

2. «When you pray ..., do not pray like... »

Neither like hypocrites, nor pagans

Lectio Mt 6,5.7

Unlike Luke, where Jesus responds immediately to the question made by one of his disciples, by teaching how to pray the *Our Father* (Lk 11,1-4), in Matthew, we read that Jesus precedes the Lord's prayer, with a careful catechesis, before actually teaching which words to use when praying (Mt 6,5-8), indicating that this should not be like the form of prayer either a hypocrite or a pagan would use (Mt 6,7-8).¹ Jesus assumes the role of teacher regarding how and what to pray. Thus, the disciple may not pray either in any manner, or about anything.

REFLECTION

In Matthew, Jesus presents prayer as one of the religious practices that is to be done in secret² for the *greater glory of God*, as is expected of his followers (Mt 6,1). In order that the disciple give God *greater glory*, it is expected of him/her to adopt a life of piety typical of neither the Jewish synagogue, nor what was customary in the Greco-Roman world. In his/her life of prayer, the disciple of Jesus should be clearly different to the way most religious contemporaries prayed.

Be not like hypocrites

In Jewish culture, prayer was highly valued and regulated as a practice of piety. While the local synagogue was the common place of worship, one could pray anywhere. Given that one should pray three times, daily (cf. Dan 6,11; Acts 3,1; 10,30), it was normal to meet people in prayer, anywhere, “*in the field, at home, in bed, in the heart*” (Midr. Ps 4,4). Praying on the street was quite normal to do, if one happened to be there at the time of prayer. One would usually pray standing (Jer 18,20; Mk 11,25; Lk 18,11.13), but not only (Nm 16,22; Dan 6,10; Lk 22,41; Mt 26,39).

“⁵ When you pray, be not like the hypocrites, who love to stand up and pray in the houses of worship and on the street corners, so that everyone would see them. I tell you, they have already been paid”.

In fact, Jesus does not criticize whether one prays in public or prays standing up, but rather, wherever one finds him/herself, one must adopt the posture one chooses as long as he/she is not “*looking for notice before others*”. By addressing others saying: 'when you pray' in the plural, (cf. Mt 6,2.5.17), may suggest that Jesus was referring to prayer in common; however, because he immediately after uses the singular saying “*and you, instead, when you pray*” (Mt 6,7), we are made to believe that he is referring to any form of prayer typical of a disciple, be it in private or in public.

¹From the formal point of view, both paragraphs have a different construction: while Mt 6,5-6 repeats the basic form of Mt 6,2-4.16-18, in which he compares the typical attitude of the hypocrite to the attitude required of the disciple, Mt 6,7-8 presents an improper formula of a prayer of a Christian. Mt 6,5-6 continues to recall the opposite *they vs you, publicity vs secret, men vs God* which we find in Mt 6,2-4.16-18, and which is totally absent in Mt 6,7-8.

² Almsgiving (Mt 6,2-4) and fasting (Mt 6,16-18) being the other two.

The controversial accent is evident. It was so normal for a Jew to pray in public, in order to easily seek attention while doing so. The remark made by Jesus, who preferred to pray in private (Mk 1,35; 14,32-42; Mt 14,23; Lk 5,16; 6,12; 9,18; 11,1), does not refer to the fact of praying in public (Mt 14,19; 15,36; Jn 11,41-42), even though he sometimes appears to be reticent about looking for attention when recognized in public, where public squares and street corners are places of greater visibility.

Jesus calls “*hypocrite*” one who is a comedian and pretends to be another by hiding behind a mask. They are those who want to attract attention and praise and by doing so, the controversial element is intensified. He says how much they love doing this and want to appear as friends who pray. The prayer of a hypocrite is not directed to God alone, for it poses in public as though directed towards God.

Over and above the description of hypocritical behavior, Jesus is severe about the results of such behavior. Whoever wants to please the public by his relationship with God obtains what he wanted by being admired by others without, however, really directing his/her prayer to God while looking for attention. Whoever wanted to be admired would have obtained what he/she wanted without really being seen and heard by God.

“⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen and your Father who sees what you do in private, will reward you”.

Whenever he/she prays, the disciple of Jesus must seek to pray in private, for this is stressed in the words, “*But when you pray ...*”. Many are those whose prayer is false by seeking their own vainglory, while, on the other hand, a true disciple is one who withdraws to seek and meet God the Father in prayer.

The effort made by the disciple to pray in private is described in greater detail in the words 'enter', 'close', 'pray'. The dwelling where one is to retire to pray to the Father is a place that can be closed, a humble dwelling without windows and with only one door.³ When at prayer, the disciple avoids being seen by others so that he/she may be contemplated by God, alone. There, where no human eye can reach, the heart of God awaits us. There, where darkness reigns, is where one cannot stand out, but rather be seen only by God.

Jesus does not expect to impose that prayer be in a private dwelling, and neither does he impose solitude and a particular form of prayer (cf. Mt 18,19-20). He does not in any way refute that prayer be in common. What he insists on is, that his disciples pray seeking God alone, and not the approval or disapproval of others. The opposite of “*public*” vs “*private*” is not so much a matter of being an action to attract the attention of others or whether done in the presence of God alone, but one that is intended to be acceptable to God the Father God (cf. Mt 5,16).

Although the type of reward is not defined, the context that follows suggests that the reward is *God's pleasure* before one who does not seek to be admired by others. The awareness of being son/daughter of God is already the reward in the prayer of a disciple. It does not mean that the Father will grant all that is prayed in secret, but that God, who regards him/her as son/daughter,

³ In the NT, the word means the interior part of the house, the most private room, the least accessible room (Mt 24,26; Lk 12,3.24). The sentence recalls Is 26,20 (2 Kings 4,33), where the prophet encourages Israel to close himself in a store room until God's anger be appeased. However, the meaning is quite the opposite: Matthew recommends that one should hide away from the eyes of men (cf. Gen 43,30) in order to obtain an encounter with God.

will grant what is asked of God as a Father. One could not desire a greater reward for a prayer addressed directly to God. To know that one is acknowledged as son/daughter is the reward given to the one who prays while seeking God is his intimacy. It is the experience of being sons/daughters of God, and not so much the petitions made, that the disciple who prays in secret obtains as a reward.

Matthew is neither interested nor insistent on the privatization of a life of prayer. What he refutes is a piety that is interested in being seen and not gone unnoticed by others.⁴ Whoever seeks to be acknowledged by men loses sight of being acknowledged by his Father. The appreciation and attention given by God the Father is the aim of the disciple's life of prayer. For this reason, the prayerful disciple can bear with not being acknowledged by all those who *do not see in secret*.⁵

Do not be like the pagans

What Matthew states in Mt 6,7-8, besides using unusual vocabulary, does not seem to be coherent with what he expresses in Mt 6,9-13⁶ It is, therefore likely that the original vocabulary had been expressed in another context. Here it serves as an introduction to the Lord's Prayer, highlighting as its characteristics the carefully chosen words relating to the petitions expressed in the Lord's Prayer.

It is not clear whether it was originally the prologue of the 'Our Father', or whether the editor of this narrative included it himself taking it from tradition.⁸ It is more likely to be a deliberate contrast from what we see in his final version of the 'Our Father' (Mt 6,7-8) and seems to deliberately express the contrast between the way the pagans prayed (Mt 6,7a.8a: "do not be like them" ... "for the Father already knows what you need before you ask Him" (Mt 6,7b.8b).

"⁷When you pray, do not use a lot of meaningless words, as the pagans do because they think that God will hear them because their prayers are long".

When God's children pray (cf. Mt 6,5.8), besides avoiding looking for attention, they should pray without many meaningless words. The exact meaning of "*stammering*" used in the New Testament and which was not in the Greek edition until the 5th century, was expressed more clearly by "*meaningless words*". The exhortation takes for granted, this form of prayer typical of the gentiles (cf. 1Kings 18,26-29; Eccl 7,14), who had recourse to the tiring repetition of

⁴ "God wanted to be your debtor, and great was the honour that this bestowed on you. Because He is invisible, so, too would He like that both you and your prayer be invisible". (J. CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies* 19,3: PG 57,277).

⁵ He moralizes and withdraws himself from the text, AUGUSTINE, *Sermon* 2,2,5, PL 34, 272, when he comments that "human praise should not be fancied by the one who acts rightly, but should be a source of good example for those who could imitate the way of praying".

⁶ He interrupts the triple exhortation of Jesus to avoid hypocrisy in the practice of good works (Mt 6,2-4.5-6.16-18); he addresses the disciples in the plural, in contrast with the previous "you, instead" (Mt 6,3.6.17). Although he continues with the theme of praying correctly as sons (cf. Mt 6,5-6), unexpectedly it is now the pagans who are in contrast with the disciple.

⁷*Stammering and meaningless words* are unique terminology in the NT; to *listen, to pay attention*, only in Matthew; *pagans* appears only in pre-Matthew translation (Mt 5,47; 18,17).

⁸ It is also believed that what the expression means, and not so much its style, could be attributed to Jesus of Nazareth (U. LUZ, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Mt 1-7), Zürich – Einsiedeln – Köln, 1985, 330).

divine titles to assure themselves that not one of their gods had been left out, in order that their petitions be granted by their gods.⁹ In any case, whoever prays like the pagans is under the impression that it is through insistent naming of their gods and meaningless words will convince their gods to accede in favor of their petitions.

Here, the pagans are considered not as a defined group who confront the believers, but an example of a particular religious attitude (cf. Mt 5,47; 6,32; 18,17)¹⁰ that covers up what is typical of pious men and women who, by putting pressure on God to grant what they ask through tiresome repetition of his name and repetition of their need, insist on attracting God's attention to relent and to accede to their insistence. This does not mean that lengthy prayer is unacceptable, and no less acceptable is perseverance in prayer (Mt 7,7-11; Lk 11,5-8; 18,1-8). What is not right is the illusion of the person who, by not acknowledging God as Father, believes that insistence will obtain what he/she want of him: *“Be careful when you go to the temple ... Think before you speak, and don't make any rash promises to God. He is in heaven, and you are on earth, so don't say any more than you have to.* (Eccl 5,1)

“⁸ Do not be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask for it”.

When the disciple prays, he/she knows that he/she prays to a God on whom he/she can count (Is 65,24: *“Even before they finish praying to me, I will answer their prayer”*). It is, therefore, not necessary to even let him know what one desires, nor much less the need to convince him in order to receive his help. It is not so much your need, but your being convinced that you are his son/daughter that motivates you to approach God. The prayer of a pagan is very wordy because of his uncertainty of whether he/she would be heard and understood. A son/daughter do not hesitate to believe that God is beside them always, whether he/she is at prayer or not (cf. Mt 6,25-34).

Looking closely at the exhortation of Jesus, avoiding repetitive and tiresome prayer is based on his own experience of God. There is no need to be aware of one's needs, and much less, insist on being heard. While the disciple prays, he/she does not expect to put pressure on God to listen to him/her and to seek his favor, for he/she knows that God loves him/her as a son/daughter. The disciple seeks, therefore, to approach God as such, while submitting to him. *“While we acknowledge to be son/daughter in prayer, we turn to God as Father and not as a servant.”*^{11, 12}

MEDITATION

We may be surprised that Jesus would present the life of prayer as one of these religious practices of his time, together with almsgiving (Mt 6,2-4) and fasting (Mt 6,16-18), as an expression of the “greater justice” (Mt 6,1) which God expects from his own. This implies that, for the disciple, prayer is not so much a personal need, as indeed it may be, as much as that

⁹ The practice of repeating the name of a god, and in doing so pronouncing it correctly in order to have a certain influence in his regard, had already been criticized by pagan authors as “tiring God” (HORACIO, *Od.* 1,2,26; SENECA, *Ep.*, IV, 2,5).

¹⁰To compare the religious behaviour of a Jew with that of a pagan would in itself be humiliating to a Jew. However, the motive is not alien to Matthew who several times, warns his community not to be like the pagans (Mt 5,47; 6,32; 18,17; 20,25).

¹¹H. HENDRICKX, *El Sermón de la montaña*, Madrid, 1986, 141.

¹²“Hence, if he already knows what we want, we do not pray to ask what we want. but rather, to make sure that what we ask for is pleasing to him. (ANONIMO, Incomplete work regarding the Gospel of Matthew 13: PG 28 56,711).

which is required of us by the Master: for it is as such that Jesus has identified it. Besides, Jesus has placed more attention on prayer than on the other aspects of discipleship (Mt 6,5-15); he did not only indicate the attitudes that are to be avoided, but also the precise words that are to be used when praying. Jesus has left his followers less freedom in how to pray than how to practice charity and deny oneself of food!

The reason is obvious, for when the disciple prays, he/she must distinguish themselves from all others who pray. While disclaiming the Jewish and gentile way of praying of his time, he is asking of his own to pray in a particular and precise way. The motive for this difference makes one wonder. It shows, in effect, the underlying concept of God who is Father, and who is present in what “is hidden” (cf. Mt 6,18), that is to say, in a place totally opposed to that which is occupied by one who is false in prayer, whether a believer, hypocrite or a pagan in anguish.

The hypocrite prays with the intention of gaining something. He is not interested so much in what he asks of God, but rather in what others think of him. He does not even take notice of God before whom he is praying, but rather in the attention and esteem he obtains from those who see him. The prayer of a hypocrite that is not made in the presence of God, but in the sight of others, seeks to be seen by others and is not made in the presence of God to whom he owes justice.¹³

Jesus does not impose, either that we pray or where we pray. Moreover, he indicates what the purpose of prayer should be in the prayer life of a disciple. This, and no other, is precisely the reward. It does not mean that God hides in secret places and neither suggests that he is more present in the intimacy of the home rather than in the noise of the street and of the temple. It is therefore taken for granted that God sees and hears the prayer that is made in secret (cf. Mt 6,4). What is characteristic in one who really prays is the way, or better said, the intention in praying and not so much the place where one prays that really matters. Rather than yearning to receive what one asks for in prayer, one should rejoice in being able to approach God as Father in prayer. To know that God contemplates us while we pray, is why we need not seek to be seen by others. If the prayer of a Christian does not have the glory of God as its aim, this instead is vainglory. Whatever is not done to be pleasing to God is not worthy of his sons and daughters.

The hidden goodness of the disciple does not remain unseen and unknown to the Father, who sees and accepts it. Even though such prayer remains secret, it will never be ignored. For the fact that such prayer is not intended to attract the attention of anyone, it does not mean that it is worthless (Deut 29,29; Eccl 17,15; 23,18; 39,19),¹⁴ for the reward will be paid to each one according to its merits (Prov 24,12; Eccl 12,14). We may be full of material needs and social

¹³ With good reason, it was noted by D. BONHOEFFER, *The cost of discipleship*, Touchstone: 1995, 164: “Enclosed in my dwelling, I can organize an enormous protest ... the publicity that I seek for myself, consists of the fact that I am, at the same time, the one who prays and who listens. How could I not expect that God listens to me ..., I decide to listen to myself. I am aware that I have prayed in a spirit of prayer, and it is in this spirit wherein is rooted the satisfaction of my petition”. “I can lay on a very nice show for myself even in the privacy of my own room...The publicity which I am looking for is then provided by the fact that I am the one who at the same time prays and looks on. I am listening to my own prayer and thus I am answering my own prayer. Not being content to wait for God to answer our prayer... we provide our own answer. We take note that we have prayed suitably well, and this substitutes the satisfaction of answered prayer.”

¹⁴ That God sees in secret is both a biblical and Jewish conviction. cf. G. F. MOORE, *Judaism*. I, Cambridge, 1966, 368-374.

esteem, but before God, we only need to experience the need of him while knowing that he is aware of it and ready to grant what we need. Whoever, while praying, is solely intent on God the Father will treasure him in the secret of his heart.

The fact that immediately before the words of the “Our Father” (Mt 6,7-8) and to better understand how they contrast with the anguished manner of praying of the pagans,¹⁵ when Jesus teaches how to pray, he does not approve of the excessive way the pagans pray. Although in this context, this brief exhortation serves as an introduction to the prayer of Jesus, it is not to be considered as a simple counsel because of its brevity (Mt 14,23-25; Lk 18,1). He seeks, rather, to educate the one who prays to trust in a childlike manner while he/she seeks to conform his/her will to that of God the Father.

When the disciple prays, he/she is not to be preoccupied about their situation, however serious that may be. He/she is rather to rejoice at being before their Father and to be reassured that he/she is his son/daughter, while trusting that he acknowledges them as his children and knows their needs without having got to convince God that he has to intervene at all costs. While this reassurance is not only exclusive to Jesus (cf. Is 65,24), we respond to our concept of God and our certainty of his closeness to us (cf. Mt 7,7-11; Lk 11,5-8; 18,2-7). While pagans do not feel close to their gods, and neither know them, they try to pester them. Instead, the disciple knows that the Father knows him/her intimately and knows that he will never let them down. It is for this reason that the disciple does not need to be told what God already knows about them.

The constant repetition of one's needs, besides leaving restless and insecure the one who prays, reveals how little he/she knows about God. However sincere a prayer is, ignoring who God is, is not peculiar to his children. It is not necessary to reveal our poverty, to him who is already aware of it. As a Father, God knows his children, their poverty, their shortcomings. This makes unnecessary any attempt by the one who prays to influence him; he/she should not ask in kind what has already been received in excess: the Father's favor and attentions. Prayer is not nurtured by shortcomings or desires; it is only nurtured by the trust that the Father deserves. It is not much what is missing that leads one to pray, but how much we need God.

Whatever attempt to put pressure on God and to influence his decisions, is useless. It would be a waste of time to tell God your Father what he already knows about you (Mt 6,8). What God needs to know is that his disciple trusts him as Father and does not approach him in prayer only to ask, but, above all, to entrust him/herself to him.

Jesus warns his disciples, that since even they could fall into the temptation that their God is simply there to listen to insistent petitions. To be preoccupied that one is heard by God, and to inform him of what one needs is to be discouraged. The disciple, while praying to convince God to grant what he asks for, should rather place himself/herself at the service of their Father. Prayer life that does not convert his disciple to being God's son/daughter is not Christian authenticity (Mt 26, 39.42-44).

Because Jesus should be taken seriously, he does not object to praying much with God, but rather to know well when to do so. Whoever is moved before the Father, does not lack words to express his/her emotions. While contemplating him as Father, the one who prays knows that

¹⁵ This reflect well the critical reaction that contemporary Judaism in the time of Jesus held in relation to the way the pagans prayed.

he /she is loved, although in need, yet knows that God the Father, who knows all about our needs, will never let him/her down.

Such catechesis regarding prayer is full of teaching. We Christians are inclined to defend our lengthy practices of piety when criticized on the grounds that they may lack fidelity to the teaching of Jesus regarding the way Jews and pagans prayed. However, Jesus did not refer to prayer as such, but rather to the way one presented him/herself, at prayer. What was important to him was how one is to approach God in prayer. Jesus did not disapprove of neither prayer in common nor in public (Mt 6,5-6; cf. Acts 2,44-47), and in no way does he disapprove of perseverance in prayer (Mt 6,7-8; cf. 1Thess 5,17; Rom 12,12). Instead, he promotes the search for God as the exclusive way of praying, in order to get in touch with God who is aware of all our needs. However much one lacks and may suffer, whoever prays before the Father as son/daughter and abandons him/herself to him is praying in both a personal and ecclesial manner. The fact is that the person who does not acknowledge God as Father is likely to pray as the hypocrites and pagans do.

PRAYER

I thank you, Lord, for having taught us how to pray so that we might be able to attain this “greater justice” (Mt 6,1) that you ask of us. I had not realized how true it is that prayer brings about the fulfilment of your will and is the best way to give you 'greater glory'. Moreover, praying as you have taught is a way of acknowledging that you are my teacher and that I am your disciple. However, I consider somewhat naive, that while you teach me, you take it for granted that I already pray. I admit that I am never too keen on praying, given that there is always so much to do. You, who before teaching how to pray, prayed frequently, grant me the desire to meet with “our Father” (Mt 6,9b), and then help me to be prompt to follow your teaching.

I understand, Lord, that while you have told me what not to do and what to say when speaking to the Father, you have left me little freedom to choose to do as I please. It seems strange to me that, while you do not make me pray, you do not permit me to do whatever I want, but only as you prescribe. Besides, you even say that I must not pray like those who do not follow you. You want to convert me into one of your followers.

Thank you, Lord, for also warning me of the danger of turning to my Father in greater anguish because of my misery, rather than because I am sure of his mercy. May my weaknesses and desires increase my trust in “our Father”. I cannot stop worrying about how long it will take me before I can enjoy his presence. I will do my best to let the Father know my needs, before he asks anything of me. I will try to win over his heart, in spite of my many weaknesses, even before being convinced that he already knows everything about me (Mt 6,8). Because I am impatient due to my sinfulness and the fact that his goodness does not appease me, I fail to see myself as son/daughter. I concentrate on my own misery and seem to ignore your goodness. I am sorry because I think more of my needs rather than of your need to know that I am your son/daughter. I feel ashamed of myself, and ask your pardon, Lord, for I not only ignore your teaching, but overlook the opportunity to acknowledge you as Son loved by his Father.

Above all, Lord, thank you for, first of all, warning me that I could destroy my prayer life, if I should transform it into an exercise of hypocrisy which is practiced by good people who, while praying, seek only, themselves. Help me to understand that, if I want to be accepted and honored by those who watch me at prayer, this would interfere with my being seen by you,

Father. I will therefore pray in secret, where you may know that I am your son/daughter. For being looked upon by the Father, I can claim to be son/daughter of God, and so how could I possibly dream of a greater gift from you?

Of what use is it, Master, to pray in secret as you ask me to do, if when I am before the Father, I only think of myself? Do you not notice how I insist on calling his attention, my impatience to be listened to and to influence what he thinks of me? I admit that the confidence I lack in your Father is greater than my faults. I beg you to forgive my expectation to get what I want through so much reasoning when he has not as yet convinced me of his great love. To acknowledge me as God's son/daughter and you as brother should be enough for me, in spite of my many failings. Help me to understand, Lord Jesus, that while the Father considers me his son/daughter, he will also see in me what he has seen in you (Mk 1,11; 9,7), for it is he who is present in my prayer, and not so much my worries. Teach me, Master, that whenever I pray, I may desire to do God's will by placing myself in his service as son/daughter, and by doing so, fulfilling whatever the Father wants of me.