

Men of Prayer, Men of Action - “Do Whatever He Tells You”

By Fr Julian Belich

Brothers,

Last month we reflected on faith in action: that our faith must be visible in the fruits of our lives—in charity, fraternity, service, and the practical work of the Knights.

This month, we go to the source of Christian action.

Before a Christian man acts, he must first listen. Before he speaks, he must first receive. Before he serves, he must allow the Lord to form his heart.

Our Lady gives us the theme in one simple sentence at Cana:

“His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’”

— John 2:5, RSV

But we cannot do what Christ tells us unless we are close enough to hear him.

The Gospel scene of Martha and Mary gives us the starting point:

“Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.’ But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.’”

— Luke 10:38–42, RSV

Jesus is not criticising service. Martha’s hospitality is real and good. Yet she has become distracted, anxious and troubled. Mary, by contrast, sits at the Lord’s feet and listens.

The lesson is not that Christian men should do less. The lesson is that Christian action must begin in the presence of Christ. Prayer is not an escape from duty; it is what enables us to carry duty with clarity, peace and love.

The Catechism describes prayer as “the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God,” and adds that “humility is the foundation of prayer” (“CCC 2559”). Prayer is a living communion with God, who always takes the first step towards us (“CCC 2562–2564”).

Summary

The three pillars of authentic prayer are:

1. “A willingness to change” — prayer means allowing God to lead us beyond our habits, preferences and self-made plans.
2. “Humility grounded in reality” — prayer means recognising that God is God, we are his creatures, and we depend upon his grace.
3. “Silence” — prayer requires space in which we stop merely hearing noise and begin to hear the voice of the Lord.

These three pillars lead us from distraction to attention, from self-centredness to love, and from anxious reaction to Christian response.

To see them more clearly, I would like to place before us two contrasting images: two people at a restaurant, absorbed in their phones; and Saint Bruno of Cologne, who allowed prayer to change his life.

Two Contrasting Images

The first image is very familiar.

Imagine two people sitting opposite one another in a restaurant. They have arranged to share an evening. They may have chosen the restaurant, ordered a meal and set aside time for one another. Outwardly, it appears they are together.

But each is looking at a phone.

One is reading messages. One is scrolling through news. One is replying to emails. One is checking social media. They are physically close, but they are not truly present to one another.

And this is no longer only something seen in restaurants. Many homes can be like this as well. A family can sit in the same room, or even around the same dinner table, while each person is absorbed in a separate screen, a separate conversation and a separate world.

Everyone is present. Yet no one is fully present.

There is a difference between being physically close and truly listening.

The second image is “Saint Bruno of Cologne”, founder of the Carthusian Order.

Bruno was born around 1030 in Cologne, in present-day Germany. His proper name was simply Bruno; he is called Bruno of Cologne because that was his birthplace. He was a highly educated and respected teacher at the cathedral school of Reims in France.

One of his students was Odo of Châtillon, who later became Pope Urban II. Bruno did not seek fame or influence, but he made such an impression that his former student, once Pope, later sought his counsel.

Bruno's life was not a smooth path of advancement. At Reims, he opposed the wrongdoing and corruption associated with Archbishop Manasses. It took courage to challenge what was wrong when doing so could cost him security and position.

Later, Bruno left behind learning, reputation, advancement and comfort. In 1084, with a small group of companions, he withdrew to the Chartreuse mountains near Grenoble in France and founded the first Carthusian community, the Grande Chartreuse.

The Carthusian way of life was marked by solitude, simplicity, prayer and silence. It was not a rejection of people or responsibility. It was a radical decision to seek God with an undivided heart.

The contrast is striking!

The people at the restaurant—or at home—remain enclosed in themselves. Bruno becomes free to leave himself behind for God.

The people on their phones are surrounded by noise. Bruno seeks silence in which God can be heard.

The people may be close to others while remaining untouched by their presence. Bruno allows the reality of God to change the whole direction of his life.

These are two different postures of the heart.

First Pillar: Change

The first pillar of prayer is a willingness to change.

Behind the screen, there is often no willingness to become different. Scrolling allows us to stay inside our own world. We choose what we want to see. We skip what challenges us. We move quickly past anything uncomfortable. We can do our own thing while another person is sitting right in front of us.

There is little openness to receive the other person as they are. There is little risk of being changed by love.

Prayer is different.

Prayer is not simply asking God to approve plans we have already made. Prayer is putting ourselves before God and saying, if not in words but definitely with intent:

“Lord, show me what needs to change.”

This is why prayer can be difficult. We may want comfort but not correction. We may want reassurance but not conversion. We may ask God to solve our problems while resisting his desire to change our hearts.

Saint Bruno gives us a very different picture.

He was willing to speak against what was wrong at Reims. He did not merely look away.

He was willing to leave behind a secure and influential path.

He was willing to change the direction of his life for God.

Bruno did not make one brave decision and then settle into comfort. He continued seeking the will of God. Even when his former student, Pope Urban II, summoned him to Rome as an adviser, Bruno obeyed; yet he remained drawn to a life of prayer and later returned to solitude.

For most of us, God is not asking us to leave family life, work or ordinary duties. Our vocation is to love and serve him in those places. But Saint Bruno's witness still challenges us:

“What is God asking me to change?”

Perhaps it is a habit that leaves no room for prayer.

Perhaps it is an old resentment.

Perhaps it is the need always to be right.

Perhaps it is avoidance of a difficult conversation.

Perhaps it is an attachment to comfort, recognition, approval or control.

Perhaps it is the way we use our time, our attention or our phone.

The Magi give us a beautiful image of conversion. After encountering Christ, they did not simply return to life as before:

“And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”

— Matthew 2:12, RSV

When we truly meet Christ in prayer, we may return to the same family, work, home and responsibilities—but we are called to go by another way.

The Catechism says that prayer is a battle. It involves struggle against distraction, doubt, spiritual laziness, temptation and the false belief that we can live without God (“CCC 2725–2745”).

Jesus says:

“If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

— John 7:37–38, RSV

Prayer begins when we admit our thirst. It begins when we acknowledge that activity, achievement, approval, possessions and distraction cannot satisfy the deepest hunger of the heart.

Second Pillar: Humility

The second pillar of prayer is humility, grounded in reality.

Humility does not mean thinking badly of ourselves. It means seeing reality truthfully.

God is God. We are his creatures.

Life is a gift, not something we have created or earned.

We are responsible for our choices, but we are not in control of everything.

We need grace. We need forgiveness. We need wisdom greater than our own.

The Catechism states:

“Humility is the foundation of prayer.”

— CCC 2559

Think again of the two people at the restaurant, or perhaps a family gathered at home.

There is no humility in being more interested in our own screen than in the person sitting before us. The phone can say, silently: “My messages, my interests, my thoughts and my world matter more than your presence.”

It is a subtle form of self-centredness.

The other person may be in the room, but they are no longer the centre of our attention. We are not truly listening. We are not receiving the reality of the person before us.

Prayer challenges this.

Prayer is that posture: ““Lord, I am not the centre.”

It is to recognise that God does not exist to fit into our plans. Rather, we exist because of God’s love, and we are called to discover his will.

In prayer, we learn to receive rather than merely manage. We learn to listen rather than simply prepare our next reply. We learn to place our plans, worries and ambitions before the Lord.

Humility also changes how we relate to other people.

To listen properly means more than waiting for a gap in the conversation so that we can say what we had already planned to say. It means receiving the other person. It means noticing their words, tone, joy, pain, hesitation and need, and posture etc.

It also means noticing our own reactions: impatience, defensiveness, fear, anger, tenderness or compassion.

Prayer forms this kind of attentive heart. It helps us become better husbands, fathers, grandfathers, sons, friends, priests, leaders and Brother Knights.

Saint Bruno's humility can be seen in his willingness to leave behind status and advancement. A man of his education could have built his identity on being admired, consulted and important. Instead, he chose the hiddenness of prayer.

There is a beautiful irony here. Bruno sought hiddenness, but his life still bore great fruit. His former student, Pope Urban II, valued his counsel. Bruno did not chase influence; he sought God. That is why his life continues to speak to us centuries later.

Our Lady gives us the greatest model of humility. At Cana, she sees the need: "They have no wine." She does not seek attention for herself. She points the **servants to her Son:**

"Do whatever he tells you."

— John 2:5, RSV

This is humility at its most beautiful: seeing the need, trusting Christ, and pointing away from ourselves towards him.

Third Pillar: Silence

The third pillar of prayer is silence.

The phones at the restaurant table—or around the dining table at home—are not merely objects in our hands. They represent noise in the mind.

Every notification tells us that something else needs attention. Every scroll leads to another image, opinion, headline, argument, complaint or demand. Even once the phone is put away, its noise can remain within us.

The mind keeps scrolling.

Silence can be difficult because it reveals what noise conceals. In silence, we may become aware of sadness we have not faced, anger we have excused, fear we have avoided, a relationship that needs healing, or a decision we know we need to make.

But silence is not emptiness. Silence is the space in which God can speak.

The prophet Elijah discovered that the Lord was not found in the wind, earthquake or fire. Afterwards, Elijah heard:

“A still small voice.”

— 1 Kings 19:12, RSV

Saint Bruno reminds us that God often speaks more clearly and effectively when we are quiet enough to hear him.

The Carthusian life is shaped by solitude, prayer, simplicity and silence. Silence is not an end in itself. It is a way of becoming available to God.

Saint Bruno asks us an important question: if every moment of our day is filled with noise, work, entertainment, news, conversation or screens, when will we hear the Lord’s gentle invitation?

The Catechism teaches that contemplative prayer is a gaze of faith fixed upon Jesus, a quiet attentiveness in which we allow ourselves to be looked upon and loved by God (“CCC 2715–2719”). It calls contemplation “a silent love” (“CCC 2717”).

We may not be called to a Carthusian monastery, but every Christian needs some small desert in daily life.

- Ten quiet minutes before the household wakes
- A visit to the Blessed Sacrament
- A walk without headphones or a phone
- Reading the Gospel of the day before work
- A few quiet moments in the car before entering the house
- A pause at the end of the day: “Lord, where were you today, and how did I respond?”

The point is not to have a perfect spiritual experience. The point is to become available to God.

In silence, we notice what needs to change.

In silence, we become humble enough to receive the truth.

In silence, we begin to hear the voice of Christ.

Prayer Leads to Action

Brothers, prayer is not opposed to action. Prayer purifies action.

Without prayer, we often react. With prayer, we can respond.

Reaction is fast, anxious and defensive. It can come from fear, fatigue, wounded pride, pressure or the desire to remain in control.

Response is different. It may still be firm, courageous and decisive, but it comes from a heart that has first been placed before God.

A man of prayer is not necessarily a man who does less. Often, he becomes more faithful, more courageous, more patient and more generous. But he acts from a different centre.

St Paul writes:

“Pray constantly.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:17, RSV

This does not mean filling every moment with formal prayers. It means allowing prayer to become the posture of our lives: a readiness to listen, receive, give thanks, ask forgiveness and seek God in all things.

The Catechism teaches that prayer is both a gift from God and a determined response from us (“CCC 2725”). It cannot be separated from Christian life, because prayer gradually forms us in the love, forgiveness and service of Christ (“CCC 2605; 2840–2845”).

For the Knights, this matters deeply.

Our meetings, charitable works, support for families, care for the sick, service to the Church and fraternity must not become merely activities to complete.

We are not simply an organisation that does good things. We are Catholic men seeking to do what Christ tells us.

Before a meeting, before an important decision, before a difficult conversation and before an act of service, we can pause and ask:

“Lord, what are you asking of me here?”

That is where Christian action begins.

May we not be like people sitting close together—at a restaurant or in our own homes—yet lost in separate screens.

May we become like Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening.

May we follow Saint Bruno of Cologne's example: open to change, humble before God, and quiet enough to hear his voice.

Then our lives, our families, our parishes and our work as Knights will be shaped not by distraction, but by Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. Where am I physically present but not truly attentive—to God, my family or those entrusted to me?
2. What is God asking me to change at this point in my life?
3. What distractions, habits or attachments keep me from listening to the Lord?
4. Do I come to prayer willing to receive God's answer, even when it differs from my own plans?
5. In what ways do I need greater humility—before God, in my family, at work or among my Brother Knights?
6. What practical step can I take this week to make space for silence and prayer?
7. Before I act, decide or respond, can I pause and ask: ““Lord, what are you asking of me here?””