

God Our Father

by Dr. Christopher Burgwald

Not long before we receive Jesus in Holy Communion at Mass, the priest says to us, "Jesus taught us to call God 'our Father', and so we have the courage to say," and then we together pray the Our Father. Now, if you are anything like me, you rattle off this prayer without a problem... it was among the first prayers you were taught, and you have no problem at all getting through it. Consider, though, someone like St. Therese of Lisieux, who was said to be unable to get beyond "Father" in the prayer because she would be overtaken with emotion at the thought that she could dare to call the Almighty God her Father!

For most of us, referring to God as Father is commonplace and frankly strikes us as something without great significance; as the *Catechism* notes, many religions invoke God as "Father", and our Jewish ancestors in the faith referred to God in this manner (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 238). Likewise, Jesus made clear that God is our Father, and this belief is something which all Christians hold as true. In this sense, calling God "Father" is completely normal and everyday, and as such, we are typically not struck by it, certainly not in the manner that St. Therese was.

Nonetheless, perhaps St. Therese's response should serve to give us pause and should provoke within in us a question: why, exactly, was she so overcome by simply invoking God as Father? Or even more

importantly for us, what exactly does it mean to refer to God as Father?

Once again the *Catechism* is a useful resource to answer these questions. In paragraph 239 we read, "By calling God 'Father', the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children." The first thing the *Catechism* tells us is that by calling God 'Father' we are recognizing the reality that He is the "first origin of everything and transcendent authority." To speak of God as 'Father' means to proclaim that He is the Creator, the source of everything else that exists. Not only did God create the universe and everything within it, but He continues to hold the universe and all it contains in each and every moment. In other words, right now, at the very instant you are reading these words, God is thinking and everything around you into existence. Literally. The universe and everything in it—including you and I—are *always* on God's mind. Literally. If it weren't the case, we and the universe would instantaneously cease to exist. Literally.

Even more important is this: God is not only *thinking* us into existence, but he also *loves* us into existence in each moment. The *Catechism* tells us that by calling God 'Father' we also recognize His "goodness and loving care for all his children." By calling God

'Father' we do not simply acknowledge his power to create us and continually hold us in existence, we also affirm his love and goodness. By calling God 'Father,' we proclaim that He is not only all-powerful, but also all-loving. One of the most popular bible verses is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." God is not simply our Creator, but is also our *Father*, and as such he loves us with an intensity beyond imagination. In John



3:16 Jesus tells us that He became man because the Father wants all of us to have eternal life. What, though, is eternal life? It isn't floating about on wings playing harps, or even laughing it up with friends and family who are likewise in Heaven... it is much, much more than that. Heaven—eternal life—is nothing less than sharing in the very life of God! God's desire isn't simply that we live forever in happiness, but even more that we live forever in intimacy with Him! Think about that: the all-powerful, all-knowing eternal creator of the universe desires to share Himself with you and I! *This* is what it means to call God our Father. When we apply this common, everyday term to God, we are acknowledging that He both creates us and loves us more than we are capable of imagining.

Consider this as well: if we call God 'Father', that means that He sees us as His sons and

Continued from page 1

daughters. How is this possible? Because in our baptism we have been joined to the one who has always been His Son: Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word of the Father. Jesus revealed to us that God has *always been* Father, because He always had a Son. While this might seem obvious, it is nonetheless a very significant statement: fatherhood isn't something that God took on and had to learn when He created man and woman and desired to share with them His own divine life. Unlike human fathers, God didn't become a father at some moment in time and then have to learn what it means to be a father. No: God *has always been* Father, from before time began. Jesus reveals to us that God has *always been* Father, in that the Son has always existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the Trinity, God is an eternal communion of three divine persons, the first of which has always been Father to the Son.

It should be noted, finally, that the Fatherhood of God completely transcends human fatherhood. There is obviously some similarity between the way that God is Father and the way that I, for example, am a father; if there were no similarity, it would make no sense to apply fatherhood to both God and myself. Nonetheless, as the *Catechism* also states in

paragraph 239, "no one is father as God is Father." We are all familiar with the reality of human fathers who fail to live up to what is asked of them; as the *Catechism* also says in the same paragraph, "human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood." God is Father in a way that completely surpasses what it means for me to be a father, and this is a good thing: God the Father is perfect in love and mercy, and is always, continually striving and working to bring us to our eternal home, where He can share with us his own divine life and draw us into His intimacy.

Perhaps if we keep these things in mind, we might better understand St. Therese's difficulties in praying the Our Father, and might ourselves consider and pray these words with greater attention, reverence and devotion, meditating on the beautiful mystery which they convey: God is our Father.



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THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS

1. How is Jesus (as true God and true Man) uniquely suited to unite us to God the Father?
2. How does Jesus provide an example for obedience to the Father?
3. How does this apply to our relationship with the Father?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Many religions invoke God as "Father." The deity is often considered the "father of gods and of men." In Israel, God is called "Father" inasmuch as he is Creator of the world. Even more, God is Father because of the covenant and the gift of the law to Israel, "his first-born son." God is also called the Father of the king of Israel. Most especially he is "the Father of the poor," of the orphaned and the widowed, who are under his loving protection.

By calling God "Father," the LANGUAGE of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and

loving care for all his children. God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father

as God is Father.

Jesus revealed that God is Father in an unheard-of sense: he is Father not only in being Creator; he is eternally Father in relation to his only Son, who is eternally Son only in relation to his Father: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

For this reason the apostles confess Jesus to be the Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"; as "the image of the invisible God"; as the "radiance of the glory of God and the very stamp of his nature."

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