

OUR FATHER

I was a college student, still a teenager, and still savoring my recent experience of conversion. I had been “born again,” saved by Christ from sins that would have destroyed me, and I was eager to share my faith with other kids who seemed headed for delinquency.

So I jumped at the chance for a summer internship in the inner city, helping to run youth programs for adolescents who lived in poverty. The ministry was run by two tough young men who had themselves converted after spending years in street gangs. One had been a member of the militant Black Panthers.

Their misspent youth was a providential preparation for ministry in that part of town—where most storefronts were boarded up, and drug dealers and police cruisers were the most frequent visitors. They talked tough to me on my first day and showed me to the spartan room where I’d be spending my nights. On one particular night, fairly early in the summer, I was on my knees praying in that room, when I heard gunfire outside and bullets whizzing by my window. Still, I have to say that I was happy to be there. The squalor and the danger made me all the more aware of the neighborhood’s need for Jesus Christ.

Father-Hunger

Weeks passed before the directors of the ministry felt confident enough to let me give inspirational talks to the boys. They prepped me once more by making sure I was truly aware of the boys’ home lives. Most, they said, came from single-parent households. Many didn’t even know the names of their fathers. Some had fathers who were in prison—or dead, the victims of their own criminal lifestyle.

My directors had spent their entire lives in neighborhoods like this. They evoked a bleak picture of a subculture that had no experience or recent memory of fathers being involved in family life. And they brought all this to a practical point: “When you talk to these kids, don’t talk about God as their Father. That’s something they can’t relate to. It can only turn them off.”

I was stunned. How could a Christian talk about God without mentioning His fatherhood?

I had finally arrived at the moment I was dreaming of—the day when I could preach the Gospel to kids who were “at risk”—and I knew that I couldn’t do it the way my directors wanted me to do it.

So I asked them, How could I lead our group to the Son of God without mentioning His eternal Father? And how could I lead them to pray except in the way that Jesus had taught us: “Our Father”?

I made an impassioned case, and I guess I convinced them, because they agreed to let me try it my way.

I did, and my directors had to acknowledge that I succeeded. When I spoke of God as Father, I spoke not to the memories of my audience, but to their need. They hungered for a father more than they hungered for a good

meal. They knew what they'd been missing, and they were eager to find it in God.

There is only one God. He is the God Whom Jesus revealed to us, and He is the God Who made the hearts of those adolescent boys. God made us for Himself, said Saint Augustine, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Him—the only true God.¹

Father Forever

As a young Evangelical Protestant, I had read the words of the Anglican theologian J. I. Packer: “For everything that Christ taught . . . is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God.”²

As a superannuating Catholic, I turn to the words of Tertullian. This third-century African Christian wrote that before Jesus Christ “[t]he expression God the Father had never been revealed to anyone. When Moses himself asked God who he was, he heard another name. The Father’s name has been revealed to us in the Son, for the name ‘Son’ implies the new name ‘Father.’”³

Since the name lay hidden till Jesus, it was new to mankind with the New Testament. But it was not newly coined. For God’s name, from all eternity, is Father.

Jesus revealed this at the end of His earthly ministry, when He commanded His disciples to baptize “in

¹ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 1, chap. 1, no. 1.

² J. I. Packer, *Evangelical Magazine* 7: 19 ff., quoted in J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 182.

³ Tertullian, *De Oratone* (On Prayer), chap. 3, quoted in Catechism, no. 2779.

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

What Jesus named here was radically different from anything the world has seen, before or since. Other religions have invoked their gods as father, but they have used the title only in a metaphorical sense—meaning that their god is *like* a father, because he begets them, guides them, and provides for them.

Jesus praised God as Begetter, Guide, and Provider, but He also—by His own eternal sonship—named God as eternally Father. For *Father* can be God’s name, His personal identity, only if God is Father eternally.

Think about the other titles we give God—Creator, Lawgiver, and Physician. He is Creator only *after* He has created something; so Creator is not God’s personal identity. He is Lawgiver only *after* He has given a law; so He is not an eternal lawgiver. He is Physician only *after* He has creatures in need of healing.

Yet He is Father forever, because He eternally generates the Son, and together They breathe forth the Spirit, the bond of Their love.⁴

A Family Affair

The eternal relation of the Father and the Son is not a metaphor. Indeed, human fatherhood is more like a metaphor for God’s eternal fatherhood. Human fatherhood is a created image of God’s eternal fatherhood—an image more or less vivid, depending on the sins of the dad.

Saint Ephrem of Syria put it well. Earthly fathers, he

⁴ See my *First Comes Love: Finding Your Family in the Church and the Trinity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), chap. 3-5.

said, “are called fathers, but He is the true Father. . . . The terms ‘father’ and ‘son’ by which they have been called are borrowed names that through grace have taught us that there is a single true Father and that He has a single true Son.”⁵

God is Father to Jesus, Who shares His sonship with us. In the Church’s ancient phrase, we are made “sons in the Son” through baptism. We become, quite literally, partakers of the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4). We are made godlike. We are made to share in the love Christ shares with the Father. Only when we grasp this can we truly pray, “I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). We’ll want for nothing because the Lord is not just our Shepherd, but also our Father. And someone who lives the life of God ultimately needs nothing other than that life.

God is our Father because we share in Jesus’ sonship. Note that we do not address Him as “my Father,” but as “our Father.” By gathering us together in Christ, God has established a universal human family in the Church. In the words of Pope John Paul II, “The Father, Creator of the universe, and the Word Incarnate, the Redeemer of humanity, are the source of this universal openness to all people as brothers and sisters, and they impel us to *embrace them in the prayer* which begins with the tender words: ‘*Our Father.*’”⁶ It is our common sonship that gives us the right to address God as a common Father, as *our* Father.

All the remaining words in the Lord’s Prayer—indeed,

⁵ Saint Ephrem, *Hymn 46 on the Faith*, quoted in Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 80.

⁶ Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane* (February 2, 1994), no. 4, emphasis in original.

UNDERSTANDING “OUR FATHER”

all the truths of the Christian faith—can be understood as an elaboration of that compact opening phrase: “Our Father.”