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Staying Awake with Christ

a. “Remain here, and stay awake with me.”

“Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’”

— Matthew 26:36-38

After having been the one who comforts, soothes, and heals the sick, after having identified himself with everyone in need and privation, Jesus himself becomes the Great Sufferer at the end of his life. After his last supper with his disciples, anticipating the awful torments his enemies were preparing, he went to the Garden of Olives – Gethsemane – where, as the Gospel-writer tells us, he “*began to be grieved and agitated*”.

Clear-minded in the face of the inevitable Jesus asked for the company of his closest disciples: Peter, James, and John. “*Remain here, and stay awake with me*”. This has always been the plea of so many sick, suffering, and dying persons. It is an appeal for the most basic form of compassion: do not leave me alone with my fear, my distress, my unhappiness and suffering.

“And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

« *Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'* »

— *Matthew 26:39-41*

When Jesus returns and finds Peter, James, and John asleep, he insists and adds an instruction: “*Stay awake and pray*” The wakefulness to which Jesus invites the three Apostles does simply mean letting time go by. It is not an empty time, but a time of watchfulness, of prayer and spiritual combat.

It could be said that the theme of temptation shapes and emerges throughout Jesus’ ministry. From the outset, immediately after his baptism, he “*was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came...*”¹ Jesus emerged victorious from this combat in the desert, but he knew at what cost. When he taught his disciples to pray that they “*may not come into the time of trial*”, he knew well what he was talking about.

Why did Jesus thus emphasise, from the beginning to the end of his life, the importance of praying to be spared temptation? Of what does this temptation consist? Benedict XVI offers a particularly enlightening answer to the question. Having devoted a chapter of his book *Jesus of Nazareth* to Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, he concludes that:

“*At the heart of all temptations, as we see here, is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives. Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, building on our own foundation; refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion – that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied forms.*”²

“*[The tempter] merely suggests that we opt for the reasonable decision, that we choose to give priority to a planned and thoroughly organized world, where God may have his place as a private concern but must not interfere in our essential purposes.*”³

The act of pushing God aside... Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God... Building on our own foundation... This, in Benedict XVI’s words, is what the fundamental temptation consists of, the one we must all confront: to cut oneself off from God and to aspire to control one’s own life and situation.

¹ *Matthew 4:1-3*. For the accounts of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, see *Matthew 4:1-11* and *Luke 4:1-13*.

² Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 28.

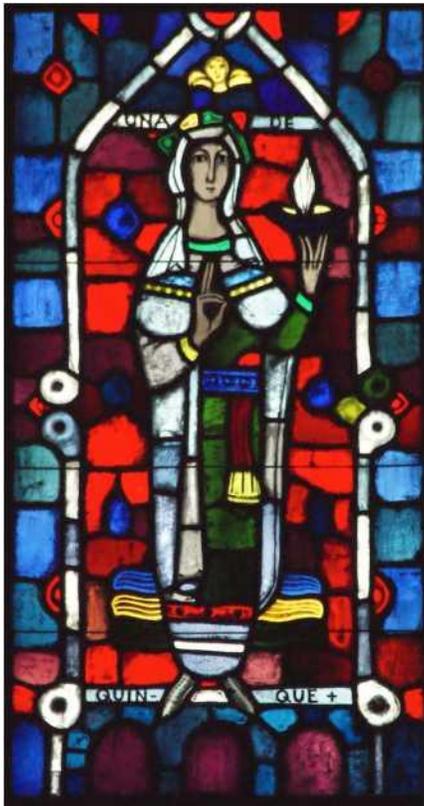
³ Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth*, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 41.

It could be said that prayer is precisely the opposite: it means to be connected to God, to open one's life to him and abandon oneself to him. This is why Jesus calls us to "*pray that we may not come into the time of trial*", so that we might remain in relationship with God rather than cutting ourselves off from him.

In our day, perhaps more than ever, we find it difficult not to be in control of situations. From this point of view, the *Act respecting end-of-life care* can be seen as an extreme instance of the fundamental temptation, where we legally authorize ourselves to choose the moment of death and to go so far as to provide "medical aid" in dying.

For us disciples, called by Jesus to stay awake with him in order to enter into the anguish of his struggle against the ultimate temptation, this time in history – a time of legalized euthanasia on demand, at the end of life, under the name "medical aid in dying" – may well become a time of prophetic witness and resistance.

b. "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."



"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

– Matthew 24:36

"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"

– Matthew 25:13

"Staying awake", "keeping vigil," or "watching," also means waiting. The theme of waiting recurs several times in Jesus' teaching: the character of the Good Samaritan asks the innkeeper to take care of the wounded man until his return⁴; a master entrusts the management of his household to a steward during his absence⁵; a king sets out to receive his crown in a distant capital and, during his journey, entrusts the management of his goods to his servants⁶; young girls stay up late into the night, their lamps alight, waiting for the bridegroom to arrive for the wedding.⁷

⁴ Luke 10:35

⁵ Matthew 24:45-51

⁶ Luke 19:11-27

⁷ Matthew 25:1-13

However, for the disciples it is a matter of a period of waiting whose end-point is already known: the Lord's return, that is, his coming in glory that will mark the end of time. It is Christ who is the Bridegroom, the Master, the King who is awaited and longed-for. Of course, we do not await this coming in glory the way we await a celebration or an event written down in our agendas, since in those instances we know how much time remains and can busy ourselves with other tasks. No, the watching and waiting to which the Lord invites us touches every day and every moment. The book of Revelation – the final book of the Bible – witnesses to the centrality of this theme in the life of the Church from its first generations.

*“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’
And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”*

– Revelation 22:17

After this, the *book of Revelation* – and thus the Bible as a whole – ends with these words:

“Surely I am coming soon. - Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

– Revelation 22:20

For its part, the world of today often seems allergic to waiting. We are in the age of immediacy: everything must happen at the speed of a click on the Internet, or nearly. Any waiting is thus seen as a waste of time and any service not provided on-the-spot runs the risk of being slammed for incompetence. Anything long or drawn-out is unbearable, seen as wasteful or costly.

Having to wait for a prolonged period for the death of a person who is at the end of life, especially if he or she is unconscious or must be kept so for comfort's sake, may seem more and more problematical. “Why not just end it all right away?” we sometimes hear, especially to spare loved ones from being present for the end of a life that they find unbearable.

As difficult as it may be, however, this ultimate time of waiting can be lived as a time of vigil, a time to live compassion – “suffering-with” – in its strongest sense.

Keeping vigil with a person who is dying, spending a long time holding the hand of a person who is but partly conscious, or who is even sedated or in a coma, may be the culmination and fulfillment of a relationship of fraternity, friendship, and love. Even when unconscious and reduced to total passivity, the dying person can bring the one who accompanies him or her to tap into inner resources, to grow as a person and thus to progress towards full human maturity. This time which may seem endlessly drawn-out is certainly a trying time, but it may also be a time of interior transformation, spiritual growth, and even conversion.



c. "Pray without ceasing."



"Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."

– I Thessalonians 5:17-18

At the start of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II wrote that now, more than ever, what is needed is *"a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer"*⁸:

*"Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: 'Abide in me and I in you'. This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life..."*⁹

When this life comes to an end in weakness and sickness, when it seems interminably drawn out, when ultimately we cannot do much, and we feel useless, burdensome, and good for nothing, then prayer – this dialogue with Christ which is *"is the very substance and soul of the Christian life"* – can satisfy the heart and give meaning to this crucial phase of life.

Here we might think of the moving testimony of Céline Martin, who was the sister of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and who accompanied her throughout her last days:

"I awoke several times a night, despite her entreaties. On one of these visits I found my dear little sister, her hands joined and her eyes raised to Heaven. 'What are you doing like this?' I asked 'You must try to sleep.'

- 'I cannot, I am suffering too much, so I pray...'

- 'And what do you say to Jesus?'

*- 'I don't say anything to him, I love him!'"*¹⁰

This secret and intimate dialogue of the dying person with the Lord – a dialogue that must sometimes take place wordlessly, as St. Thérèse testified – can include fervent intercessory prayer for family, for loved ones, and for the world.

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, para. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.* The reference to Christ's words is from John 15:4.

¹⁰ Translated excerpt from "Dernières Paroles de Thérèse à Céline" [*Last words from Thérèse to Céline*] in Thérèse of Lisieux, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Cerf/Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), p. 1162.

In the Church there are people who consecrate their whole lives to this ministry of prayer for others. This a very important and valuable service, but one that is not, of course, the vocation of very many. However, in the last phase of life and right up to the last instant, when one has lost almost all one's powers, when one may feel tempted to think oneself useless and of no purpose, one can yet make an inestimably valuable and irreplaceable contribution by means of prayer. In one's fragility and apparent powerlessness, the Christian who is approaching death may be one of the most active members of the Church in the communion of saints.

When we think of the unceasing prayer of the faithful, we naturally think of the usual prayers, starting with the *Our Father*; and also of the Rosary, in which the *Hail Mary* is repeated by the decade, such that this prayer is probably the one most recited by Catholics around the world. In every language, millions of people take it up throughout every day, thus raising an incessant invocation to the mother of Jesus:

“Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

This prayer, often called the *Angelic Salutation* because its first words repeat those spoken by the angel Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation,¹¹ attests to the importance of “*the hour of our death*” in the Christian spiritual tradition. The approach of death is to be lived in prayer, and is to be prepared for in prayer throughout one's life, especially with Mary who was present right to the end at the foot of the Cross on which her Son died.

Christian life is a time of watching – a time of watching, temptation, and spiritual combat, one that must be filled with prayer, in the communion of saints.



¹¹ Luke 1:26-38.

To receive and meditate on the Word of God:

a. “Remain here, and stay awake with me.”



I put myself in the place of one of the three disciples who were with Jesus in Gethsemane, and I hear him telling us: *“I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me. Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* What would my response, my reaction, have been? What does Jesus’ invitation mean for me today – *“pray that you may not come into the time of trial”*?

b. “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”



The Bible ends with a heartfelt plea: *“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”* In my own life, what corresponds to this waiting for the Lord that was so important for the first Christians? How can I respond in practice to the Lord’s invitation to *“watch”* or *“stay awake”*?

c. “Pray without ceasing.”



How do I understand this call to *“pray without ceasing”*? How does it translate into everyday life at work, at home, in the family; morning and night; when things are going well, and when they are going badly?



To continue reflecting or to stimulate discussion:

- What touches me most in this reflection entitled *Staying Awake with Christ*? Which passage from God's Word speaks to me most?
 - In the context of end-of-life care, what is the meaning of Jesus' invitation "*Remain here, and stay awake with me. Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.*"?
 - How can the experience of personal prayer prepare one to accompany a person who is at the end of his or her life?
 - What does it mean for me to invoke Mary, Mother of God when we ask her, in the *Hail Mary*, to pray for us "*now and at the hour of our death*"?
 - Could it be said that the legalization of euthanasia under the name "medical aid in dying" is a temptation?
 - What would be a Christian attitude in the face of the affirmation that it is better to be done with life right away, rather than living all its final steps with the benefit of true palliative care?
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*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.*

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

– Psalm 63:1-8





Notes

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a journey of reflection in five steps***

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