

Discourse Two

Our Father Who Art in Heaven

The great Moses led the Israelite people to the mystery of God which occurred on Mount Sinai. First he set down a law for purification because he did not think the people were worthy of God's revelation without cleansing through abstinence and sprinkling (Ex 19:14-15). But even so the people did not show confidence of spirit before the display of divine powers. Rather, they were overcome with awe by everything they witnessed—the fire, the darkness, the smoke and the trumpets. When Moses returned to the people, they thought it was necessary that the lawgiver act as a mediator of the divine will on their behalf. Their courage was not strong enough to approach God and receive for themselves the divine revelation.

In the case of our Lawgiver, however, things are very different. Our Lord Jesus Christ leads us through His words directly to the realm of divine race. He does not bring us before Mount Sinai covered with darkness, smoking with fire, and filled with the sounds of trumpets rumbling with unclear yet threatening noises. Neither does He purify the soul by a three-day abstinence and through water that washes away filth. Nor does He leave the entire Church behind at the foot of the mountain, while allowing only one person to ascend to the top that was covered by the darkness concealing the glory of God.

Instead of bringing us to the mountain, Christ leads us to heaven itself, having made it accessible to all. He does so through the practice of goodness and virtue. He makes us worthy not only to behold the divine power, but also to share in it by somehow being intimately united with the Divine Nature. For those who seek the abounding glory of God, He does not conceal it with a cloud of darkness in order to make it difficult to behold. But rather, having illuminated the darkness with the radiant light of His teaching, He has rendered His ineffable glory visible to the radiant inner world of those who are pure in heart.

As for sprinkling, He gives us water not from an external stream, but water that flows from within us. We can understand this in two ways: either as the fountain of tears springing from the eyes or the purity of conscience experienced in the heart. He ordains a law not against any alleged filth in the lawful intercourse of spouses but against every human disposition burdened by material things and evil passions. In this manner He brings us close to God through prayer. For this is the power of His words in the Lord's Prayer, a prayer by which we learn not merely sounds uttered through syllables of speech, but the knowledge of the ascent to God achieved through a spiritual way of life.

The Meaning of Prayer and Vow

We can comprehend the divine mystery through the words of the Lord's Prayer. Christ begins with the words, "When you pray" (Mt 6:7). He did not say "when you offer a vow," but "when you pray." The reason is because what is proper to a vow (*εὐχή* - *euche*) must be already completed prior to approaching God in prayer. How do these two words differ in meaning? A vow (*euche*) is a promise of something that we reverently dedicate to God's service, whereas prayer (*προσευχή* - *proseuche*) is a supplication which we bring to God requesting blessings from Him. Because we need to have a confident spirit before God, the vow must necessarily precede supplications. Supplications are made for things that are beneficial to us. Thus, having completed what is in our hands, we can take courage to ask for what is in God's hands.

It is for this reason that the Prophet David says, "*I will pay You my vows, those that my lips uttered*" (Ps 66:13-14), and again "*Make vows to the Lord your God, and perform them*" (Ps 76:11). We can see in many places of Scripture that this is the meaning of "vow." From these references we should know that, as has been said, a vow is a grateful promise of an offering to God, whereas prayer signifies our approach to God that happens after the fulfillment of the promise. The words of Scripture teach us not to ask something of God before we make an offering to Him for all His blessings. For it is necessary first to

make a vow and then to pray, just as one might say that sowing must precede harvesting. So then we must first sow the seeds of the vow and, after the seeds grow, we can reap the crop through prayer, receiving grace in return. Thus the vow must necessarily precede prayer since we cannot meet God with confidence of spirit unless our approach to Him occurs with some prior vow or offering.

Our Father

On the principle then that the vow has been fulfilled, the Lord said to the disciples: "*When you pray, say, 'Our Father who art in heaven'*" (Mt 6:9). Somewhere in the Psalms the great David says, "*Who will give me wings like a dove*" (Ps 55:6)? I, too, would dare speak with the same voice. Who will give me such wings as to fly with my mind to the height of the noble meaning of these words? I need to leave the whole earth behind. I must traverse all the intermediary air and come to that ethereal beauty, reaching the stars and beholding their lovely order.

Even then I could not remain with the stars. I would need to pass through them and go beyond all material things that change and are in flux. I would want to reach the eternal nature of God, the unshakable power, which has established itself and governs the universe. All things exist and are dependent on the ineffable will of the Divine Wisdom. I would have to remove my mind far from all things that change and are in flux. By attaining to an unchanging and unwavering disposition of the soul, I would first earnestly make Him my friend who is eternal and unchangeable. Only then would I invoke that most intimate Name and say, "*Father!*"

What quality of soul must the speaker possess to speak of God as "*Our Father!*" What confidence of spirit! What purity of conscience! To perceive God's ineffable glory, he must comprehend the mystery of God as far as it is possible from the names that have been conceived of and attributed to God in the Scriptures. He must learn that the divine nature of God is goodness, holiness, joy, power, glory, purity and eternity. Whatever God may be in His deep mystery, He possesses all these eternal and many other conceivable attributes that properly belong to the Divine Nature. Let us say that a person could understand all these endowments of God through the study of Holy Scriptures as well as one's own creative reflection. Could such a person even then dare to utter the sacred Name and call such a God his own Father?

One thing is very clear. If he had any sense, he would not dare address God with such a Name and say "*Father,*" unless he perceived a reflection of the same attributes in himself. For it is impossible that God who is good in His very essence should be the Father of anyone engaged in evil activities. God who is holy could not be the Father of one defiled in life, nor He who is Eternal be the Father of one prone to every change, nor He who is the Father of life be the Father of one dead in sin. Similarly, God who is pure and spotless cannot be the Father of those who behave unseemly, neither can God who is generous be the Father of those who are greedy, nor the All Good One be the Father of those who in any way participate in evil things.

Someone may indeed dare seek intimacy with God while yet knowing himself to be in need of purification, discerning that his wicked conscience is filled with stains and evil wounds. If such a person, prior to being cleansed from these many evils, approaches God to call Him "*Father,*" it would be like a person who is unjust and impure, and yet dares to address the One who is Most just and pure. It would be, at it were, to name God as the Father of one's own wickedness, a flagrant insolence. Such a person's words would amount to no less than mockery. Why? Because the word "*Father*" signifies fatherhood—the source and cause of a person who is made to exist by God. Therefore, whoever invokes God as Father and still possesses a wicked conscience, he in fact accuses God of nothing less than being the source and cause of his own evils.

According to the apostle Paul, however, "*there is no communion between light and darkness*" (2 Cor 6:14). Rather, the contrary is true. The light seeks intimacy, with what is just, the good with what is good, the incorruptible with what is incorruptible. The opposite things seek intimacy with their own kind. The Lord said: "*A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit*" (Mt 7:18).

If someone is possessed, as Scripture puts it, by hardness of heart and dares to utter the words of the Lord's Prayer, he pursues falsehood. Let him know that such a person calls Father not the Heavenly One, but the Infernal One. The latter is himself a liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44) that may arise in any given person. He is sin and the father of sin. For this reason, those whose soul is given to evil passions are called "*children of wrath*" (Eph 2:3) by the Apostle Paul. He who separates himself from true life is named "*son of perdition*" (Jn 17:12). And someone who is loose and immoral is called "*the son of traitorous maidens*" (1 Sam 20:30). on the contrary, those who have a conscience full of light are called "*sons of light and of the day*" (1 Thess 5:5). And those who have sought to fortify themselves with divine power are called "*sons of power*" (1 Sam 10:26).

When therefore the Lord teaches us in this prayer to call God "*Father*," I believe He is doing nothing less than ordaining an exalted and sublime way of life. For He who is the Truth does not of course teach us to lie, that is, to state that which we are not. He does not want us to name God as Father when it is not our right. But when we dare call the Incorrputible God, the One perfectly just and good, "*our Father*," we must attest to our kinship with Him by our way of life.

Do you see how much preparation we need? What quality of life? How much and what kind of diligence in order that our conscience rise to that level of confidence to dare address God as "*Father*?" If you are concerned about money, or preoccupied with deceits of life, or chase after human glory, or are enslaved by the most wicked desires, and then take this exalted prayer to your lips, what do you think the Lord would say, He who sees the manner of life and knows genuine prayer?

For my part I would venture to say that God would speak to him rather in this manner: Do you, who are corrupt in life, call "*Father*" Him who is the Father of incorruption? Why do you defile the pure Name by your foul speech? Why do you lie against the Name? Why do you mock the spotless nature of God? If You were my child, my own attributes should have necessarily defined your way of life. I do not recognize in you the image of my nature. Our traits and qualities are opposite. What communion is there between light and darkness (2 Cor 6:14)? What affinity is there between life and death? What intimacy is there between the pure and impure in character?

The gap between the Benefactor and the greedy is vast. The opposition between the Merciful One and the cruel is uncompromising. The father of the evils in you is another, because my offspring are adorned by the attributes of my Father. It is a merciful person who is truly a child of the Merciful God, and it is a pure person who is truly a child of the Pure One. Corruption is alien to the Incorrputible. It is always true that the good derives from the good and the just from the just. But as for you, I do not know your origin (Mt 25:12). Therefore, it is dangerous to dare utter this prayer and address God as one's "*Father*" before being cleansed in life.

Who Art in Heaven

But let us once again listen to the words of the prayer. Perhaps we can come to understand their hidden meaning by frequent repetition. "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" By what we have already said, we have sufficiently examined that we must attain intimacy with God through a life according to virtue. But it seems to me that these words also signify a deeper meaning. They remind us of the homeland from which we have fallen and of the noble status from which we have been exiled.

Recall the story about the prodigal, the young man who left his father's home and surrendered himself to a life fit for swine. Christ the Divine Word points out the plight of human wretchedness by narrating in detail the young son's departure and prodigality. He does not bring him back to his original prosperity until the son acquires a consciousness of his dire misfortune. First the son had to come to his senses and ponder his words of regret. These words that the son carefully prepared to say, parallel in some way the words of the Lord's Prayer. For he said: "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you*" (Lk

15:21). He would not have added to his confession the sin "against heaven" unless he was convinced that his true homeland was indeed heaven against which he had sinned by leaving.

The thoughtful care behind the son's confession made the father more accessible. The father ran toward him and welcomed him with a kiss, embracing him around the neck (*ἐπέπτεσεν ἐπὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ* – *epepesen epi ton trachelon autou*, Lk 15: 20). This action allegorically signifies the spiritual yoke established by word of mouth, that is, the preaching of the good news now placed on the shoulders of humanity. The gospel is the new yoke replacing the old yoke of the first commandment in paradise, which was intended to guard man but which man cast off and later even abandoned. The father then put on him a new robe, meaning no other than the first robe that man had lost on account of his disobedience when he tasted what was forbidden and immediately beheld his own nakedness (Gen 3:10). A ring bearing a carved stone was placed on the son's finger. The ring signifies the regaining of the divine image. The feet were also secured with shoes. This means that, as man approaches the head of the serpent, his naked heel will not be bitten (Gen 3:15).

Thus the son's return to the father's home became the cause of the father's boundless expression of love towards the young man. The father's home signifies heaven against which, as he said, he sinned. In similar fashion I think that by teaching you to invoke the Father who is in heaven, the Lord reminds you of the blessed homeland. He wants to instill in you a stronger desire for its good things in order to fortify the path that will take you back to the homeland.

The path that leads human nature toward heaven is none other than flight and detachment from worldly evils. And the manner of flight is, it seems to me, none other than to attain likeness with God. Likeness with God is to become just, holy, good and the like. If such traits visibly stamp the character of a person insofar as it is possible, then one effortlessly and spontaneously will pass from earthly life to the heavenly realm. The distance between the divine and the human is not physical. There is no need for some mechanical instrument or human device for us to transpose this heavy, dense and earthly body to a course of life which is bodiless and spiritual. Virtue and vice are distinguished in a spiritual manner. The crucial factor lies solely with one's free choice. It is free choice that leads a person to go wherever his desire inclines him.

Because no physical labor is necessary to make the choice of what is good—and free choice can be followed by success in whatever one chooses—it is possible for you to occupy heaven immediately upon putting God into your mind. The author of Ecclesiastes says that "*God is in heaven*" (Eccl 5:2). If you, according to the Prophet David, cling to God (Ps 73:28), you will prove entirely true that he who is united with God will be found where God is. Therefore the Lord, by directing you to address God as your own Father in prayer, commands nothing less than that you become like the heavenly Father through your godly way of life. Elsewhere He affirms the same thing more clearly, saying: "*Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect*" (Mt 5:48).

Children of God

I hope we have understood the meaning of this invocation. Now it is time to prepare our souls and to gain the courage to take up these words on our lips and say with confidence: "*Our Father who art in heaven.*" The identifying marks of our likeness with God by which one becomes a child of God are evident. Scripture says, "*to whoever received Him, He gave power to become children of God*" (Jn 1:12). And one receives God in himself when taking up the way of perfection through goodness. In a similar way there are certain character traits which mark evil. Whoever takes on these traits cannot become a son of God because he bears the image of the opposite nature.

Do you wish to know the attributes of the Evil One? They are: envy, hate, slander, conceit, greed, wicked desire, and the sickly mania for glory. These and the like are the features by which the form of the adversary is shaped. If one's soul bears the scars of such marks, and he calls out to his father, what father will hear him? That is to say, it can be no other than the father who has kinship with the one calling out. He is

not the Heavenly Father but the Infernal One. The latter will surely recognize his own kind because he bears the caller's signs of affinity. Therefore, the prayer of an evil person, as long as the evil remains in him, is an invocation of the Devil. But whoever has removed himself from evil and lives in goodness, he it is who truly calls the Good One "*Father*".

When we approach God, let us first examine our way of life. Let us see if we inwardly possess some quality worthy of divine kinship. And then we can take courage to speak those words. For the Lord who has directed us to say "*Father*" did not thereby permit us to speak a lie. Therefore, whoever conducts himself worthily of God, it is he who rightly gazes toward the heavenly city. It is he who rightly names the King of heaven "*Father*" and calls the heavenly blessedness his own homeland.

Where does the aim of our advice lead? To think of the things above, where God is. It is there that each should lay the foundation stones of his home. It is there that each should lay up treasures and each lift up his heart. "*For where the treasure is, there is also the heart*" (Mt 6:21). Then one can continuously behold the beauty of the Father and adorn his own soul with that same beauty.

Scripture says, "*God shows no partiality*" (Rom. 2:11). Let the impurity of partiality also be removed from your own comeliness. The Divine is pure from envy and all stain of wickedness. Do not be spotted by such evil passions: neither envy, nor conceit, nor anything else that defiles the godly beauty.

If you are such, take courage to call out to God with those beloved words and to name the Lord of all as your own Father. He will look upon you with fatherly eyes. He will cover you with a divine robe and will adorn you with a ring. He will equip your feet for the upward journey with the sandals of the gospel. He will restore you to the heavenly homeland in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom belong the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.