



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 23 May 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday I explained what St Paul says about the Holy Spirit being the great master of prayer who teaches us to address God with the affectionate words that children use, calling him: “Abba, Father”. This is what Jesus did; even in the most dramatic moment of his earthly life he never lost his trust in the Father and always called on him with the intimacy of the beloved Son. In Gethsemane, when he feels the anguish of his approaching death, his prayer is: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36).

Since the very first steps on her journey the Church has taken up this invocation and made it her own, especially in the prayer of the “Our Father”, in which we say every day: “Our Father... Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven! (Mt 6:9-10).

We find it twice in the Letters of St Paul. The Apostle, as we have just heard, addresses these words to the Galatians: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). And, at the centre of that hymn to the Holy Spirit which is the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul declares: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry: ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself...” (Rom 8:15).

Christianity is not a religion of fear but of trust and of love for the Father who loves us. Both these crucial affirmations speak to us of the sending forth and reception of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Risen One which makes us sons in Christ, the Only-Begotten Son, and places us in a filial relationship with God, a relationship of deep trust, like that of children; a filial relationship like that of Jesus, even though its origin and quality are different. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who took flesh; we instead become sons in him, in time, through faith and through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Thanks to these two sacraments we are immersed in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the precious and necessary gift that makes us children of God, that brings about that adoption as sons to which all human beings are called because, as the divine blessing in the Letter to the Ephesians explains, God, in Christ, “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his [adopted] sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4).

Perhaps people today fail to perceive the beauty, greatness and profound consolation contained in the word “father” with which we can turn to God in prayer because today the father figure is often not sufficiently present and all too often is not sufficiently positive in daily life. The father’s absence, the problem of a father who is not present in a child’s life, is a serious problem of our time. It therefore becomes difficult to understand what it means to say that God is really our Father. From Jesus himself, from his filial relationship with God, we can learn what “father” really means and what is the true nature of the Father who is in heaven.

Critics of religion have said that speaking of the “Father”, of God, is a projection of our ancestors in heaven. But the opposite is true: in the Gospel Christ shows us who is the father and as he is a true father we can understand true fatherhood and even learn true fatherhood. Let us think of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount where he says: “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:44-45). It is the very love of Jesus, the Only-Begotten Son — who goes even to the point of giving himself on the Cross — that reveals to us the true nature of the Father: he is Love and in our prayers as children we too enter this circuit of love, the love of God that purifies our desires, our attitudes marked by closure, self-sufficiency, and the typical selfishness of the former man.

We could therefore say that God in being Father has two dimensions. First of all God is our Father because he is our Creator. Each one of us, each man and each woman, is a miracle of God, is wanted by him and is personally known by him. When it says in the Book of Genesis that the human being is created in the image of God (cf. 1:27), it tries to express this precise reality: God is our Father, for him we are not anonymous, impersonal beings but have a name. And a phrase in the Psalms always moves me when I pray. “Your hands have made and fashioned me”, says the Psalmist (Ps 119[118]:73). In this beautiful image each one of us can express his personal relationship with God. “Your hands have fashioned me. You thought of me and created and wanted me”.

Nonetheless this is still not enough. The Spirit of Christ opens us to a second dimension of God's fatherhood, beyond creation, since Jesus is the "Son" in the full sense of "one in being with the Father", as we profess in the Creed. Becoming a human being like us, with his Incarnation, death and Resurrection, Jesus in his turn accepts us in his humanity and even in his being Son, so that we too may enter into his specific belonging to God. Of course, our being children of God does not have the fullness of Jesus. We must increasingly become so throughout the journey of our Christian existence, developing in the following of Christ and in communion with him so as to enter ever more intimately into the relationship of love with God the Father which sustains our life.

It is this fundamental reality that is disclosed to us when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and he makes us turn to God saying "Abba!", Father. We have truly preceded creation, entering into adoption with Jesus; united, we are really in God and are his children in a new way, in a new dimension.

Now I would like to return to St Paul's two passages on this action of the Holy Spirit in our prayers on which we are reflecting. Here too are two passages that correspond with each other but contain a different nuance. In the Letter to the Galatians, in fact, the Apostle says that the Spirit cries: "Abba! Father!" in us. In the Letter to the Romans he says that it is we who cry: "Abba! Father!". And St Paul wants to make us understand that Christian prayer is never one way, never happens in one direction from us to God, it is never merely "an action of ours" but, rather, is the expression of a reciprocal relationship in which God is the first to act; it is the Holy Spirit who cries in us and we are able to cry because the impetus comes from the Holy Spirit.

We would not be able to pray were the desire for God, for being children of God, not engraved in the depths of our heart. Since he came into existence *homo sapiens* has always been in search of God and endeavours to speak with God because God has engraved himself in our hearts. The first initiative therefore comes from God and with Baptism, once again God acts in us, the Holy Spirit acts in us; he is the prime initiator of prayer so that we may really converse with God and say "Abba" to God. Hence his presence opens our prayers and our lives, it opens on to the horizons of the Trinity and of the Church.

We realize in addition — this is the second point — that the prayer of the Spirit of Christ in us and ours in him is not solely an individual act but an act of the entire Church. In praying our heart is opened, not only do we enter into communion with God but actually with all the children of God, because we are one body. When we address the Father in our inner room in silence and in recollection we are never alone. Those who speak to God are not alone. We are within the great prayer of the Church, we are part of a great symphony that the Christian community in all the parts of the earth and in all epochs, raises to God. Naturally, the musicians and instruments differ — and this is an element of enrichment — but the melody of praise is one and in harmony. Every time, then, that we shout or say: "Abba! Father!" it is the Church, the whole communion of people in prayer that supports our invocation and our invocation is an invocation of the Church.

This is also reflected in the wealth of charisms and of the ministries and tasks that we carry out in the community. St Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4-6).

Prayer guided by the Holy Spirit, who makes us say: “Abba! Father!” with Christ and in Christ, inserts us into the great mosaic of the family of God in which each one has a place and an important role, in profound unity with the whole.

One last remark: we also learn to cry “Abba! Father!” with Mary, Mother of the Son of God. The consummation of the fullness of time, of which St Paul speaks in his Letter to the Galatians (cf. 4:4) is brought about at the moment when Mary said “yes”, the moment of her full adherence to God’s will: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn to savour in our prayers the beauty of being friends, indeed children of God, of being able to call on him with the trust that a child has for the parents who love him. Let us open our prayers to the action of the Holy Spirit so that he may cry to God in us: “Abba! Father!”, and so that our prayers may transform and constantly convert our way of thinking and our action to bring us ever more closely into line with Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the ecumenical delegation from the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Sweden. I also welcome the group from the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas in Manila. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, including those from England, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, India, the Philippines, South Korea and the United States, I invoke the Holy Spirit’s gifts of wisdom, joy and peace.

Lastly, a special thought for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost always sustain and nourish the life of faith of the Christian community. Dear *young people*, put the search for God and love for him above all things; dear *sick* people, may the Holy Spirit be a help and comfort to you in times of greatest need; and may you, dear *newlyweds*, make your union sounder and deeper every day with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

