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INTRODUCTION

Pope Benedict XVI has preached many homilies, delivered dozens of speeches, and conveyed regular messages to the Church and the world.

He has spoken to hundreds of thousands of young people around the world, to small groups of the sick and disabled, to ambassadors, university faculties, priests and religious, children, the faithful gathered at places of pilgrimages, and the curious stopping by St. Peter's Square on a warm Wednesday morning, wondering who this fellow is and what all the fuss could be about.

Is it possible to pull a common thread from this rich, diverse body of works?

I believe it is, and this book is the fruit of that conviction.

His fellow academics have correctly discerned many fundamental themes in the work of theologian Joseph Ratzinger: an interest in the relationship between faith and reason, religion and culture, modernity and faith; the liturgy; and the continuity and discontinuity in historical development.

A pope does not leave his own interests and expertise at the door of the Sistine Chapel when he is elected, so all these points of study that interested Joseph Ratzinger over his decades as an academic theologian continue to inform his writing as pope.

However, when you listen and read the papal writings attentively, it is difficult not to notice one particular element that seems to come into focus no matter what the specific topic or who the audience is.

That “element” is a person: Jesus Christ.

Benedict made this focus clear from his first homily as pope. He referred to Pope John Paul II’s 1978 inaugural homily in which his predecessor exhorted his listeners to “Open wide the doors for Christ.” Benedict concluded his own homily in this way:

If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life.¹

Pope Benedict has articulated this invitation countless times over the years of his pontificate. Whether the initial occasion concerns liturgy, vocations, justice and charity, or a particular moment in the Church’s year, for the Holy Father, everything always comes back to Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus, the pope reminds us, that we find the peace for which our anxious, restless hearts yearn. In him we find joy and comfort when the world lets us down. It is in him that we find the true, lasting answers to the anxieties and fears that beset us all in the darkest nights and in the midst of the most intense suffering.

Come Meet Jesus highlights the ways in which Pope Benedict is inviting his listeners, both inside and outside the Catholic Church, to discover the saving, healing, life-giving love of Jesus. Pope Benedict’s words are not difficult to understand. He writes in a lucid, clear style. However, as I mentioned at the beginning, the quantity of works available from even a few years of his papacy is great, and not many of us have the time to follow the pope’s words on a daily basis. This book is offered with the hope that more might be inspired to listen with open minds and hearts to Pope Benedict’s persistent and heartfelt invitation for all of us to put friendship with Jesus at the center of our lives.

Amy Welborn

MEETING JESUS IN PRAYER

*Each one of us can be on intimate terms with him; each can call upon him. The Lord is always within hearing. We can inwardly draw away from him. We can live turning our backs on him. But he always waits for us and is always close to us.*⁸³

Prayer is such a fundamental part of the Christian life. For most of us, prayer began at a young age, when we were taught to “say our prayers.” As we go through life, however, our prayer changes.

For example, when I was a teenager, I got the impression that the only legitimate prayer was contemplation and meditation. “Rote” prayer, including the Rosary, was for children and the spiritually immature. I am not sure why I thought that I was better than such spiritual masters as Teresa of Ávila and Francis de Sales, who recognized the importance of different forms of prayer, including vocal, memorized prayer.

Eventually in my thirties, I learned that the world within my own head, uninformed by the words and gestures borne of thousands of years of Jewish and Christian prayer, was a very small place. I wanted to be in a bigger place, a place in which I did not pray alone but with God’s people, drawn into Christ, together. I have monks to thank for the beginning of that learning process, monks who gathered in dark, cool chapels at the end of the day, chanting ancient psalms that spoke of praise and anger, joy and sorrow.

of the first Eucharist celebrated in the context of the Last Supper, when Jesus broke the bread and thus anticipated his death and resurrection by giving himself to the disciples. Jesus also breaks bread with us and for us, he makes himself present with us in the Holy Eucharist, he gives us himself and opens our hearts. In the Holy Eucharist, in the encounter with his Word, we too can meet and know Jesus at this two-fold table of the Word and of the consecrated bread and wine. Every Sunday the community thus relives the Lord’s Passover and receives from the Savior his testament of love and brotherly service.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the joy of these days strengthen our faithful attachment to the Crucified and Risen Christ. Above all, may we let ourselves be won over by the fascination of his resurrection. May Mary help us to be messengers of the light and joy of Easter for all our brethren. Once again, I wish you all a Happy Easter.⁸²

We hope that as we age, our prayer matures, survives dry spells, and flourishes. And yet, even as we grow in prayer, we still face challenges. I can pray any way and every way—with words, without, in song, deep in Scripture or the words of the saints—but obstacles can still remain, part of my own making, part of the world's.

Perhaps I have not quite outgrown my childhood understanding of prayer, and still see it in utilitarian terms, not as the foundation of my life. I have not grasped what Paul meant when he said, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), much less allowed myself to live that way.

Perhaps I am not as open to God as I think I am. Am I ready for *anything* God has to say to me? Or am I operating out of the assumption that I pray in order to have *my* plans affirmed by God?

Perhaps I have missed the point of prayer. I approach prayer because I want to feel better about myself or my life, or because I want some sort of magic to happen, or because I believe that prayer is anything I want it to be, whatever I feel like at the moment.

Perhaps I suspect that there is no point to prayer anyway, that God is too big and the gap between us impossibly great.

If these suspicions haunt us, if these obstacles stand in our way, they keep us from the heart of prayer—from meeting Jesus as he waits for us.

Across the Divide

As should be very clear by now, Pope Benedict speaks as often as he can about Jesus' invitation to all of us to be in relationship with him. The foundation of our response to this invitation is in prayer:

Love for Christ expresses itself in the will to harmonize our own life with the thoughts and sentiments of his heart. This is achieved through interior union based on the grace of the sacraments, strengthened by continuous prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and penance. We have to listen attentively to the inspirations that he evokes through his Word, through the people we meet, through the situations of daily life. To love him is to remain in dialogue with him, in order to know his will and to put it into effect promptly.⁸⁴

So right away, we might experience a slight adjustment in our understanding of prayer. It is not about finding a comfortable inner space. It is about being in dialogue with Jesus.

It's worthwhile—and maybe a little scary—to consider who is at the forefront of our prayer. When we come to prayer, who is on our minds? Is it God, or is it ourselves?

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. He responded with a prayer, which begins, not with an explanation of who we are and why we are there and what our troubles are, but with a hallowing of God: Our Father.

The question, then, is this: If I seek to meet Jesus in my prayer, is he at the center of my prayer, or am I? Am I really ready to listen? How open am I?

It seems to me that this gesture of openness is also the first gesture of prayer: being open to the Lord's presence and to his gift. This is also the first step in receiving something that we do not have, that we cannot have with the intention of acquiring it all on our own.

We must make this gesture of openness, of prayer—give me faith, Lord!—with our whole being. We must enter into this willingness to accept the gift and let ourselves, our thoughts, our affections, and our will be completely immersed in this gift.⁸⁵

Openness involves at least two aspects: a commitment and will to accept whatever it is God sends or tells me, and a sensitivity to the presence of God in a busy world, in the midst of a busy life:

Thus, it is also an invitation to be sensitive to this presence of the Lord who is knocking at my door. We must not be deaf to him, because the ears of our heart are so full of the din of the world that we cannot hear this silent presence that is knocking at our door.

Let us at the same time consider whether we really are prepared to open the doors of our heart; or perhaps this heart is crammed with so many other things that there is no room in it for the Lord, and for the time being, we have no time for him. Thus, insensitive, dead to his presence, distracted by other things, we fail to hear the essential: the Lord, knocking at the door. He is close to us; hence, true joy, which is more powerful than all the sorrows of the world or of our lives, is at hand.⁸⁶

Putting Jesus at the center, becoming aware of what distracts us from his presence, we can now focus on the purpose of prayer, which is deeply related to everything else Benedict has been saying

to us so far: to be a Christian is to be “in Christ.” It means to let Christ live in me and love through me.

The purpose of prayer is to help this happen. As I pray, I let Jesus in, and, most importantly, I allow everything about my life to be shaped by that presence. I am surrounded by many voices, both internally and externally, which want to lead me, and some of those I dearly would like to follow. But my faith in Jesus tells me that he is the one Voice that loves me, the only one worthy of trusting with my life.

So how can I recognize that voice unless I take time to listen, know, and be familiar with it? In speaking to Swiss bishops in 2006, the pope explored this question (which, incidentally, should tell us something—that the pope is under no illusion that bishops are beyond the need for education on this score). No matter who we are, there is always a call to go deeper in our relationship with Christ:

Learn to think as Christ thought, learn to think with him!
And this thinking is not only the thinking of the mind, but also a thinking of the heart.

We learn Jesus Christ’s sentiments when we learn to think with him and thus, when we learn to think also of his failure, of his passage through failure and of the growth of his love in failure.

If we enter into these sentiments of his, if we begin to practice thinking like him and with him, then joy for God is awakened within us, confident that he is the strongest; yes, we can say that love for him is reawakened within us. We feel how beautiful it is that he is there and that we can

know him—that we know him in the face of Jesus Christ who suffered for us. I think this is the first thing: that we ourselves enter into vital contact with God—with the Lord Jesus, the living God. . . .”⁸⁷

This personal openness to the Lord is one part of the picture. The other part is context. How do I know if what I am sensing in my prayer is the Lord’s voice or that of my own desires? Does prayer actually work on those desires and reshape them?

Pope Benedict, reflecting on St. Augustine in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, points us to an important dimension of prayer: praying shapes our prayer. St. Paul says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26), meaning not that we don’t know the words, but that we do not really know what we should be praying *for*. Our own needs and desires blind us to what God wants of us. One of the foundational ways to discern and grow more sensitive to the authentic voice of God in our prayer, is to always pray in the context of the Church: with the Scriptures, with the liturgical prayer of the Church, with the Spirit-formed tradition of the Church in mind. If we really want to meet Jesus in prayer, we don’t come at it as a lone ranger. We trust that Jesus lives within his Church, and by knowing Jesus in the Church, we can more easily recognize his voice in the context of our own prayer:

To pray is not to step outside history and withdraw to our own private corner of happiness. When we pray properly, we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well. In prayer we must learn what we can truly ask of God—what is

worthy of God. We must learn that we cannot pray against others. We must learn that we cannot ask for the superficial and comfortable things that we desire at this moment—that meager, misplaced hope that leads us away from God. We must learn to purify our desires and our hopes. We must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves. God sees through them, and when we come before God, we too are forced to recognize them. “But who can discern his errors? Clear me from hidden faults,” prays the psalmist (Psalm 19:12). Failure to recognize my guilt, the illusion of my innocence, does not justify me and does not save me, because I am culpable for the numbness of my conscience and my incapacity to recognize the evil in me for what it is. If God does not exist, perhaps I have to seek refuge in these lies, because there is no one who can forgive me, no one who is the true criterion. Yet my encounter with God awakens my conscience in such a way that it no longer aims at self-justification, and is no longer a mere reflection of me and those of my contemporaries who shape my thinking, but it becomes a capacity for listening to the Good itself.

For prayer to develop this power of purification, it must on the one hand be something very personal, an encounter between my intimate self and God, the living God. On the other hand, it must be constantly guided and enlightened by the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly. Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, in his book of spiritual exercises, tells us that during his

life there were long periods when he was unable to pray and that he would hold fast to the texts of the Church's prayer: the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the prayers of the liturgy. Praying must always involve this intermingling of public and personal prayer. This is how we can speak to God and how God speaks to us. In this way, we undergo those purifications by which we become open to God and are prepared for the service of our fellow human beings. We become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others. Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well. It is an active hope, in which we struggle to prevent things moving toward the "perverse end." It is an active hope also in the sense that we keep the world open to God. Only in this way does it continue to be a truly human hope.⁸⁸

Teach Us to Pray

Even with that central purpose—knowing and being one with the mind and heart of Christ—there are still as many ways to pray as there are human beings on the journey.

During his pontificate, Pope Benedict has taken special care to remind us of these many different ways, paying special attention to what some might call more traditional modes of prayer and devotion. Some of us might not know about these forms or be closed to them because of their associations with the past. We might be under the impression, as I once was, that the only "real" prayers are forms that involve only meditation without any material or traditional elements. Pope Benedict invites us to open our

hearts and to consider walking with our brothers and sisters who have lived before us, ready to meet Jesus as he speaks to us there.

For example, he says this about spending quiet time in Eucharistic adoration:

In the Sacred Host, he is present, the true treasure, always waiting for us. Only by adoring this presence do we learn how to receive him properly—we learn the reality of communion, we learn the Eucharistic celebration from the inside. Here I would like to quote some fine words of St. Edith Stein, co-patroness of Europe, who wrote in one of her letters: "The Lord is present in the tabernacle in his divinity and his humanity. He is not there for himself, but for us: for it is his joy to be with us. He knows that we, being as we are, need to have him personally near. As a result, anyone with normal thoughts and feelings will naturally be drawn to spend time with him, whenever possible and as much as possible" (*Gesammelte Werke* VII, 136ff.). Let us love being with the Lord! There we can speak with him about everything. We can offer him our petitions, our concerns, our troubles, our joys, our gratitude, our disappointments, our needs, and our aspirations. There we can also constantly ask him: "Lord, send laborers into your harvest! Help me to be a good worker in your vineyard!"⁸⁹

About the Rosary, he says:

To be apostles of the Rosary . . . it is necessary to experience personally the beauty and depth of this prayer, which

is simple and accessible to everyone. It is first of all necessary to let the Blessed Virgin take one by the hand to contemplate the face of Christ: a joyful, luminous, sorrowful, and glorious face.⁹⁰

And in the prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours:

The Liturgy of the Hours is another fundamental way of being with Christ: here we pray as people conscious of our need to speak with God, while lifting up all those others who have neither the time nor the ability to pray in this way. If our Eucharistic celebration and the Liturgy of the Hours are to remain meaningful, we need to devote ourselves constantly anew to the spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture; not only to be able to decipher and explain words from the distant past, but to discover the word of comfort that the Lord is now speaking to me, the Lord who challenges me by this word. Only in this way will we be capable of bringing the inspired Word to the men and women of our time as the contemporary and living Word of God.⁹¹

And, finally, we can open our hearts so that God can speak to us through all that surrounds us. Here the Holy Father speaks extemporaneously at the end of the Lenten retreat given to the Roman Curia, reflecting on what he heard and saw that prompted his own prayer:

During your first conference, I became aware that in the inlay of my *prie-dieu*, the Risen Christ is shown surrounded

by flying angels. These angels, I thought, can fly because they are not regulated by the gravity of the earth's material things but by the gravity of the Risen One's love; and that we would be able to fly if we were to step outside material gravity and enter the new gravity of the love of the Risen One.

You have really helped us to come out of this gravitational force of everyday things, to enter into this other gravity of the Risen One and thus, to rise to on high. We thank you for this.⁹²

To let Jesus be present to us in everything, ancient or new, in all that surrounds us, in all that we meet: that is prayer.

In the Name

The goal of Christian prayer is the goal of the Christian life—union with Jesus Christ. This union leads, of course, to joy and a sense of fulfillment. But as Pope Benedict has pointed out, if our own personal universe of emotion and need forms the walls of the room in which we pray, we will undoubtedly be misled and will end up not serving Christ but only ourselves.

For service, in the end, is the whole point. Meeting Jesus in prayer leads us to his heart, which is not a heart of sitting still and feeling okay about who we are. It is a heart of radical, sacrificial love.

On Ash Wednesday of 2008, Pope Benedict called on Christians to enter into that heart, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the world:

MEETING JESUS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Of course, this is always a great adventure, but life can be successful only if we have the courage to be adventurous, trusting that the Lord will never leave me alone, that the Lord will go with me and help me.⁹⁴

What has your day been like so far? Did you get the kids to school? Is dinner planned? Are you overwhelmed at work? Or anxious about getting—or losing—a job? How is your health? Your spouse's health? Your children's? Tired? Missing anyone? Wishing someone would go away? How many things did you worry about today? Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?

Life is . . . life. God puts us here for a reason, we know, but sometimes that reason becomes murky, or the demands and busyness of each day take on a life of their own. When that happens, it is often difficult to rediscover the hand of God—even if we can remember a time when that hand was very clear and present to us.

Those of us who aren't priests or religious or even lay church employees might be tempted to look at those who are with envy at times. After all, keeping Christ at the center of daily life is so much easier for them—it's their job!

But those who work in the Church, either lay or religious, find it just as challenging to keep Jesus at the center of their daily

Prayer is a crucible in which our expectations and aspirations are exposed to the light of God's Word, immersed in dialogue with the One who is the Truth, and from which they emerge free from hidden lies and compromises with various forms of selfishness. Without the dimension of prayer, the human "I" ends by withdrawing into himself, and the conscience, which should be an echo of God's voice, risks being reduced to a mirror of the self, so that the inner conversation becomes a monologue, giving rise to self-justifications by the thousands. Therefore, prayer is a guarantee of openness to others: whoever frees himself for God and his needs simultaneously opens himself to the other, to the brother or sister who knocks at the door of his heart and asks to be heard, asks for attention, forgiveness, at times correction, but always in fraternal charity.

True prayer is never self-centered; it is always centered on the other. As such, it opens the person praying to the "ecstasy" of charity, to the capacity to go out of oneself to draw close to the other in humble, neighborly service. True prayer is the driving force of the world, since it keeps it open to God. For this reason, without prayer there is no hope but only illusion. In fact, it is not God's presence that alienates man but his absence: without the true God, Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, illusory hopes become an invitation to escape from reality. Speaking with God, dwelling in his presence, letting oneself be illuminated and purified by his Word introduces us, instead, into the heart of reality, into the very motor of becoming cosmic; it introduces us, so to speak, to the beating heart of the universe.⁹³