

The Parables of Prayer

Edited by
Msgr Antonio Pitta

Preface by Pope Francis

NOTES ON PRAYER

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Translated by Matthew Sherry

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Introduction

After *The Parables of Mercy* (2015), which I discussed in view of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, those on prayer continue in the same vein in the year dedicated to prayer as requested by Pope Francis. The intuition on the teaching of prayer in parables comes from the evangelist Luke, who is particularly sensitive to both traits of Jesus. He is the greatest master of parables, even if it is necessary to distinguish the original source of the parables from their final version. The former is owing to the historical preaching of Jesus, the latter to the influence of the first Christian communities and ultimately to the composition of the individual evangelist. In any case, as Joachim Jeremias understood quite well, whoever delves into the parables of Jesus finds himself on a solid historical basis.

If at a certain point in His preaching one of His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, this means that Jesus had a particular way of praying. Before Jesus, John the Baptist and the Pharisees had also taught their

disciples to pray. Nonetheless, John had chosen ascetic prayer in the desert of Judah, and the Pharisees did not use parables to teach prayer. What characterises, in a singular way, Jesus's teaching on prayer is the recourse to parables. Jesus did not invent a new system for praying. With all due respect to other masters, Jesus was not a hermit, a Buddhist monk, or a yogi. He instead chose the daily life of His people to teach prayer with parables.

In the itinerary we are undertaking, our first stop will be the prayer of Jesus and, in particular, the *Our Father*. Next will come an exploration of the parables explicitly related to prayer: the troublesome friend, the widow and the unbelieving judge, the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple, the fig tree and the kingdom of God. At first glance the parable of the merciful father, rather than of the "prodigal son", does not seem related to prayer. This consummate parable is instead meant as a response to those who object to Jesus's association with tax collectors and sinners (*Luke 15:1-2*). Yet the baffling humanity of the merciful father, unimaginable in any father of this world, betrays the relationship between the heavenly Father and human beings.

Except for the parable of the fig tree, which is also found in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the other parables on prayer are found only in the Gospel of Luke, the foremost Gospel of prayer and parables. Without wanting to force the matter, we believe that the connection between the *Our Father* and the parables on

prayer is an original one. Jesus illustrated the *Our Father* with parables, and with these He continually referred to the *Our Father*. This back-and-forth is decisive, between the *Our Father* and the parables of prayer, and so the most appropriate way to recite and explain the *Our Father* is found in the parables.

The beginnings and endings of the parables on prayer are not a matter of chance, but play into Luke's narrative strategy. The first parable, right after the *Our Father*, is that of the troublesome friend (*Luke* 11:5-13). The last parable concerns the fig tree, and watching for the kingdom with vigilant prayer (*Luke* 21:29-36). The first parable ends with the gift of the Holy Spirit (*Luke* 11:13); the last ends with vigilant prayer, in view of the kingdom of God (*Luke* 11:31). The Spirit and vigilance go hand in hand. The Spirit teaches us to pray because He cries aloud in the human soul, and vigilant prayer is born from the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the hearts of believers. It is my heartfelt wish that the readers, between the presence of the Spirit in the Church and the prayer that brings the signs of the times to light, will let themselves be guided by Jesus, the original teacher of prayer with parables.