Prayer in Times of Crisis
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How ought we to pray in times of crisis? Before we turn our attention to the Scriptures for what might be the best example of prayer in times of crisis, let us briefly sketch out an understanding of what prayer is.

Prayer is open and honest friendship with God: it is communication that is worthy of you and worthy of God. Thus prayer is not a one-sided affair in which we search out God, as if prayer is entirely our business. God already established an intimate relationship with us when he created us; we can be certain that it is not us, nor our prayer, that initiates our relationship with God. God’s relationship to us is more profound and intimate than any other relationship we might have. The Psalmist expressed it in these words: “[O Lord,) You formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works! My very self you knew; my bones were not hidden from you... Search me, O God, know my heart; try me, know my concerns. See if my way is crooked, then lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:13-15a, 23-24). The relationship that God has initiated with us out of love forms the foundation and springboard of all prayer. Prayer, then, is cultivating “a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2558), so it would be a tragic mistake to think of prayer as a monologue. “As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama” (CCC 2567). Prayer is a lively conversation among friends, and friends speak openly and honestly; again, it is speech worthy of you and worthy of God. We must remember that we are not the initiators of prayer. The God who created us and holds us in existence constantly prompts us to prayer. Our prayer is first and foremost a response to God’s initiative. Our prayer does not compel God to respond; rather, it is God who stirs our restless hearts to reach out to him. “Whether we realize or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him” (CCC 2560). Thus, we must be “ready to receive freely the gift of prayer” (CCC 2559). God speaks to us precisely in the desire to pray. Thus, we must follow the instinct on our hearts that is leading us to prayer, and then do it!

In times of crisis, we may feel like God is distant or inattentive to our prayers, or that he has forgotten us. We may not be able to sense in any tangible way the love that God has for us. We may feel that God does not have plans for us, and so we may become discouraged. We may identify with the cry of the Psalmist: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest” (Ps. 22:1-2).

When these are the feelings, thoughts, and prayers bubbling up inside of you, be tranquil. Surrender your concerns over to God. Once we realize that God is calling us to pray about our struggles, we should have no reservations whatsoever about praying the words of Psalm 22. While hanging on the Cross, he cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:24). Such words coming from Jesus, the Son of God, might give us pause. Is it the case that Jesus Christ, who enjoys perfect communion with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, now has doubts? The Catholic answer is, “Of course not.” There are two points to make here.

1 “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jer. 1:5); “The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name” (Is. 49:1); “[God]... had set me apart before I was born” (Gal. 1:15).
2 This notion of “thirst” comes from Christ’s words on the Cross (Jn. 19:28). See also Mother Teresa’s “I Thirst” meditation.
First, God, knowing our weakness, helps us to pray, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). Even in difficult times, God is the one initiating our desire to pray, and he is also bringing that desire to fulfillment God stirs your heart to reach out to Him, just as Jesus, in His humanity, was stirred to prayer.

Second, when quoting the words of Psalm 22, Jesus is actually evoking the words of the whole Psalm. In the verses immediately following, the Psalmist recounts how God has worked in amazing ways throughout history, trusting that God will act in a similar way again: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and they were saved. In you they trusted and were not put to shame” (vv. 3-5). The Psalmist then goes on to acknowledge how God has already worked in the Psalmist’s own life: “Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast. From birth I was cast on you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God” (vv. 9-10). The prayer continues by invoking God’s help in this trying time: “But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs” (vv. 19-20). The Psalm ends with a resounding confidence, not only that the difficult time will come to an end, but that everyone will come to see God’s triumph: “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!” (vv. 27-31). Notice how the prayer traces how the Psalmist gradually grows in intimacy with God, which then transforms the world.

It is precisely by acknowledging in prayer that we are in a time of crisis that we can grow closer to God. The prayer reminds us that God is with us. **Crying out in difficult moments contains in itself an expression of hope—or at least the beginning of it—for why would we pray if we were not confident that an answer would come?** Hope in a time of crisis begins with an honest prayer that acknowledges the real gravity of the situation.

The times when prayer is difficult are precisely the best times to pray. We ought to recognize that any experience of being abandoned, disregarded, or forgotten is an *invitation* to dive more deeply into prayer, into relationship with God. And although it may feel almost blasphemous to utter the Psalmist’s words, we must remember that these words are honest, making them worthy of ourselves, and since these words of Scripture are inspired by God Himself—indeed, even uttered by Christ Himself on the Cross (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34)—we know they are worthy of God.

**Suggestions for Further Reading:**
- Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray*
- C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*
- Fr. Walter J. Ciszek, S.J., *He Leadeth Me*
- St. Mother Teresa, “I Thirst”