

'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' (1Thess. 5:16-18)

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians at a time when many of Jesus' contemporaries were still alive. They had seen and heard him and had witnessed the tragedy of his death and the wonder of his resurrection and ascension. They recognized the mark he had left upon others and expected his imminent return. Paul loved the Thessalonian community who were exemplary in the way they lived and in their fruitful witness. He wrote this letter to them, imploring them to share its content with all (5:27) and he recommended that they should be 'imitators of us and of the Lord' (1:6). He summarised this as follows:

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The common thread in all of Paul's exhortations is not only *what* God expects of us, but also *when*: that is always, constantly and repeatedly.

Can someone command others to rejoice? Everyone experiences that at times life may assail us with problems, worries, suffering and anguish and that society around us may be dreary and unwelcoming. Yet for Paul there is a reason that could make it possible to 'rejoice' as he suggests. In this letter, he is speaking to Christians advising them to take Christian life seriously so that Jesus can live in them with the fullness promised after his resurrection. Jesus lives in those who love and we experience this. We can follow a *pathway of love* when we are not closed in on ourselves but love others, and when we welcome the support of friends and keep alive faith that 'love conquers all'.

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Dialogue among believers of different religions and beliefs leads to an even deeper understanding that praying is a profoundly human action; prayer constitutes and elevates all human beings.

How can we pray without ceasing? The Orthodox theologian Evdokimov wrote, 'It's not enough to *have* prayers, rules and habits; we should become prayer, *be* prayer incarnate. Our life should be liturgy, prayer concerns the most ordinary and everyday things.' (*The Prayer of Jesus* in 'La Novita' dello Spirito')

Chiara Lubich emphasized that 'we can love (God) as children and our hearts can be filled with the Holy Spirit of love and trust in our Father. Such confidence makes us speak to him often and tell him everything that we are doing, our intentions and plans for the future.' (*Conversations*, Citta Nuova)

There is a way to pray without ceasing that is accessible to everyone: by pausing before each action, focussing upon the intention by saying 'For You'. It is a simple practice that transforms our activities from within and makes our entire lives into constant prayer.

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Give thanks in all circumstances. This is the attitude that flows freely and sincerely from grateful love towards the One who silently sustains and accompanies individuals, peoples, history and the entire cosmos. We also have gratitude for others who journey with us and who make us aware that we are not self-sufficient.

Rejoicing, praying and giving thanks are three actions that bring us closer to becoming as God sees and wants us to be and they enrich our relationship with him. We trust that 'the God of peace will sanctify us entirely'. (5:23)

By living this way, we prepare to enter more deeply into the joy of Christmas; we contribute to making the world a better place and we become creators of peace in ourselves, our homes, our workplaces and our public squares. Nothing is more necessary and urgent today.

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