



Rome, 1 December 2024  
First Sunday of Advent

## ADVENT LETTER

### **JESUS LIVES IN US! JESUS PRAYS IN US! JESUS PRAYS WITH US!**

To all members of the Vincentian Family

Dear sisters and brothers in Saint Vincent,

May the grace and peace of Jesus be always with us!

Although the theme of prayer is a subject that is often discussed and reflected upon, when I came across a book that many of you probably already know, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, its description of how to pray touched me deeply. I will try to share it with you in this letter.

Written in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia by an anonymous author, it is the true story of a man, who lost everything: his wife and all his possessions. One day, he heard, in a sermon, the words of Saint Paul, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). He was deeply touched. The words would not leave him at peace.

He started to wonder and reflect on how it could be possible to “pray without ceasing.” He said to himself: If it is true that God does not ask a person for impossible things, and God Himself is asking for it, I need to find the way to pray without interruption.

The man set out on an over 20-year pilgrimage to learn how to carry out that call that troubled him so profoundly. Nothing became more important in his life than trying to find the response, because he was convinced that in finding it, all of life’s questions, challenges,

difficulties, and struggles would be resolved. In addition, the way to inner peace, joy, conversion, and, finally, personal resurrection, would become a reality.

He started by reading the Bible, over and over again, listening to many sermons, traveling from village to village, from city to city, seeking the advice of wise men. Finally, after years of pilgrimage in the vast steppes of Siberia, he met an old Spiritual Father who, step by step, through long moments of listening, questioning, reflecting, and meditating, began to open the eyes of the pilgrim's heart. These are the fruits of their encounters:

- Remember, says the Spiritual Father, good actions do not make us capable of prayer, but prayer leads us to good actions. Thus, the work of prayer comes before all else.
- The pilgrim discovers that true pilgrimage is not going from one place to another, but from outside to inside, from things to the heart: the inner pilgrimage. The pilgrimage of the heart is the most important.
- The prayer of the heart is able to extinguish all sinful passions. Indeed, there is no temptation or passion that cannot be overcome. Prayer is a shield, a protective armor, even if we do not realize it.
- Our spiritual enemies need to be opposed with the right weapons, and among these the most powerful is precisely continuous prayer: with this we use the name of Jesus like a hammer that crushes passions, and they disintegrate. One must try it to believe. Prayer transfigures the person.
- Jesus told us to pray always because, while we can act on quantity, we have very little power regarding the quality of prayer, for who among us can say that we "pray well"?

It is Jesus's Spirit who prays in us; it is God's grace that makes the prayer we offer effective. We can only decide to pray and put in our quantity: it will then be the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, who will give warmth, strength, and effectiveness to the prayer that the Spirit finds present in us. Jesus never said to pray little and with good quality products. The experience of continuous prayer teaches that by setting the heart to persevering prayer, Jesus's Spirit will take possession of our own prayer and transform it into a living torrent that will change our whole existence. Then we will no longer pray, but become living prayer. Everyone desires the fruits of prayer. The secret is revealed here in a wonderful way. It is necessary to make up one's mind to try, then the prayer will not stop.

- The Spiritual Father encouraged the pilgrim over and over again to begin to practice continuous prayer through the repetition of an expression already found in the Gospel, that of the tax collector who in the temple asks God to have mercy on him.

This is the drop of water that eats into the stone and, by falling on the heart of stone (for in reality the stone is our hardened heart), it eventually destroys it and the effect is a drastic

change: prayer sets off a mysterious world that has no boundaries. The problem then will be not so much when to pray, but when to stop praying.

The pilgrim discovers with surprise that prayer is already present in his heart, that nothing needs to be invented; he merely needs to tune into the prayer already present and let it flow. Thus, it is Jesus's Spirit in us who cries out, prays, expresses himself (*you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!"* Romans 8:15). We only have to tune into the word of the Spirit present in the depths of our heart and give human voice to the divine voice.

- True praying persons have liquid hearts: totally possessed by the Lord who is infinite Mercy. They feel that they want to embrace everyone; they pray for the salvation of everyone; carry everyone in their hearts before Jesus, and, unceasingly, plead for mercy on all sinners. Not because they feel they are good, but because they identify with all people: they become all sinful people, painfully feeling the burden of sin, and unceasingly pleading that sin be forgiven.
- The pilgrim at one moment asked: "Does God really need people to intercede for others? Could not He do everything himself?" No, is the answer of the Spiritual Father, because we are all connected, like one body: the good of one is like the good of all, the evil of one is like the evil of all. We need brothers and sisters to intercede for us.

The world subsists thanks to those prayers. This is why praying souls are the most useful and necessary to the world, even if it apparently does not seem so in the eyes of the world.

- At one crucial and decisive moment of the pilgrim's search, the Spiritual Father reveals the secret that the former was ardently longing to find: the constant and uninterrupted calling on the Divine Name of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" contains the tool for praying without ceasing.
- The effort and struggle of the pilgrimage to the heart and constant prayer are only initial, because the stone to be chipped is hard, but once the explosion takes place, then everything changes.

The two realities that touched me deeply are:

- a) that "Jesus is constantly praying in us" and
- b) that to "pray unceasingly" means attuning our prayer with Jesus's prayer who is continuously praying for us and with us, interceding before His and our Father for us, all happening in the deepest area of our being: the heart.

In this adventure of love, we need to remind ourselves constantly that “the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26) and become attuned to Jesus’ constant intercession, prayer for us and with us. We need to keep repeating in silence or out loud in that deepest chamber of our being the words: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” By doing so, we arrive at the point that Jesus’s Heart and our heart become so united, one with the other, that we become “prayer.”

Saint Vincent de Paul, the Mystic of Charity, himself made this pilgrimage to the heart, to be able to arrive at a personal conversion, repeating, out loud or in silence, the prayer of the tax collector in the temple, literally or with other words, but with same meaning, so Jesus’s Heart and his heart became so attuned, that Vincent himself became “prayer.” He insisted that his followers do the same, telling the first Daughters of Charity: “Dear Sisters, you and I must take the resolution never to omit making our prayer every day. I say every day, Sisters, but if it were possible, I’d say let’s never leave it and spend no time without being in prayer; that is, without having our minds raised to God” (*CCD IX*, 332).

May the time of Advent help us to understand more and more what an indescribable and unmeasurable wealth we carry in our heart and strive to become “prayer” ourselves.

Your brother in Saint Vincent,

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