

3. “This, then, is how you should pray...”

Part I: Like sons and daughters

Lectio Mt 6,9; Lk 11,

According to evangelical tradition, the *Our Father* is the only prayer Jesus taught his disciples.¹ Matthew and Luke, the evangelists who record this *Lord's prayer*², coincide in considering it *as yet another teaching of Jesus*. However, they differ in the narrative context in which they place it, and in doing so they differ even in the understanding of its meaning. In Luke, Jesus, while walking towards Jerusalem, prays and teaches his disciples how to pray (Lk 11,1); Matthew, instead, introduces the *Our Father* with a careful catechesis about prayer, which is the center of the eloquent Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6,9a). Luke prepares his disciples to face the cross by showing them how to pray. For Matthew, prayer is the essence of discipleship.³

REFLECTION

In Matthew, it is Jesus who, out of his own initiative, teaches them to pray and warns them of the risk that prayer might not be efficacious when it is either prompted by selfish hypocrisy (Mt 6,5) or by excessive meaningless words (Mt 6,7). In Luke, Jesus inspires a disciple to want to learn how to pray because he has seen his master at prayer. In Matthew, Jesus stands out as one who teaches how to pray since it is something to be learnt. Luke sees Jesus as a model of one who prays and is recognized as such by his disciple, who may have been a teacher himself. In Matthew, whoever prays fulfils something he has been told to do by Jesus himself (Mt 6,9a: “*pray like this*”), while in Luke, it is a matter of following the example of Jesus (Lk 11,1).

Matthew understands that prayer is a matter of obedience characteristic of the children of God. Before telling them what they have to say, Jesus has shown them how to approach God in solitude and with a trusting disposition. Luke highlights the fact that learning how to pray was desired by the disciple who, before asking Jesus to teach them how to pray,⁴ had first seen his master at prayer.

“^{9b}[Our] Father ...”

In Matthew, “*Father*”, is a frequent invocation when Jesus prays, (Mk 14,36; Lk 10,21; 22,42; 23,34.46; Mt 11,25.26; 26,39.42; Jn 11,41; 12,27.28; 17,1.5.11.21.24.25),⁵ as is also the case in

¹ J. P. MEIER, *Un juicio marginal. Nueva visión del Jesús histórico*. II/1. Juan y Jesús. El reino de Dios, Estella, 1999, 359.

² Because of its early origin, the *Our Father* was known as the *Lord's prayer*. cf. *Did* 8,2; CYPRIAN, *De dominica oratione*, CSEL 3/1, 267-294; GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De oratione dominica*, PG 44, 1120-1193.

³ “The ‘Our Father’ is the synthesis of Christianity, all that we are, all that we live, all that we need, all that qualifies us as sons and daughters of God journeying towards the Kingdom.” (C. M. MARTINI, *Incontro al Signore Risorto. Il cuore dello spirito cristiano*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 2012, 179).

⁴ “The prayer that Jesus teaches stems from his own prayer and his prayer is the source of our prayer.” (A. GEORGE, *El evangelio según san Lucas*, Estella, 1976, 46).

⁵ “*Father*”, is pronounced by Jesus 170 in the Gospels: 14 times, in Mk; 15, in Lk; 42, in Mt, 109, in Jn. Though we cannot always attribute to Jesus the use of this term, it is certain

Luke. It is the translation of “*Abba*” in Aramaic, and it appears only three more times in the NT (Mk 14,36; Rm 8,15; Gal 4,6), expressing the veneration that a son has towards his father, or the respect that a child feels towards an adult. Jesus of Nazareth uses an expression that he used only within family relationships (“*my Father*”, cf. Mt 11,27; 26,53), when he was not only talking about God, but, above all, when he was speaking to him.⁶

The title does not appear in contemporary Jewish prayer in which, however, the fatherhood of God was used (Is 64,7; Mal 1,6; Eccl 23,1.4; Sab 14,3; 3 Mac 5,7; 6,3.8; Tob 13,4). That God would treat Israel as a father would, was a basic conviction in Jewish faith (Dt 7,6-15; 8,5; Is 63,16; Prov 3,12).⁷ In fact, although the title of father was commonly attributed to divinities in contemporary religions in Israel,⁸ the OT seems hesitant in using it while referring to God. When it is used, it is used by God himself when referring to the fact that God, himself adopted Israel as son in order to save his people (Ex 4,22-23; 6,6-7; Dt 32,6) and to keep protecting them from every form of servitude (Ex 20,3-6; Jer 2,17; 3,19-20). The prophets use the title as an image of the intimate solicitude of God for his people (cf. Hos 11,1-4.8-9; Is 1,2; 30,9; Mal 1,6; 2,10). As an invocation, although rarely so, it appears recently in Hellenistic Judaism as spoken by individuals who lead a life of virtue (Eccl 23,1.4; 51,10; Sab 2,16-18; 14,3). In the study of both the New and Old Testament, it is proven that the expression “Our Father” was used as an invocation, although more commonly used as an affirmation.⁹ However, there is no reliable evidence that the term “*Father*” indicating an individual, it is used as an invocation, and still less that of using it to reflect the intimacy that it portrays when Jesus prays.¹⁰

It is characteristic of the personal piety of Jesus to have dared to imagine God (Lk 15,11-32; Mt 18,21-35), and still more to have invoked him (Mk 14,36; cf. Mt 7,21; 10,32; 12,58; 15,13; 16,17; Lk 22,41; Jn 11,41; 12,27; 17,1), with such familiar language, and more frequently used and heard on the streets, in an environment where one was cautious in using the name of a God¹¹ and careful not to name his importance. Jesus could do so, because he was referring to God who was close and familiar, and it was in his name that he preached (Lk 11,11-13; 15,11-32), and before whom he acknowledged to be responsible (Mt 6,7-8; Lk 11,5-13; 18,1-8), a God to whom he was submissive (Mk 14,3; Mt 26,39-42; Lk 22,42; Jn 12,27-28) and in whom he trusted implicitly (Lk 10,21-22; Mt 11,25-26).

that he used this term when speaking to God and when he prayed. Cf. J. SCHLOSSER, *Le Dieu de Jésus. Etude exégétique*, Paris, 1987, 41-51.123-177.203-209.

⁶ It is likely, though its use is not exclusive to Jesus, that the term “*abba*” belongs to the nucleus known as the *ipsissima verba*.

⁷ God is frequently compared to a father (Dt 1,31; 8,4; 32,18; Mal 3,17; Ps 22,11; 103,13; Job 31,18; Prov 3,12; Sab 11,10); as also to a mother (Is 49,15; 66,13; Eccl 4,19).

⁸ “Faith in divine fatherhood is, without doubt, one of the most universal characteristics in all cultures used by historians of religions and its interpretation still an object of hypothesis” (J. POUILLY, *Dios, nuestro Padre. La revelación de Dios Padre y el Padrenuestro*, Estella, 1990, 6).

⁹ *Jub.* 1,24-25.28; 19,29; 1QH 9,35-36. See more texts and his commentary, in POUILLY, *Dios*, 22-24.

¹⁰ W. MARCHEL, *Abba, Père! La prière du Christ et des chrétiens*, Roma, 1971, 91-92.

¹¹ “To those outside this environment God’s name was never spoken as Father, only in images or parables, and in any case never “your Father.” This expression is thus one of the characteristics of the teaching given by Jesus to his disciples” (A los de fuera de este ambiente parece ser que no les habló nunca de Dios como Padre más que en imágenes y parábolas, y que en todo caso no dijo nunca «*vuestro Padre*». Esta expresión es, pues, una de las características de la enseñanza dada por Jesús a sus discípulos), J. JEREMÍAS, *Abba. El mensaje central del Nuevo Testamento*, Sígueme, 1983², 51.

That Jesus would invoke God as Father from whom he preceded and who was his solicitous protector was the expression of his personal faith on which was founded the assurance of a very close intimacy with God, expressed as filial confidence and at the same time total obedience. Jesus could use the term, “*my Father*” (Mt 15,13), whereas to his disciples, he referred to God as “*your Father*” (Mt 5,45.48; 6.32). The fact that Jesus chose to teach his disciples to address God as “*Father*” indicates that, while addressing God, he wanted them to do so as his “*sons*” (cf. Mt 5,45), living in total dependence on him (Mt 6,8-9) and thus enjoying a profound familiarity (Mt 6.4.6.18.26.32).¹² While Jesus prayed, he himself, shared with his disciples his sentiments as the Son of God, thus sharing God as Father.

To understand well the meaning of paternity in prayer, it is not the exclusive gift of the one who prays, but rather the attribute which defines God (cf. Mt 5,9.16.45.48; 7,11.21), a God who considers sons those who pray to him, and as such converts them into brothers/sisters.¹³ Contrary to the Lucan version, Matthew adds “*our*” to the invocation “*Father*”.

The formula “*Our Father*”, though not used very frequently, was known in the OT. (Is 63,16; 64,7; Tob 13,4). By adding “*our*”, Jesus identifies not only one person who prays, however secretly (Mt 6,6), but a community that is re-created when praying to God the Father. Such a community, whatever their gender, social status or race, are considered brothers and sisters for the very fact that they pray to a common Father. “He bestowed on all the same noble title by allowing to be invoked by all in the same manner as “*Father*”.”¹⁴

When a disciple of Jesus speaks to his God, he does so in the name of and within the community. Before the God of Jesus, one does not pray in solitude, however alone one might be. To pray the “*Our Father*” is to create community while praying,¹⁵ by becoming brothers/sisters of Jesus (Mt 12,50) and adopted sons/daughters of God (Jn 1,12; Rom 8,14-17; Gal 4,4-7).¹⁶

“... [who are] in heaven,”

Matthew adds to the invocation a formula which was familiar in Jewish prayer (cf. Bill 283.394), yet does not alter its basic orientation. That the Father who is to be addressed by the disciple is “*in heaven*”, an expression which is characteristic of him (Mt 5,16.45; 6,1.14.26.32; 7,11; 12,50; 15,13; 16,17; 18,10.19.35; 23,9), highlights, not so much his personal authority, (cf. Mt 6,1.4.6.18.26.30), as much as the different nature of all other paternity on earth. Those on earth are fathers who generate sons, while the Father in heaven is Father to all who invoke him as “*Our Father*”.

¹²“A filial spirit is at the root of every prayer and is the most important attitude, because eternal life consists in making clear the meaning of being sons and daughters of God” (MARTINI, *Incontro*, 180).

¹³ in Jewish prayer, we more frequently find *our* Father, rather than *my* Father, because, at prayer, “man unites his soul to the community” (bBer29b)

¹⁴JOH CHRYSOSTOM, *Hom in Mat.* 19,4: PG 57 278.

¹⁵ “Above all, the Doctor of peace and Master of unity did not admit praying alone and privately, so that when praying, one prays only for oneself ... He claims that prayer is both public and in common, hence, we not only pray for ourselves, but for all people, because the people are one.” (CYPRIAN, *On the Lord's prayer* 8, 204).

¹⁶ “A new community is, therefore, created, consisting of all who are open to the preaching of Jesus and to the mission of salvation that God will realize at the end of time when he reveals himself as Father”. (H. SCHÜRMAN, *La prière du Seigneur à la lumière de la prédication de Jésus*, Paris, 1965, 21).

However much intimacy and affection one feels for him, he does not belong to us and is completely different. Because of not being at our level, we cannot reach him, for his home is in heaven, while ours, for the moment, is on earth. Wherever he is, there we are also, since he holds us in his fatherly heart. He watches us on earth, to see if we acknowledge to be his sons/daughters who love one another.

MEDITATION

The two contexts of the narrative in which Matthew and Luke insert their version of the “Our Father”, obviously point to two moments. Although on both occasions, Jesus is a teacher of his disciples regarding prayer (Mt 6,5.7.9; Lk 11,1-2), what motivated the teaching of how to pray was different. In Luke, it was the desire to imitate the master that arose in the disciple who watched Jesus at prayer. Whereas, in Matthew, it was Jesus himself who, while delivering his first great discourse, first of all taught all who were listening to him how one must not pray (cf. Mt 5,1-2; 7,28) before actually teaching them what to say.

In Luke, Jesus taught first of all through his example, thus showing that he could teach by his example. Should the disciple not have been close to him, he may not have noticed Jesus praying. Besides, should he not have taken an interest in the way Jesus prayed, he would not have asked to be taught how to pray. While one needs to learn how to pray, the desire to do so comes from seeing it in another. We owe the “Our Father”, which is the prayer of the children of God, to the curiosity and daring of an anonymous disciple. We should remain grateful to him for having stayed close to Jesus, and having observed him, wanted to learn from him, saying: “Lord, teach us how to pray”. This came from realizing that he did not know how to pray as Jesus did. The “Our Father” is therefore the prayer for those who, like ourselves, are close followers of Jesus yet who may have no notion of how to pray like Jesus. If we stayed closer to him, wouldn't we succeed to imitate him while contemplating him? Why does a life of following Jesus not lead us to a life of prayer?

In Matthew instead, Jesus teaches how to pray within a broad catechesis regarding a new way of fulfilling the 'greater glory' that the disciples owe to God (cf. Mt 6,1). It is a fact, and indeed not an insignificant one, that Jesus is a teacher of 'how to pray' to those who accompany him, for distant from him, one does not learn how to pray. Here, Jesus does not respond to a petition, but imposes a practice. It is not a matter of praying like him, but that of doing as he says. According to Matthew, the disciple who prays fulfils a precise order from his/her Master: “This then is how you should pray” (Mt 6,9a). One can learn how to pray; however, in order to pray, one must learn how to obey. The consequences are obvious, for, according to what Jesus expects, prayer is an irrevocable duty of the disciple. Jesus has not left prayer to our whims or only for when we have time or want to do it. Yet, how few of us regard the “Our Father” as an obedience that we owe to the Lord! The disciple who does not nourish himself through personal prayer is not worthy of his name. An authentic follower of Jesus follows his teaching and prays, not only when he/she has a need to do so, but always in the spirit of wanting to obey the Lord.

The first thing that Jesus taught his disciples was to address God by the name of “Father” as he did (Mt 6,9b; Lk 11,2). More than a word, however exceptional it may seem, the only divine name used by Jesus reveals sentiments of profound intimacy that he wanted to share with all, whether curious or obedient, in praying like him. Whoever fears the God to whom he prays cannot be a disciple of Jesus. Prayer that does not lead us to acknowledge that we are

sons/daughters of God is not worthy of him. To obey God, it is necessary to acknowledge that we are sons/daughters of a common Father.

It may go by unnoticed that we run the risk of failing to learn from Jesus, that not only by not praying are we being disobedient, but also that those of us who pray may no longer be his followers, should prayer not increase in us our awareness of being sons/daughters of our God. What we should first tell God is that we see him and acknowledge him as Father. By this invocation, which we would have never dared to dream of, Jesus converts us into his brothers/sisters, since we share the same Father. Here we have a Master who acknowledges his apprentices as brothers/sisters ... because they pray like him.

Unlike Luke, Matthew has stressed the fatherhood of God. He is “ours” and not only of the one who prays. Besides, “he is the one who is in heaven”, and he does neither belong nor live with men on earth. However much one prays in solitude, God is the Father of all who turn to him and accepts him/her as his son/daughter. Even when one prays in secret and is not accompanied by another in prayer, he is aware of being brother/sister to all the sons/daughters of the Father. Bonded by the fatherhood of God, the disciple meets with a community, where, only by praying to the same Father, he/she becomes their brother/sister. Prayer brings about a brotherly/sisterly community and one must think seriously why our prayer life may not nourish and sustain our life in common. However alone one might be in prayer, he/she will never be alone before God when he/she invokes him as “Our Father”. For in doing so, they know themselves to be united as family before the Father. The awareness that the God of Jesus is “our” Father should lighten the burden that community life might be (Ps 133,1). Not to achieve this denies what we say when we pray to God as Jesus taught us.¹⁷

To the invocation “Our Father”, Matthew has added “who are in heaven”, an expression which he uses frequently. By using this expression, Matthew highlights the fatherhood of the God of Jesus in direct contrast with human fatherhood. God is Father of whoever acknowledges to be his sons and daughters, and when they call him “Father”, they accept as brothers and sisters all who pray with them. A Father “who is in heaven” is beyond our reach physically, but as “Father”, we meet him in secret, where no one can see us (Mt 6,6). And since he is “ours”, we also find him among our brothers/sisters.

Because He is “Father”, he will hold us in his heart, where we will experience his tenderness (cf. Ps 103,13; 27,10; Is 63,16-17; 64,7; Jer 3,19-20; 31,9). Because he “is in heaven”, we will always be at home in Heaven, with him, in his Fatherly heart.

PRAYER

Besides the fact that a disciple envied your way of praying, or that you intended to teach us how to pray, I thank you, Lord Jesus, for having taught us how to pray the “Our Father”. I cannot find a prayer so intimate and brief, while being so deep. Now that I know the words that I should use when I pray before God, grant me those sentiments that I should have to make those words mine own. May I not only imitate you in what I say, but may I also feel what you felt when you approached God your Father. Grant me your awareness and the love of a child when I pray to the Father.

¹⁷ “Not one of us would dare pronounce such a name in the prayer if he himself had not permitted us to do so. We therefore need to agree, dear brothers, that when we call God Father, the consequence is that we operate as sons of God. Besides, he, in turn, is honoured by us as sons”. (CYPRIAN, *On the Lord’s prayer* 11, 209).

I would like to speak to God the way you did, with the same words and tenderness, in order to be converted into your true disciple and a son/daughter of the Father. I thank you for having taught me how to speak with God as you did, and for having given me the opportunity to share your same sentiments. Praying like this, God will not only acknowledge me as his son/daughter, but also, I may be more like you, his eternal Son. How can I thank you enough for having taught me how to pray the “Our Father”!

The fact that the “Our Father” has been for me a concrete act of your teaching, this means that praying it is for me an act of obedience which I owe you as your disciple. I would not be a faithful follower of yours if I did not pray as you have taught me, for praying little or much does not make me a follower of yours. You are not content with disciples who pray as the pagans do, but you ask that we pray as you taught us. You have not asked us to pray as frequently as you did, but rather, that when we pray, we do so as you prayed. To pray the “Our Father” is therefore not optional, as in the case of necessity. It is, moreover, a prayer that guarantees that we have learnt that, when we pray, we direct our prayer to God as you did. It is the prayer that converts us into your followers and at the same time, sons/daughters of your Father.

I do not know how to thank you for having shared with me the words you used and the affection you expressed when relating with God. When I acknowledge God as Father while praying, I identify myself with you, as his Son. Could I wish for a greater grace? Therefore, I wonder why I do not spend more time in acknowledging you as Son of your Father and myself, your brother/sister! How foolish I am for not taking advantage of such a privilege! Forgive me, Lord, for not following your teaching and continuing to fail to consider myself a son/daughter of God. You do not ask of me anything too great, but simply tell me to pray as you taught me. Do not expect anything more from me, except that I pray as you have taught me.

Of what use is a life of prayer, if I do not manage to acknowledge that I am a son/daughter of your God? Patiently show me that I fail to pray as you expect of me. Teach me once more how to pray so that your Father might see in me what he sees in you - a loving son/daughter (cf. Mc 1,11; 9,7). That I might remember what I am to say when I pray, grant that I may live close to you. If you do not find me among your followers, you cannot be my teacher of how I am to pray. If I am not with you, how could I envy your life of prayer?

Although you have advised me that when I pray, I seek only God, and find him where nobody can find me, you have also taught me, Lord, Jesus, that I approach God as “our” Father. Yours, Jesus, is a Father whom I must share, as I am to do when praying the “Our Father”. For in doing so, I enter into a praying community of disciples in your Church and there, pray as a brother/sister of all, wherever they may be. Praying as you have taught me creates a common life, because there I meet so many brothers/sisters who pray.

God, my Father, what a pity it would be, should I not realize that by praying the “Our Father” I could convert as my brothers/sisters all who pray with me! It is you, my Father, God, who, acknowledged as such, gives me as many brothers/sisters as your Son Jesus has as his disciples. Help me to keep in mind that in a family we do not choose who is to be acknowledged as a brother/sister, since he/she is the gift of their parents. I therefore realize, as Jesus taught me, that it is not right that, while praying the “Our Father”, I should reject anyone who is praying with me.

It strikes me, Jesus, that you have taught me that only by praying to God, “Our Father”, I become a member of the community of your disciples. At the same time, you tell me that our Father is not on earth, but “is in heaven”, where he is not easily reached. However, he holds us in his fatherly heart, as the object of his tender love and care. I am deeply grateful to you for convincing me that there, where our Father God, is, is our heaven. Hence, while we do not yet reach him, we remain always in his heart as sons/daughters. Could I ever desire a better way to belong to God!