

# **Communitarian dimension of prayer in contemporary Christianity**

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## **Abstract**

The present study wishes to concentrate on the role that prayer has in today's Christian context, taking into account the secularised and globalised world and the role that the laity is gaining more and more within the Christian folds. After deepening some basic aspects, according to Christian tradition, and presenting a bird-view unfolding of the prayer life in the history of Christianity, we propose to focus, in a specific way, on the communitarian dimension of prayer which is underlined and valued by renewal movements and laity in today's experience.

## **1. Introduction**

For me prayer is a surge of the heart;  
It is a simple look turned towards heaven,  
It is a cry of recognition and of love

Embracing both trial and joy.<sup>63</sup>

With this poetic form, one of the masters of Christian spirituality, St. Therese of Lisieux, effectively describes her experience of prayer. The same phrase opens the chapter devoted to prayer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), which, subsequently, defines the act of praying as “*the rising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.*”<sup>64</sup> These words are taken, instead, from another great representative of Christian spirituality, St. John Damascene, one the Fathers of the Church, who lived between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.. Significantly, the Catholic theologians and bishops who worked on the CCC wished to describe the meaning of prayer in the Christian perspective drawing inspiration from two masters, who lived in two different contexts. St. John Damascene belonged, in fact, to the rich oriental traditions of the early centuries, while St. Therese of Lisieux is an expression of the Catholic Latin and Western world of the second half of the XIX century.

This helps us to understand that, in Christian tradition, prayer is a topic, which presents a vast richness and multiform elements that vary according to or receive precious contribution from the different spiritual streams born and developed within the Church in different cultural contexts and times. Prayer, in fact, is a primary aspect of all religions. Perhaps is the heart of religiosity, in general, to the point of setting a line of demarcation between, “what and who is religious, and what and who is not”. Wherever human persons are born and whatever culture they belong to, experiencing their powerlessness, they feel the need to address a Superior Being, the Absolute, who grows within them. As Pope Paul VI effectively pinpoints, “*something is missing in the very formula of our own*

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<sup>63</sup> ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX, *Manuscrits autobiographiques*, C 25 r.

<sup>64</sup> ST. JOHN DAMASCENE, *Defide orthodoxa* 3,24: PG 94, 1089C.

*existence and it cannot be ensured even by the illusion of our self-sufficiency. It needs God; there is the need to pray to Him, to find in Him that security, that fullness which can come to us only from His goodness. We need to pray in order to live”.*<sup>65</sup>

It is through prayer that all human beings, in their own religious traditions, can establish this contact with the Absolute. For Christians this experience is a meeting between the human being's life and God's life, between the creature's powerlessness and the Creator's strength. It is a living rapport, which is personal and loving, enabling human beings to fill up the emptiness of their existence. It is not simply an act, but a heart-to-heart and face-to-face encounter, which fills up the creature's heart with God's gifts.<sup>66</sup>

## **2. Christian prayer as covenant and as communion**

Though prayer is common to all faiths and religious traditions, still it varies significantly according to the idea and perception of God and of the Absolute Reality that every faith offers to its followers. Two elements distinguish Christian prayer, from ways of praying according to other faiths: its being part of a covenant with God and its communitarian dimension. Christianity was born from the Jewish tradition, which is

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<sup>65</sup> Paolo VI, *Angelus*, 3rd August 1975. (English translation by the author of the article)

<sup>66</sup> E. ANCILLI, «Il mistero della preghiera cristiana» in E. Ancilli (ed. by), *La Preghiera. Bibbia, teologia, esperienze storiche*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, 14-35, 14.

characterised, by several covenants or pacts between the people of Israel – the Chosen People – and God.<sup>67</sup>

In this perspective, the relationship that a Christian establishes with God is always part and expression of the covenant between the Creator, who offers a free promise of salvation, and the creature who can answer with a response of love.<sup>68</sup> When creating, God called every being into existence. Human beings can be distinguished from all other creatures because they have been made in His image. Nevertheless, though, through sin, human beings have lost their relationship with God, however, they retain the dimension of being in His image. They are a ‘*you*’ of the Creator and constantly search for Him, as the desire for the One who created them cannot be suppressed or extinguished. Prayer has to be seen in this perspective. In fact, God calls the human being first, and though human beings may forget their Creator, running after idols of all sorts, the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, God's initiative of love always comes first;

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<sup>67</sup> According to the Jewish tradition, God has performed different covenants with the People of Israel, through some of their prophets. We refer to the Covenant with Noah - when He promised no longer to destroy the world and the creatures as it was done during the great deluge -; the covenant with Abraham and the Patriarchs and the one with Moses. To these covenants, pacts or alliances Christianity has added the final one, through Christ. Contrary to what was widely believed this last covenant in no way substituted or revoked the previous ones. Each of these covenants never eliminates the previous one, it rather confirms it and, at the same time interprets it in a new way. (W. Kasper, *Chiesa cattolica. Essenza-Realtà-Missione*, Queriniana, Brescia, 2012, 478-479.

<sup>68</sup> See CCC 2661. Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man. (CCC 2564)

our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals the human being to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama, which engages the heart, unfolding throughout the whole history of salvation.<sup>69</sup>

## **2.1 Jesus, model and inspiration of Christian prayer**

Jesus of Nazareth offers a model to Christians in all expressions of life, including the one of prayer. In fact, as reported by the four Gospels, Jesus, did not only preach, work miracles and call the disciples to follow him; He also immersed himself in prayer. He himself learnt how to pray and, presumably, he did it, privately, from his mother Mary, and, in public, in the synagogue at Nazareth and in the Temple at Jerusalem. It is not difficult to imagine that he learnt prayers and hymns, according to the words and rhythms of the prayer of his people.

In the course of his existence, as narrated by the evangelists, Jesus prayed on many different occasions. He did it before all the decisive moments of his life, for instance - before his baptism, the transfiguration and before his passion.<sup>70</sup> He also prayed prior to the main stages of his mission - the call of the Twelve, the acknowledgement of Peter who recognized in Him the '*the Christ of God*' and asked that Peter's faith may not fail when tempted<sup>71</sup> - and that of the future mission to be carried out by his Apostles.

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<sup>69</sup> See CCC, 2564 and 2567.

<sup>70</sup> See Lk 22:41-44.

<sup>71</sup> See Lk 22:32.

From Jesus' life, Christians have learnt where, how and for whom to pray. In fact, Jesus often draws apart to pray, in solitude, on a mountain, preferably at night.<sup>72</sup> His last prayer includes all people. Particularly close to the human being's plea is the prayer he elevates before raising his friend Lazarus from death, as recorded in the Gospel according to St. John.<sup>73</sup> He started, thanking the Father for having heard him. Precisely this relationship with God as "Father" is the most striking aspect in Jesus' prayers. Often, speaking to God, He addresses Him with the term *Abbà*.<sup>74</sup> The word '*Abbà*' represents the distinctive element of the nucleus of His prayer, to the point that some theologians are convinced that in

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<sup>72</sup> See Mk 1:35; Mk 6:46; Lk 5:16.

<sup>73</sup> See Jn 11:41-42.

<sup>74</sup> See Lk 22:42. In the course of the four Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth prays to the '*Father*' 19 times, out of which 6 are in the last prayer, called the '*priestly prayer*' (Jn 17). (See G.HELEWA, «Abbà! Padre» E. ANCILLI (ed. by), *La Preghiera. Bibbia, teologia, esperienze storiche*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, 73-106, 75). It is the Gospel of Mark, which refers the Aramaic term *Abbà*, while reporting the prayer of Jesus before his passion and death. (See Mk 14:36.) Mark, in fact, wrote his Gospel for the Christian community residing in Rome, where the majority of the new converts were non-Jews. By using an Aramaic term, like *Abbà*, presumably he wished to convey a specific and not negotiable witness of the person of Jesus. This is very much in tune with Mark's style, who often makes use of Aramaic terms pronounced by Jesus. The use of *Abbà* conveys, in fact, the intention of sharing something truly pronounced by Him (See G.HELEWA, «Abbà! Padre» E. ANCILLI (ed. by), *La Preghiera. Bibbia, teologia, esperienze storiche*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, 73-106, 76). In those times, normally, family circles used this term - it was the way, children were accustomed to address or speak of their fathers. For this reason, it was impossible for a Jew to address God in this way; it would have been a profanation of God's Holy Name. (See G.HELEWA, «Abbà! Padre» E. ANCILLI (ed. by), *La Preghiera. Bibbia, teologia, esperienze storiche*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, 73-106, 78.)

the course of His life Jesus never invoked God in another way.<sup>75</sup> Jesus praying to God as *Abbà* is therefore, a key-point in Christian prayer and sets a fundamental example for the centuries that followed. In fact, though He prayed in a variety of ways, when asked by the disciples to disclose them how to pray, He invited them to address the *Father* directly. This remains till today the typical Christian prayer: the *Our Father* (Mt 6:9-13).

## 2.2 Christian prayer throughout the centuries.

Since the early days of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, prayer has represented a main element of Christian faith and religious practice.<sup>76</sup> Many of the Fathers of the Church agreed on recommending their communities to be faithful to prayer life, following the apostles' example.<sup>77</sup> Gradually, different Christian assemblies formulated some common prayers to be recited. These also became part of the liturgy and took different forms according to the different traditions. For sure, a

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<sup>75</sup> S. LYONNET, «Les épîtres de saint Paul aux Galates et aux Romains» in *Bible de Jérusalem*, 102, foot-note 2 in G.HELEWA, «Abbà! Padre», 80. Lyonnet underlines that this way of addressing God as *Abbà* comes in Mc 14:36; Mt 11:25 ff.; Lc 22:42, 23:34-46; Gv 11:41; 12:27 and 17:1 ff.

<sup>76</sup> The early followers of Jesus used to pray on their knees as a sign of penance while during Easter Tide they used to stand – this was to celebrate the Resurrection – keeping their arms open. (See E. ANCILLI, «Il mistero della preghiera cristiana» in E. ANCILLI (ed. by), *La Preghiera. Bibbia, teologia, esperienze storiche*, Città Nuova, Roma 1988, 14-35, 20).

<sup>77</sup> Tertullian records that the sign of the cross used to seal all gestures during prayers (See TERTULLIAN, *De Corona*, 3; *Ad ux.* II, 5.)

main characteristic of the prayers of the early communities of Christians must have been the communitarian dimension.<sup>78</sup>

Following the early days of Christianity, prayer developed according to different modalities and expressions. The monastic tradition, for instance, drew inspiration from the solitary moments of prayer by Jesus and developed what was later defined as, “vocal and mental prayer”. Slowly, also the liturgy developed according to different rites and in monasteries. The so-called *Liturgy of the Hours* took shape especially following St. Benedict’s inspiration. Private prayer become more relevant after the 11<sup>th</sup> century thanks to different streams of spiritualities: Cistercians, Carthusians and, later, Franciscans and Dominicans. All these typical styles of praying drew inspiration from Jesus’ life: birth, preaching, passion, death, poverty etc... Monastic life, during the Middle Ages, favoured also the contemplative and mystic stream of prayer. Both these forms of prayer remained eminently private or personal, though at times, entire communities of monks and nuns performed them together. Throughout these centuries, the dimension of prayer is confined almost entirely to abbeys, monasteries and convents, involving different dimensions of the human being: intellect, senses, spirit and sentiment. The laity seem to remain on the outskirts of the real prayer life.

Towards the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries there was a great development of popular practices, like the recitation of the rosary,<sup>79</sup> the litanies, the Way

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<sup>78</sup> On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of the Promise was poured out on the disciples, gathered "together in one place."(Acts 2:1) While awaiting the Spirit, "all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer." (Acts 1:14) [...] In the first community of Jerusalem, believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers."(Acts 2:42) (CCC 2623 and 2624).

<sup>79</sup> Repeated invocations to Mary, mother of Jesus.



of the Cross<sup>80</sup> and different prayers addressed to saints or to Mary herself. There is also the beginning of a more marked tradition of pilgrimages to holy places. An important phase in the development of Christian prayer tradition is the one marked in the Renaissance period, with Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, proposing a new model of praying through the *Spiritual Exercises*, which help men and women, including laity, towards a deep introspection of their spiritual life.

The contemporary world is characterized by a progressive distinction between faith and reason, sacred and profane which has progressively become a separation. This process provoked the confinement of religious life, including prayer, to the private dimension of the human being. As a result of this, Western Christianity has been experiencing a strong and seemingly unstoppable process of erosion of spiritual values, which have contributed to an epoch of sterile interior life where prayer has lost its meaning for a large portion of people in countries with Christian tradition. In recent decades, the scientific and technological revolution have further contributed to this process. The Western person today is rather insulated towards the richness of the Christian experience of prayer. Moreover, as Bauman effectively describes the phenomenon, in today's so-called *liquid society*, it seems that everyone is running after the dream of escaping from themselves. At the same time, it becomes almost impossible to extinguish the stimulus coming from inside to keep the intimacy with our own soul. We run the great risk of being lost.<sup>81</sup> The Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, has tried to re-ignite a spiritual and liturgical dimension more in tune with the need of today's

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<sup>80</sup> It is a form of prayer performed in Lent, as a preparation to the celebration of Easter, which helps to remember the passion, agony and death of Jesus.

<sup>81</sup> J.O.LARIOS VALENCIA, *Pregghiera porta della gioia*, Effatà Editrice, Cantalupa (Torino), 2013, 13.

humanity, but the years which followed the renewal process within the Catholic world seemed to be even more discouraging. There have been quite diversified and varied attempts to identify social commitment, justice involvement and engagement in works of charity with prayer life to the point that, for many, to pray could be replaced by work for our neighbour in need.<sup>82</sup>

### 3. A new spiritual awareness

Nevertheless, we cannot downplay the fact that the period after the Council has witnessed also other types of processes within the folds of Christianity. In fact, alongside the trend of secularisation and indifference towards religion, and therefore towards prayer, there had been a new resurgence of spirituality, often promoted by lay people who have progressively taken up a new commitment in Church life and activities. Precisely the laity has often been protagonist in establishing new communities and groups, called *movements*, which emerged in the Catholic Church towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> It is not a new phenomenon for Christianity. Already in the years of the Vatican Council J. Robinson concluded that to pray is not to withdraw from a world that is progressively dissipated, but, on the contrary, to fulfil our duty of charity towards our neighbour, as our fundamental vocation, an unconditional commitment through which we encounter God. This is considered the prayer of the '*secular man*', which seems to have only one dimension: the human one. (See J. ROBINSON, *Honest to God*, trans. In Italian Firenze 1965, 118-126 in E. ANCILLI, «Il mistero della preghiera cristiana», 23).

<sup>83</sup> "In other epochs the lay Christians were the ones who welcomed a new spiritual stream coming from convents and religious communities, while today exactly the opposite is taking place. Often, in fact, in these lay movements there

These movements, communities, groups of different types, apart from being promoted by lay people, carry specific characteristics. For instance, they were born spontaneously without pre-planning and they propose the early Christian community as a model for today's being Christian. This underlined a growing awareness in the communitarian dimension of religion and carried a remarkable impact on Christianity. In reference to this unexpected phenomenon, A.M. Besnard wrote, "*there is a current to be kept into account and we can bet that the history of this discovery will surely be one of the most significant of our century*".<sup>84</sup>

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are priests and consecrated men and women who are involved". (J. Castellano Cervera, "Tratti caratteristici dei Movimenti Ecclesiali Contemporanei" in *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, 39 (1985), 560-573, 561-562).

<sup>84</sup> A.M. BESNARD, "Linee di forza delle tendenze spirituali contemporanee," *Concilium*, 1 (1965), 4, 88-108 in M. VANDELEENE, *Io – il fratello – Dio nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma, 90.

This phenomenon, which, as mentioned, has been largely unexpected, was comprehensively introspected and analyzed by Card. Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. "[...] *in the early 1970's, a time when Karl Rahner and others were speaking of a winter in the Church [...] it did seem that, after the great blossoming of the Council, frost was creeping in instead of springtime, and that exhaustion was replacing dynamism. The dynamism now seemed to be somewhere else entirely—where people, relying on their own strength and without resorting to God, were setting about creating a better world of the future. That a world without God could not be good, let alone a better world, was obvious to anyone who had eyes to see. But where was God in all this? [...] But suddenly here was something that no one had planned. Here the Holy Spirit himself had, so to speak taken the floor. The faith was reawakening precisely among the young, who embraced it without ifs, ands, or buts, without escape hatches and loopholes, and who experienced it in its totality as a precious, life-giving gift*". (J. RATZINGER, "The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements", in *Communio* 25 (Fall 1988): 480-500.)

These movements, religious aggregations and communities stemmed out from a strong spiritual experience. They do not propose a theory to their followers, but rather a living experience of Christianity in today's world with a commitment in prayer life, works of charity, service to the Church and society and participation in the liturgical manifestations.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, people, through these groups of believers, can have a personal encounter with God, who, according to the Christian tradition, can be present, in a mystical but real way, in a community gathered in His name, who lives the commandment of charity, especially in the mutual dimension.<sup>86</sup> On these two points is rooted the communitarian dimension of the Christian experience proposed by these new realities in Christianity.<sup>87</sup>

Prayer and sanctity, which in today's secularized world seem to be unattainable ideals, start being more approachable for people who live this experience of community life.<sup>88</sup> A great help comes from a distinctive mark in these communitarian realities. In a variety of ways, in fact, their members meet more or less regularly to share among each other experiences of the Gospel put into practice in daily life. This living

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<sup>85</sup> See J. CASTELLANO CERVERA, "Tratti caratteristici del Movimenti Ecclesiali contemporanei", *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, 39 (1985), 560-573, 568.

<sup>86</sup> "Where there is charity there is God" "Where two or three are gathered in my name there I am in the midst". (Mt. 18:20)

<sup>87</sup> "[...] these aggregations of spiritual reawakening tend to live and strengthen personal relationships among people as well as their spiritual experience in smaller or bigger groups. There is the conviction that a warm and welcoming community represents for the single person an indispensable condition for a human and religious maturity". (A. FAVALE, *Movimenti ecclesiali contemporanei*, Roma, LAS, 1991, 569).

<sup>88</sup> See J. CASTELLANO CERVERA, "I Movimenti Ecclesiali. Una presenza carismatica nella Chiesa di oggi", *Rivista di Vita Spirituale*, 41 (1987), 494-518, 506.

dimension of religion, far from intellectualism and mere reasoning, allow encounter, dialogue, sharing and prayer.

The root of this lies in the initial experience made by people who follow these modern currents of spirituality. Often, if not always, it can be summed up with the discovery or new understanding of God who is love. This is the core of the Christian message, as well portrayed by Pope Benedict XVI in the first few lines of his first Encyclical Letter – *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE).<sup>89</sup> This basic aspect, when discovered and experienced, brings about a radical change in life and in values priority. Referring to the spiritual experiences of Chiara Lubich, protagonist of this phase in Christian renewal, as foundress of one of the early movements of modern spirituality in the Catholic Church, characterised by what is defined as a spirituality of communion, the theologian Pasquale Foresi wrote:

A dazzling discovery lies at the origins of that new spirituality [...] It is the discovery of a God who, because he is love, loves each one with an infinite, personal love. Chiara repeated this constantly to her

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<sup>89</sup> “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words [...] express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us”. [...] in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (DCE 1).

first companions as she did to all those she met: “God loves you immensely. God loves us immensely.”<sup>90</sup>

The experience of God’s love, is central in Christian Scriptures, but was often overlooked in favour of other dimensions. Scriptures, in fact, often refer to the love of God making use of two powerful images: the one of the bridegroom loving his bride and the one of a mother’s love for her child.<sup>91</sup> Experiencing such great a love, changes everything in a man’s or woman’s life - our own existence, the image of the world around and, above all, every happening circumstance, whether happy or sad. Everything can be perceived as a personal gift of God who wants people to be holy as He is holy (see 1 Pt 1:16). This is the foundation of all Christian life: this love of God for each one of us and our duty to respond by giving ourselves to God in a total way.<sup>92</sup> In this frame, prayer

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<sup>90</sup> P. FORESI, “God Who is Love, and Prayer”, *Living City*, November 2004. (Translated from P. Foresi, “Dio Amore e la Preghiera”, *Nuova Umanità*, XXV (2003/3-4), 325-331).

<sup>91</sup> “God loves us as a bridegroom loves his bride. He, like the one who is hopelessly in love, loves beyond the merits themselves of the person loved. He loves to such an extent that he sees that everything in her is beautiful, positive and understandable, and what is not perfect is nevertheless overlooked and compensated for by love. [...] yet another image, [...] speaks of God’s love for us. It is the image of a mother who, whatever the situation in which her child finds himself or herself, be it even the most sorrowful and reprehensible, is always there ready to welcome the child back, forgiving everything. This is the inextinguishable, essential element of maternal love”. (P. FORESI, “God Who is Love, and Prayer”, *Living City*, November 2004. (Translated from P. Foresi, “Dio Amore e la Preghiera”, *Nuova Umanità*, XXV (2003/3-4), 325-331).

<sup>92</sup> See P. FORESI, “God Who is Love, and Prayer”, *Living City*, November 2004. (Translated from P. Foresi, “Dio Amore e la Preghiera”, *Nuova Umanità*, XXV (2003/3-4), 325-331).

is the highest form of response of the human creature to God and becomes a unique way to enter into a personal relationship with Him. It becomes, in fact, a gift and a personal encounter with God. It is no longer a privilege, which is exclusive to religious communities and consecrated people.

In this context, the discovery and the experience of God as love is not sufficient for establishing a constant relationship between the human creature and the Creator. What is necessary is a choice on the creature's side, which gives God the priority, the first place, in his or her existence. This allows the creature to have different forms of prayer, which helps the creature to maintain his or her relationship with God at all times.

### **3.1 Different forms of prayer**

There is, in fact, a spectrum of prayers, which can be elevated in different moments and contexts to God. For instance, the *prayer of offering* or *prayer of oblation* does not require a specific place to be performed at nor is it bound by timing. Those who suffer for a physical or mental sickness can address it. Also all those who, because of their life in the midst of society, cannot devote much time to traditional forms of prayer, can live this prayer dimension. In this way, by offering fatigue, problems and failures to God, even work, profession and family life can become an expression of praying. It is enough, in the morning to elevate minds and souls to God, offering to Him all the moments to be lived during the day in His name and for His sake. This form of prayer helps to experience a constant relationship with God even through the difficulties of daily

life.<sup>93</sup> This form of prayer, which can be appealing to modern men and women, does not wish to downplay or diminish the value of those who can afford longer time for prayer due to their choice of consecrating their lives to God like the ones who live in convents or abbeys. They can dedicate part of their time to explicit dialogue with God, through the exercise of certain practices of devotion, the so-called office, celebration of mass, meditation, rosary.<sup>94</sup>

Secondly, a form of prayer which has been traditionally followed in Christianity is the liturgy, including the celebration of the *Holy Mass*, which represents the community prayer *par excellence*. Believers, in fact, gathered daily or weekly in assembly and through different moments of celebration they perform the mysterious encounter between humanity - symbolized by the Church - and God. In Christian beliefs and tradition, God himself seals this celebration with His presence, culminating in the Eucharist, to make the praying community one with each other and with Him.

Another form of prayer, which is common to other religious traditions too, especially in the East, is *meditation*. Christian meditation, which the CCC defines as a quest, ensures that the personal dimension is not underplayed in favour of the communitarian one. One is necessary for

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<sup>93</sup> “It is this, after all, which humanity today is particularly sensitive to, namely, that the whole universe and all that one accomplishes in it, can be transformed into one great prayer raised unceasingly to God.” P. FORESI, “God Who is Love, and Prayer”, Living City, November 2004.

<sup>94</sup> However, we have to be aware of the decisive and fundamental admonition of Jesus - “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21) - which emphasizes that what counts is to have an authentic relationship with God and not just to multiply the number of purely external formulas recited.



the other. In fact, our mind seeks to understand the why and how of Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. (CCC 2705). It is important to focus on how Christians – especially in today’s world when they live in the midst of society and not in convents or religious communities – perform meditation. There is the need of being helped by books, like the Sacred Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts of the day or season and writings of the spiritual fathers. Depending on the spiritual masters we follow, there are a variety of modalities and methods for meditation. It is, first of all, necessary to ensure a preparation and this requires an effort to recollect ourselves and “*close the shutters*” of the soul or, in other words, “*turn off our senses*”, close the eyes, for example, so as to seek God. This will allow, even in modern and noisy life, a meeting with the Lord, who comes forth from what the great Christian mystics define, “the centre of our soul” where He abides. At this point, a dialogue is established between God and the praying soul, which feels inundated with His presence.<sup>95</sup>

What are the effects of this practice of meditation? People can establish true conversations with God. One experiences the feeling of being listened to - it’s like opening a bottle of perfume, which permeates its fragrance, the whole day. When performed well, the main effect of meditation is a loss of interest in the things of this world, and helps to focus our soul on God, on the intimate conversation with him. After

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<sup>95</sup> “We begin by reading a book, with calm, after having put ourselves in the presence of God. If, at a certain moment, we have the impression that He takes the soul and elevates it, then we close the book, stay with Him, listen to Him, answer Him, love Him, adore Him, ask Him for graces, ask Him everything, “take advantage of it”, says Theresa of Avila. Because He’s there. After a while, one might feel that the conversation can be considered ended. Then we open the book again and continue reading”. C. LUBICH, Love elevates, Speech delivered in Rocca di Papa, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1998.

meditating singly or in a group, one can go back to the people and the things of this world with their intentions all imbued with the supernatural.

There are also other forms of Christian prayer, which can be lived in today's society. A special one is, for sure, what is defined as *vocal prayer*. Jesus himself taught his own disciples a vocal prayer, the *Our Father*. This is a significant passage in the Gospel in the context of Jesus's life. It means, in fact, that Jesus not only prayed aloud the liturgical prayers prescribed by His own Jewish tradition but, as the Gospels show, he raised His voice to express His personal prayer, from exultant blessing of the Father to the agony of Gethsemane.<sup>96</sup> Another vocal prayer that is widely recited in the Christian world is the *rosary*, addressed to Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>97</sup>

What emerges from these forms of prayer is the fact that they are often characterized by the use of vocal words. In fact, while the traditional Christian spiritualities, like the monastic one, emphasised *silence* and *loneliness* with God in order to address Him, the more recent spiritualities, being distinctively communitarian, find an important element of prayer in the *vocal expression*. Words among people and words prayed together with other people who share the same spirituality become characteristic of modern ways of prayer.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See Mt. 11:25-26 and Mk 14:36.

<sup>97</sup> "As John Paul II magnificently affirms, with it, voice is given to "that love which tirelessly returns to the person loved with expressions similar in their content but ever fresh in terms of the feeling pervading them". JOHN PAUL II, *The Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, n. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Cfr. M. VANDELEENE, *Io – il fratello – Dio nel pensiero di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma, 273.

#### 4. Conclusion: to pray always and everywhere

In the wide and rich contexts of the prayer experience which has developed within Christianity, the streams of spirituality born in recent decades, largely animated by lay people, involving families, men and women living in society, what has come into evidence is the desire to have the possibility of not restraining prayer to certain moments of the day or to certain places.<sup>99</sup> For people who do not live in religious contexts and still feel the desire of constantly elevating their soul and hearts to God, there must be another way.

The secret could be the one of transforming every action into a *sacred action*, by offering our daily work to God. This is possible by performing it well and offering to Him whatever we do, even something, which seems to have nothing or little to do with prayer, like daily profession, family life, travelling, entertaining people etc..... This can be done, by basing life on 'love', by making sincere efforts to perform whatever is done as an expression of that 'love' that Jesus defined as the synthesis and fulfilment of all the Law and the Prophets.<sup>100</sup> This attitude of charity and love brings about new relationships among people and unites person

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<sup>99</sup> All this could be, and still it is, possible in convents, abbeys, religious communities where men and women who have consecrated their life to God can devote specific moments of the day and the night to address their prayer to God. Usually, there are churches or chapels as places where they can meet together or spend time individually to do so.

<sup>100</sup> See C. LUBICH, *Love elevates*, Speech delivered in Rocca di Papa, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1998.

to person. Not only: as promised in the Gospel, God, drawn by that mutual love, mysteriously but truly becomes present among people.<sup>101</sup>

God's presence in the community of believers becomes the essence of Christian prayer, it is prayer itself and acquires a truly communitarian dimension. Here we found a modern version of the traditional monastery life, which today can be in the midst of the world. In the past centuries, ever since the first millennium, the monastery was a holy community of those who for God have renounced the world, everything in the world, and their very selves. They used to stay close to God, listening to Him day and night, singing and reciting psalms. They constantly had God in their midst, according to His promise as in Mt 18:20.<sup>102</sup> In fact, there had been an awareness that "*prayer itself that does not come from persons praying together is much feebler, since the Lord has declared that he will be in the midst, if two or three who call upon him in communion of spirit*".<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Mt 18:20. "Every veil seems to fall and the relationship with him becomes almost tangible. One understands, then, why this presence of Jesus reaches the essence of prayer. It is itself prayer, implied but essentially still a prayer. In the family of Nazareth, with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, this prayer reached its apex. While we know it is unreachable, it is up to us to draw always closer and closer to that model." (. FORESI, "God Who is Love, and Prayer", Living City, November 2004.)

<sup>102</sup> See ST. BASIL, *De Monastic. Laic. Non trad.* PG. 132, 1134 in C. LUBICH, *The Living Presence*, New City, London, 133.

<sup>103</sup> ST. BASIL, *Epistolario*, 97 in C. LUBICH, *The Living Presence*, New City, London, 133.