

*“Lord, teach us to pray”*. When the Apostles ask Jesus to teach them to pray, they are expressing the awareness of their hearts of their own spiritual poverty. We, too, suffer from a very great spiritual poverty, one that springs from the inadequacy of our own prayer for there is more to prayer than quickly hurling a few formula words at heaven. Prayer is first and foremost an affair of the heart, the conversation of lovers. St Therese of Lisieux described prayer this way, “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

Prayer is the raising of both one’s mind and one’s heart to God in humility. Humility is the key to prayer that is pleasing to God and beneficial to the soul. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus tells us the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee, *“Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, ‘O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.’ But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, ‘O God, be merciful to me a sinner.’ I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”* God always hears our prayers and not just the words of our voices but also the condition of our hearts. Jesus taught us to call God our Father so that we might pray with the intimacy and sincerity of children. When we pray from the heart there is no separation between God and us; the infinite distance between heaven and earth is spanned by the power of love. This is the way God wants us to pray, from our hearts – just like that ancient tax collector.

In giving us the Our Father, Jesus teaches us how to pray, with humble

hearts that trust in the Lord's desire to fulfill our prayers. Whether we know it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst and ours, God's heart and ours, God's love and ours. True prayer comes from the heart but if our heart is far from God our words of prayer are in vain for the heart is the dwelling place of the soul, the hidden center of our existence, the place of decision where we choose life or death. It is the place where we encounter God alone in our helplessness and our weakness. Prayer should be the constant occupation of the heart because it gives life to the heart; whatever else the body may be doing, the heart should always be seeking an intimate, personal encounter with God. St Gregory Nazianzus said that "we must remember God more often than we draw a breath" because prayer breaths eternal life into our soul. But if the heart is to pray always, we must train our hearts in prayer by consciously willingly, praying with the mind and the body often. This is the purpose of formula prayer – the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Oh My Jesus – it is the training of the heart in the practice of prayer. This is why we should pray in the morning and in the evening, before meals and before going to bed, before undertaking the tasks of the moment and after the labor of the day.

A wise monk from Mount Athos once said "When we have no more men of prayer – the world will come to its end, and great disasters will befall all of mankind." In his second letter to Timothy, St Paul said "the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths." That time comes for each of us when people stop praying. So let us turn to our Blessed Mother that she might instruct us in prayer, let us ask her to teach us how to pray from the heart so that we might love her son as he deserves to be loved and that we might ask our Father in confidence and love for the gift of never ending prayer in our hearts.