual life as a very powerful weapon to counteract and weaken the powers of evil by invoking the name of Jesus.