

Fatima and Praying for the Conversion of Sinners

Looking at the message of Fatima and the call to pray for the conversion of sinners, it becomes very clear that this desire of God to bring sinners back to Himself is central to everything that Mary tells and shows the children. Not only is this evident in Mary's appearances but those of the Angel as well. What we can see in both is that God in His great love for us continues to bring us to a deeper awareness of the message of the Gospel and the urgency to repent, to believe, to intercede on the behalf of sinful men.

From the very beginning with the three appearances of the Angel in the summer of 1916 to the end of the Marian apparitions in October 1917, the three children were taught the importance of praying for the conversion of sinners.

When the Angel of Peace first made his presence known, he taught them to kneel and touch their forehead to the ground saying: *"My God, I believe, I adore, I hope, and I love You! I ask forgiveness for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope and do not love You."* This the Angel did three times telling the children to pray in this manner.

A few weeks later the Angel appeared a second time and asked the children: "Pray! Pray a great deal! ... **Offer prayers** and sacrifices constantly to the Most High."

In late September he came for the third and last time. This time he brought with him a chalice and a host which he left suspended in the air while he prostrated himself on the ground and three times said: *"Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I adore You profoundly and I offer You the most precious Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, present in all the tabernacles of the world, in reparation for the outrages, sacrileges, and indifferences by which He is offended. And by the infinite merits of His Most Sacred Heart and through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I beg the conversion of poor sinners."*

On the day of the first apparition of Our Blessed Mother to the children on May 13th, 1917, she asked the children: “Are you willing to offer yourselves to God, to endure all the sufferings He may please to send you as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended **and to ask for the conversion of sinners?**” Lucia speaking on behalf of all three gave their “yes” and was told that they would have to suffer much. Then Our Lady also told them to pray the Rosary every day. For the next six months this was her continual exhortation “continue to pray the Rosary every day.”

When she appeared on July 13th, she placed strong emphasis on the need to pray for the conversion of sinners. It was during this third apparition that the children were shown a vision of hell. Before showing them the vision she told them: “Sacrifice yourselves for sinners and say many times, especially when you make some sacrifice, *“O Jesus, it for love of You, **for the conversion of sinners** and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”* After she had shown them the vision of hell, she taught them the O My Jesus prayer which we pray at the end of each decade of the Rosary: *“**O my Jesus, forgive us our sins; save us from the fires of hell; and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Your mercy.**”*

On August 19th she exhorted them once again: **“Pray much** and make sacrifices on behalf of sinners, for many souls go to hell because there is no one to make sacrifices **and to pray for them.**”

Her last appearance to the three children culminating with the miracle of the sun was one in which she told them that people who seek cures and favors from God must more importantly **ask pardon for their sins.**

From all this we can see just how essential conversion is to the Gospel message. In fact, Jesus began His public ministry with the words: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1: 15b).

We might ask ourselves what exactly God wants of us in this message of praying for sinners. Are we being asked to say specific prayers? Are we being asked to have a more intimate relationship with the Trinity in our personal life? Are we being asked to cultivate a disposition of continual prayer, therefore deep union with God, for our own conversion as well as the conversion of all mankind? Is God through Our Blessed Mother inviting us to live our lives wholly for love of Himself and for love of our neighbor?

The answer, I believe, to these four questions is a resounding “YES!” If we want to be saints, if we want to be holy, if we want to be in communion with the Most Blessed Trinity and in union with the entire Church, in short if we want to get to heaven... the answer must be “yes”! In the book “Calls” from the Message of Fatima Sister Lucia making specific reference to the words that Our Lady gave them on August 19th, 1917 (“Pray, pray very much and make sacrifices for sinners; for many souls go to hell because there is no one to make sacrifices and pray for them”) states that we are asked to undertake an apostolate of prayer, self-denial, and charity on behalf of our brothers and sisters. With regards to the apostolate of prayer which is what I wish to emphasize, she says that it “must be the basis of every other apostolate, if it is to be effective and fruitful.” (Lucia, 143).

So then, how do we proceed?

Let’s look at this phrase “praying for the conversion of sinners” and consider its meaning in the context of our Faith.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in Part Four the section on Christian Prayer asks the question “What is Prayer?” It introduces prayer as God’s gift, as covenant, and as communion after quoting what St. Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower defines as prayer: “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.” (CCC 2558)

Prayer is God’s gift to man. We cannot pray from the height of our pride and will. Rather we must pray out of the depths of a heart that is contrite and humble. When we acknowledge that we really “do not know how we should pray as we ought,” then we are ready to freely receive the gift of prayer. We must be of the disposition that we need God and thus we must be as beggars before Him. (CCC 2559)

In the account of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus reveals to her that it is He that thirsts for us. Prayer is an invitation from God. He first seeks us out and asks us for a drink. From the depths of His being He cries from the cross “I thirst” (Jn. 19:28b). Whether we are consciously aware of this or not, in prayer we encounter the thirst of God with our thirst for Him. “God thirsts that we may thirst for Him.” He desires to be one with us. (CCC 2560-2561)

Prayer is covenant. A covenant is a sacred agreement between two parties especially between God, who is infinite and man, who is finite. The practice of making covenants in the Old Testament required that animals used for sacrifice be split in two and then each party walk through the animals promising to be faithful to the covenant or calling down the curse of being split in two if the covenant was broken. When God made a covenant with Abraham, it was not Abraham who walked through the split animal sacrifices but God as a flaming torch thus bringing down on Himself the curse of the penalty for breaking the covenant. Although man was not faithful and should have procured the punishment as a covenant breaker, God

relentlessly manifested His love in the fullness of time by sending His Son to suffer the death penalty for man's sin.

Covenant involves the whole man which is most often referred to in Scripture as the heart. It is the heart that prays, whether expressed in words or gestures because man prays with his whole being, mind, body and soul. "The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as the image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant." (CCC 2562-2564)

Prayer is communion. In prayer man enters into a living relationship with the Trinity. As a child of God he is made one with his Father "who is good beyond all measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit" so that "the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with Him. This communion of life is always possible because through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ." Christian prayer is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is the Body of Christ. (CCC 2565)

Our exemplar for this Christian prayer is Our Lady. She consistently offered herself and waited on the Lord: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word." FIAT. Thus, our prayer must be as hers: "to be wholly God's, because He is wholly ours." (CCC 2617)

In the words of Fr. Alfred McBride from the book Images of Mary: "Mary models prayer for us in the sense that she shows us that our active lives should be supported by daily silence and meditative prayer. We need quiet time to be alone with God. Our souls need to be

fed with the graces of the Spirit if we are to witness Jesus in acts of love, justice and mercy. Action without prayer soon becomes mere activism. Our deeds will cease to bear fruit for the needs of the Church and the world—and our own hearts will dry up.” (McBride, 14)

This then is the kind of prayer Our Lady is requesting, not merely certain prayers (although that is important), not merely certain times set aside for prayer (although that too is necessary), but an attitude, a disposition of living in the continual awareness of the Presence of God. In other words, she is asking us to become as the People of God, persons of prayer in which we always keep our eyes fixed on Him as we heed the words of St. Paul to “pray without ceasing.”

In the book Fatima the Great Sign Francis Johnston states that Our Lady constantly reminded the children to pray a great deal which they willingly did by spending hours on their knees under a blistering sun, reciting the Rosary and the prayer of the Angel over and over again. He quotes from a letter that Lucia wrote to her nephew, a Salesian priest: “It is sad that so many are allowing themselves to be dominated by the diabolical wave that is sweeping the world and they are so blind that they cannot see their error. Their principle mistake is that they have abandoned prayer ... What I recommend to you above all is that you get close to the tabernacle and pray. In fervent prayer you receive the light, strength and grace that you need to sustain you ... In prayer, you will find more science, more light, more strength, more grace and virtue than you could ever achieve by reading many books or by great studies ... Never consider the time wasted that you spend in prayer. You will discover that in prayer, God communicates to you the light, strength and grace you need to do all He expects of you ... We all need to intensify our life of intimate union with God and this we can only attain through prayer ... Let time be lacking for everything else, but never for prayer ...” (Johnston, 37) Lucia goes on to say that because so

many do not pray, evil abounds. “The principal cause of evil in the world and the falling away of so many consecrated souls is the lack of union with God in prayer. If we are not careful and attentive in obtaining strength from God, we will fail because our times are very bad and we are weak. Only God’s strength can sustain us.” (Johnston, 38) These words really underline our need to pray. The saints tell us: pray or perish.

Because prayer makes us aware of our total dependence on the Almighty God, we express our need by means of petition. This is where praying for conversion finds its place. Petition is an asking, a beseeching, a pleading, an invoking, a crying out for what we need both for ourselves and others. The Catechism gives a formula of sorts for doing this. (CCC 2630)

The first movement of the prayer of petition both for the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer is asking for forgiveness. We cry out to God to have mercy because we are sinners. Only in this manner can we be righteous and pure before Our God and it is this trusting humility which brings us back into the light of communion between the Father and His Son Jesus Christ and with one another, so that “we receive from Him whatever we ask” (CCC 2629). When we the members of the Church are reconciled with the Father, then we can present our petitions by way of interceding for the conversion of sinners.

We are frequently reminded in Scripture that if we desire to be with God then we must bring others to Him as well. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Mt. 6: 12-14). “Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful” (Lk 6:36). “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” (Mt. 5:7). “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn. 13:34). One of the greatest acts of love is to pray for others.

Our attitude, our desire must be that of Christ who offered Himself absolutely, completely and totally to His Father on behalf of sinful mankind, so that all men, women and children could be reconciled to God and set free from bondage to sin and satan.

We who are the Body of Christ, the Church, must do the same so that all persons may be saved. As St. Paul reminds us, we must make up in our bodies what is lacking in the suffering of Christ. We are the extension of Christ on this earth. Sister Lucia in "Calls" states: "...we have the apostolate of prayer, praying in union with Christ for the salvation of our brothers and sisters. Jesus Christ continues to pray on earth in the Sacrament of the altar, where He offers himself continuously to the Father in propitiation for the salvation of all. It is by our union with Christ in the Eucharist that our prayer is raised to God for the salvation of our brothers and sisters" (Lucia, 143).

To help us in the practical realm for praying for conversion of sinners, both the Angel and Our Lady have provided us with specific forms of prayer, especially the daily Rosary. What we must never forget, however, is that our prayer needs to come from our hearts, hearts that are daily converted to God and turned away from sin and selfishness; hearts that are daily conformed to Christ. Only then will our praying for conversion of sinners bear fruit.

The only way we bear fruit and bring the world to believe that the Father sent Jesus is through our union with Our Lord. He insists on this. His Heart yearns for us to be united among ourselves and with Him so that His redemptive work may bring all to conversion. (Lucia, 143) Our love for Him must be absolute, total and complete.

Quoting Sister Lucia again: "Love is the link binding us to Christ; it is love that gives value to our prayer and makes it fruitful for the salvation of our brothers and sisters.

The first step in our apostolate, and the necessary condition for it to bear fruit, is thus our union with Christ through prayer. Both vocal prayer, which place us in the presence of Christ, and the prayer of sacrifice when we unite ourselves with Christ, and also the prayer of love whereby we abandon ourselves with Christ to the Father for the conversion of all.”
(Lucia, 144).

In conclusion, we see that praying for the conversion of sinners must first begin with our own conversion, then for the Church and finally for the entire world. How effective we are in bringing sinners to the Father is directly linked to our personal desire and effort to pray and work for holiness and so remain closely united in the Hearts of Our Lord and Our Lady.

Let us pray.

O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, make our hearts like unto Jesus.

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