

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER IN THE JERUSALEM CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the recurring elements in the Lucan Diptych is precisely the practice of prayer by all its characters. From Jesus to Mary and the disciples, and from the women to the first Christian community everyone is said to pray in the Gospel and the Book of Acts. The initial path of the Church is marked, above all, by the action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the Apostles into witnesses of the Risen One who express themselves not only in the Word but also in the shedding of their own blood. Their testimony spread rapidly from Jerusalem and Antioch to the West until it reached the capital of the empire in Rome, as the Lord said in Acts 1:8: "you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end." The entire book of Acts reveals a praying Church, a community of faithful deeply rooted in prayer. Both as a community and as individuals, they pray continually, thus fulfilling the prayer mandate given by Jesus in the Gospel: "Stay awake, praying at all times" (Lk 21:36). The First Church, that of Jerusalem in Acts 1-8, is not drafted as a self-sufficient community, sure of itself and its means, but rather as a Church that - in its weakness - is sustained by the power of God. A vision that comes in line with those words of Jesus Christ in Luke 12:32: "There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom." This study presents the different aspects of prayer in the Early Church that sojourned in Jerusalem as we read it mainly in the first eight chapters of Acts. In the first place, we will see prayer as an attitude of expectation and the role of praying in the company of the Mother of God. Next, we shall analyze some texts that deal with perseverance in prayer and sacramental prayer. Finally, the role of prayer at decisive moments in the community and facing persecution is analyzed. Prayer is the powerful weapon granted by God to his Church to win the battles in the middle of the world and achieve the conversion of men. With prayer, the Church is omnipotent because it allows the power of God to reside among the brothers and sisters, for whom everything becomes possible (Lk 1:37).

Keywords: Prayer; Lucan Diptych; Acts of the Apostles; Holy Spirit; Witness; Resurrection; Apostles; Mother of God; Perseverance; Sacramental Prayer; Persecution.

INTRODUCTION

Acts of the Apostles is the second book of the Lucan Diptych. While the Gospel deals with the revelation itself and with the foundation of the Christian faith according to the teachings and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ, the second volume narrates the Apostles' and the people's witness to this faith.¹ In both books, one of the recurring elements is precisely the practice of prayer, from Jesus to Mary, the disciples, and the first Christian community.

¹ See LÖNING, Karl. *Geschichtswerk I*, 48.

The initial path of the Church is marked, above all, by the action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms the Apostles into witnesses of the Risen One who express themselves not only in the Word but also in the shedding of their own blood.² Their testimony spread rapidly from Jerusalem and Antioch to the West until it reached the capital of the empire in Rome. In this way, the program that Jesus gives to his disciples before the Ascension is fulfilled when he tells them: “you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth's remotest end” (Acts 1:8).

The entire book of Acts reveals a praying Church, a community of faithful deeply rooted in prayer around the Word of God. Both as a community and as individuals, they pray continually, thus fulfilling the prayer mandate given by Jesus in the Gospel: “Stay awake, praying at all times” (Lk 21:36) and “Get up and pray not to be put to the test” (Lk 22:46). In the Book of Acts, Saint Luke dwells on contemplating one of the key practices of the Early Church. A Church that prays is a Church that lives in dependence on the Lord, just as Jesus had lived in dependence on the Father. The First Church, that of Jerusalem in Acts 1-8, is not drafted as a self-sufficient community, sure of itself and its means, but rather as a Church that - in its weakness - is sustained by the power of God. A vision that comes in line with those words of Jesus Christ in Luke 12:32: “There is no need to be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your Father to give you the kingdom.” Through prayer, the early community breathes and stays alive day by day. As we will see in this presentation, the Church of Jerusalem experienced the power of prayer, the effectiveness that Jesus promised to those who make a supplication by invoking his name with faith and humility (Lk 18:13-14; Lk 11:9; Mt 18:19-20; Mt 21:22). The Church of Acts experienced the joy of being miraculously sustained by a prayer that made them stronger amid weakness.

This study presents the different aspects of prayer in the Early Church that sojourned in Jerusalem as we read it mainly in the first eight chapters of Acts. In the first place, we will see prayer as an attitude of expectation and the role of praying in the company of the Mother of God. Next, we shall analyze some texts that deal with perseverance in prayer and sacramental prayer. Finally, the role of prayer at decisive moments in the community and facing persecution is analyzed. The Bible quotations in this paper have been chosen from the New Jerusalem Bible unless otherwise noted.

1. WITH MARY FROM THE RESURRECTION TO THE GIFT OF PENTECOST

It is significant that the first scene that Saint Luke depicts, after the Ascension of the Lord, is the group of the 120 disciples in prayer (Acts 1:14). It is the concrete response to the indication of the Lord to await “what the Father had promised” (1:4), that is, the sending of the Holy Spirit. Now is the time to open up to the gift from above, which will enable them to fulfill an extraordinary mission that overwhelms them in every sense. The reader cannot forget their origins as fishermen and simple men and women from the countryside of northern Galilee. Only by being clothed with the power from on high (Lk 24:49) will they be able to witness the Good News of Christ to the ends of the earth (1:8). The prayer of this initial group is born in simplicity and poverty. It is the invocation of those who, lacking everything, expect everything from above.

In this context of anticipation, between the Ascension and Pentecost, Saint Luke mentions Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and her relatives for the last time (cf. Acts 1:14). The

² See MARGUERAT, Daniel. *Atti 1*, 61.

auctor ad Theophilum dedicated to Mary the initial pages of his Gospel, from the announcement of the Archangel Gabriel to the birth and childhood of the Lord. With Mary begins the earthly life of Jesus and with Mary also begin the first steps of the Church; In both moments, the story unfolds in an atmosphere of recollection and listening to God. Mary followed in silence, but closely, all the path of her Son during his public life until the foot of his cross, and now she also follows, with a silent prayer, the path of the Church.

Mary is present in Jerusalem, in the upper room where Jesus' disciples used to meet (cf. Acts 1:13). She is there sharing this atmosphere of listening and prayer before the doors open up and they go out to announce the message of Christ the Lord to all peoples, teaching them to keep everything He commanded (cf. Mt 28:19-20). The presence of the Mother of God with the Eleven, after the Ascension, is not a simple historical annotation of something that happened in the past. It rather assumes a meaning of great value, because Mary shares with the Apostles and with the small community of Jerusalem the most precious thing she has: the living memory of Jesus that is expressed in prayer. By keeping the memory of Jesus alive, she preserves his presence among the brothers and sisters of the Church. Mary and the Church await as one entity the gift of the Holy Spirit because one cannot consider a Church without her presence together with the Apostles, as Saint Chromatius of Aquileia said in one of his sermons.³

2. THEY JOINED CONSTANTLY IN PRAYER (1:14; 2:42)

Perseverance in prayer is the attitude of the little church of the 120 disciples in Acts 1:14 but also that of the post-Pentecost church in 2:42. At 1:14 Luke says: "With one heart all these **joined constantly** in prayer." In both cases, Luke uses the Greek verb (gr. *proskartereo*) which indicates persistence, loyalty, and devotion to prayer.⁴ Prayer and praise permeate the entire life of the early Church. Communities pray and individuals pray. The reader notes that the Church of Acts is a Church in prayer, praising the Lord, literally hanging on the power of God.⁵

The end of St. Stephen's cycle, the church's first martyr, is played out in a prayerful setting.⁶ Faced with the fury of the members of the Sanhedrin for his speech (7:54), Saint Stephen gathers himself in prayer and manifests himself "filled with the Holy Spirit" which gives him the certainty that "the Son of man is standing at the right hand of God" (7:55-56). St Stephen suffers his martyrdom in prayer, trusting his life in the hands of the Lord Jesus (7:59) and begging "aloud" forgiveness for his murderers (7:60). An attitude that confirms him as a true disciple of Christ who asked forgiveness for those who crucified him and mocked him on the cross (see Lk 23:34). Immediately after the first persecution in Jerusalem, we see Saul in prayer when a certain Ananias lays his hands on him to restore his sight in Damascus (9:11-12). And although the story does not say so explicitly, Ananias himself must have been in prayer when he perceived the call of the Lord to go to Saul (9: 10-11) despite his objections and fears (9: 13-16).

Perseverance in prayer is also mentioned when the Apostles perform miracles. Certainly, all the signs of divine power are carried out "in the name of Jesus Christ" as we can read in Peter's healings of the crippled man in the Temple and the paralyzed man in

³ "Non potest ergo Ecclesia nuncupari nisi fuerit ibi Maria mater Domini cum fratribus eius. Illic enim Ecclesia Christi ex virgine praedicatur." CHROMACE D'AQUILEE. Sermo 30:1: Sources Chrétiennes 164, 135.

⁴ See HINSON, E. Glenn, 729.

⁵ See MARGUERAT, Daniel. *Atti 1*, 121, footnote 37.

⁶ For a detailed study of St Stephen's prayer see COLMEIRO VEGA, Alejandro. 26-31.

Lydda (3:6; 9:34). In this way, it is emphasized that it is the Lord who works the prodigies, in the apostolic era at the hands of the apostles (5:12), and later through his saints. In the case of the resurrection of Tabitha of Joppa, Peter precedes his miracle with intense prayer. When they take him to the disciple who was already dead, Peter “knelt down and prayed.” Only later did he tell her: “Tabita, stand up” (9:40). The allusion to the resurrections carried out by the prophets Elijah and Elisha to the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman are more than evident, and, in both cases, the prophets prayed fervently before performing their miracles (see 1Ki 17:20; 2Ki 4:33).⁷ In Mark 5:41 and Luke 7:14, Jesus acts with his divine authority and does not need any supplication to raise Jairus’ daughter and the Nain widow’s son. Peter is a disciple and needs God’s help in everything he does. With prayer and faith, Peter returns Tabitha to life and presents her to the church gathered in that house moving many people to the faith in the Lord (9:42).

When Peter returns to Jerusalem, he is imprisoned due to Herod’s persecution. Luke tells that “The church prayed to God for him unremittently” (12:5) and implies that the later prodigious liberation in Acts 12:6-11 was possible due to the insistent prayer of the Church. This time Luke affirms that prayer not only breaks the chains of sickness and suffering from the body but also breaks down the walls of injustice and rescues believers from the hands of the enemy. When Peter is free, the prayer does not stop, since he goes to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, in search of the brothers and sisters and finds out that “they were gathered in prayer” (12:12). In short, perseverance in prayer sustains the life of the little Church of Jerusalem to such an extent that Christians could be defined as “those who call on the name of the Lord” (2:21; 3:16; 9:14-15.21).⁸

3. THE BREAKING OF BREAD

In the first summary of Acts 2:42-27, Luke mentions four essential pillars for the community life of the Church: the teaching of the apostles, communion, the breaking of bread, and prayers. The breaking of the bread was already introduced in Luke 24:30.35 to refer to the Eucharist in a more abstract way. Later we will read its verbal form as part of the practices of Christians everywhere (Acts 2:46; 20:7.11; 27:35). Since the more specific terms such as “the Lord’s supper”, “eucharist”, or “sacrifice” do not appear in the book of Acts, the breaking of the bread becomes the formal term for referring to the Eucharist in this book. A tradition that has its roots in Paul’s terminology, particularly in 1 Cor 10:16 and that at the same time, for Luke, underlines the aspect of sharing and behaving as a just community with everyone. This Eucharistic celebration was carried out “from house to house” (2:46 NAS), which helped to strengthen family ties in the Church around the sacrament of the Lord.⁹ For Luke, it is essential to leave in writing that the first communities met “on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread” (20:7). This first day would later be called the Lord’s Day (ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ; see Rev 1:10) and from very early on it will be the day dedicated to the commemoration of the resurrection and the celebration of the Eucharist as a practice of Christian identity: “every Lord’s Day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving” (Didache 14:1). In this context, it is understood that Sunday is also a day to celebrate the beginning of a new life and the resurrection, as the story of the young man Eutychus in Acts 20:9-12 also shows.

⁷ About the intertextuality of this pericope in Acts and the narratives in 1-2 Kings see MARGUERAT, Daniel. *Atti I*, 403 and 407.

⁸ See also HINSON, E. Glenn, 729-732.

⁹ See Ampuero, Julio A. Poder.

4. THE APOSTLES DEDICATE THEMSELVES TO PRAYER

Since prayer is a natural activity for the entire church in Jerusalem, it is especially highlighted in the life of the Apostles. We have seen above that the Apostles assiduously resorted to prayer. Let us mention, for example, the healing of the cripple man that occurs when Peter and John “were going up to the Temple for the prayers at the ninth hour” (3:1).¹⁰

Beyond that, the Apostles are aware of the absolute priority of Scriptural prayer in their apostolic mission. This can be observed especially when the number of disciples increases and so do the leaders’ tasks. So, they choose to entrust others with the table service and dedicate themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer (see 6:1-4). Being the service of the tables a task of charity, totally worthy and holy, they understand that their specific mission is mainly to preach the Word, an activity that finds one essential source in the recess for prayer.

It is not by chance that when the Apostles distribute the tasks, and they decide to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Word (see 6:4) we are told immediately afterward that “The word of the Lord continued to spread: the number of disciples in Jerusalem was greatly increased” (6:7). The immediate consequence of this decision is the growth of the community. When the ministers of the Church pray and announce Christ, the Gospel spreads and the Church grows.

This prayer can particularly be accompanied by fasting when there is a special request or when the spiritual maturity of people is strengthened. In the Jerusalem cycle immediately after Pentecost, there is no mention of fasting. The first time it appears is before the imposition of hands on Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and before they establish presbyters in each community (see 13:2-3; 14:23).

5. FACING PERSECUTION (4:23-31)

After the ban to speak about Jesus and the threats received from the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 4:18.21), the path of the Church meets a great challenge. With great resilience, the Apostles are determined to obey God before men. They are aware that they cannot remain silent about what they have seen and heard about Christ and his Resurrection. This is how Peter and John expressed it before the Sanhedrin in 4:19-20. The prohibition of the Jewish authorities from the Temple clashes against the mission received from Jesus in 1:8 and aims to prevent its accomplishment.

In the face of danger, the community reacts by lifting up a prayer with a revealing Biblical content. In light of this critical situation, the community does not react with discouragement or with regrets. On the contrary, they turn to the Lord as their only strength and support: “When they heard it, they lifted up their voice to God with one heart” (4:24). In their prayer, they look to God as the sovereign master of everything, as the creator of everything that exists (4:24). Reassured by the omnipotence of God, they can calmly confront the persecution they are going through.

With the help of the Word of God – specifically Psalm 2 as in the LXX – they seek light to understand their situation. And they find it, from the Word and above all from the experience of Jesus himself: Jesus also found opposition to carry out his mission by Herod and Pilate, and the persecution to which he was subjected now continues in the Church. In the same way that Herod and Pilate did not hinder God's plans, but rather –without knowing it– contributed to its achievement, persecution now does not prevent the Church from

¹⁰ About this practice see MARGUERAT, Daniel. *Acti 1*, 130 and FITZMYER, Joseph. *Acts*, 277.

fulfilling the mission received from Christ. On the contrary, persecution is integrated into God's plan (4:25-28).

Once they understand the meaning of what is happening, they do not ask for the difficulties to disappear, nor for the enemies to be annihilated, but simply for the courage to continue preaching the Word during persecution (4:29-30). Once they are convinced that the persecution will not hinder the spreading of the Gospel, they only ask to be clothed again with power from on high. They do not care if they are persecuted, but if the Gospel can be preached to everyone. The fruit of prayer is a new Pentecost that makes them preach the Word of God with courage. Prayer has broken down all fears. It has not only shed light to understand the meaning of what is happening: above all, it has given them the divine strength of the Spirit to transform that situation, as we can read in verse 31: "As they prayed, the house where they were assembled rocked. From this time, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God fearlessly."

6. FACING IMPORTANT DECISIONS

To complete the number of the Twelve, discernment is not enough, even though it is indispensable and necessary. When it comes to choosing the substitute for Judas, Luke writes: "They prayed: Lord, you can read everyone's heart; show us therefore which of these two you have chosen" (1:24). Human illumination is not enough, even if it comes from every member of the community. They are aware that it is not theirs but God's choice, and that it is up to them to match the one that God has chosen.

They are aware that only God sees into all hearts and that external appearances can often be deceiving. For this reason, they pray: "Show us which of these two you have chosen." Thus, not only the human but mainly the divine initiative is demonstrated.

Also after the election of the seven, we are told that the apostles "laid their hands on them after prayer" (6:6). They have received a mission that must be clothed with prayer. No matter how material their tasks may seem, every mission in the Church is sacred, even the table service as it is meant in this case. The prayer emphasizes this while imploring the grace so that those who have received it carry it out in the spirit of Christ.

The first great mission to the Gentiles also springs from prayer: "One day while they were offering worship to the Lord and keeping a fast, the Holy Spirit said: I want Barnabas and Saul set apart for the work to which I have called them" (13:2). In this case, we are not told that there was a question subject to discernment. It seems like a complete and absolute initiative of the Spirit that was perceived precisely while they were in community prayer.¹¹ How the voice of the Spirit has been understood may have been through one of those who are listed in the previous verse as "prophets" (13:1). We see here the early Church listening to the Spirit through prayer. Only in prayer, God's will can be discerned with certainty and without error. And only in prayer can one grasp the movements of the Spirit who constantly surprises and opens new ways for the mission of the Church.

Another clear example is the entry into the Church of the first pagan family: the conversion of the centurion Cornelius and those of his household as it is recorded in Acts 10. In this case, prayer seems to be the engine of every development in the story. The first Christians of Jewish origin had great doubts about the evangelization of the immeasurable heathen world. However, prayer breaks down obstacles and prepares the way for both the evangelizer and the ones to be evangelized. Cornelius is a pious man, a man of prayer with a

¹¹ See FITZMYER, Joseph. Acts, 497.

certain sympathy for Judaism. Precisely while in prayer he understands that he has to make Peter come and immediately he obeys what God has inspired him (10:1-8).¹²

While Cornelius's envoys are on their way, Peter is also in prayer, and without him knowing anything about what is going to happen, God himself prepares the Apostle to welcome these pagans and to walk with them (10:9-16).

Peter will end up announcing Christ to Cornelius' household and they will receive the Holy Spirit and be baptized. Prayer has prepared both the preacher and his recipients to fulfill this step of great transcendence in the early Church, without them knowing it. Prayer has opened the way to evangelization in unexpected and surprising ways. From their logic and mindsets, the Apostles might never have taken that step.

Instead, by opening their ears to God through prayer, they have allowed God himself to prepare both their minds and hearts to make that qualitative leap, unthinkable from the Jewish mentality of that time.

CONCLUSIONS

The early Church of Acts reveals prayer around the Word of God as their secret source of strength and vitality. By prayer, they live from God. They have access to a superb, mystical, and divine life. The Church prolongs in history the prayer of Christ, the Incarnate Word. Thanks to the prayerful mediation of Scriptures, God's blessings constantly descend on the world, who is saved from itself, and the Biblical Kingdom of Heavens opens its doors for them. Between the Ascension and Pentecost, Virgin Mary meets in the Church in prayer (cf. Acts 1, 14). Mother of God and Mother of the Church, Mary exercises this maternity until the end of history. Mary teaches the need for prayer and tells us that only with a constant, intimate bond, full of love with her Son can we leave "our house", be free of our ego, and reach the ends of the world with the courage to announce the resurrection of the Lord.

Instead, a Church without prayer is a powerless church, like the Apostles in their boat facing the storm. When they ask for the intervention of the Lord, everything calms down and they can reach the land safely (Mt 8:23-28). With prayer, they can break all kinds of ties and chains like those of Peter in Jerusalem or those of Paul in Philippi (Acts 12:11-12 and 16:25-26). Without prayer, the Church is left without vigor and can be easily subdued by its enemies (Mt 17: 20-21; Mk 13:37).

Only prayer can work miracles because it connects us with the power of God. Prayer is the powerful weapon granted by God to his Church to win the battles in the middle of the world and achieve the conversion of men. Prayer and fasting are the secret weapons for spreading the Gospel. With prayer, the Church is omnipotent because it allows the power of God to reside among the brothers and sisters, for whom nothing is impossible (Lk 1:37). Prayer is capable of changing the course of events. Truly, the Church that prays «has its hands on the helm of history» as St. John Chrysostom said.

¹² Cf. MARGUERAT, Daniel. *Atti 1*, 428.

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