

ABBA AND ME

[Italicized quotes – Pope Francis – General Audiences on Jan. 16 & Feb. 13, 2019]

In Romans 8:15, St. Paul says that we “received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” Paul earlier wrote that proof of our sonship was that “God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6) The fact that these passages – along with Mark’s narrative of the Agony in the Garden – keep the Aramaic word “Abba” in their Greek texts indicates the significance of the term. It is not the formal “Father” but the familiar, intimate “Dad” or “Papa,” a term used by a child who has a close relationship to the parent.

“In the first words of the ‘Our Father’ we immediately find the radical newness of Christian prayer. ... A Christian no longer considers God as a tyrant to be feared; he is no longer afraid but feels trust in Him expand in his heart: he can speak with the Creator by calling him ‘Father.’ ... Saying ‘Abba’ is something much more intimate, more moving than simply calling God ‘Father’.”

Although Pope Francis does not advocate changing the words “Our Father” in that prayer to “Dad” or “Papa,” he says that we should say “Dad” with our heart, so that we feel a child-father relationship with God. We should have *“the image of a child completely enveloped in the embrace of a father who feels infinite tenderness for him. ... In order to pray properly, one must come to have a child’s heart.... Like a child in the arms of his father, of his dad, of his papa.”*

In the Parable of the Merciful Father (Lk 15:11-32), Jesus shows us what “Father” means to him, what God’s love should mean for us. Recall how the father embraced his prodigal son, not recalling the son’s abandoning his home or wasting away his fortune, but rather letting him know how much he had been missed.

“And let us ask ourselves: is it possible that You, O God, really know only love? Do you not know hatred? No — God would respond — I know only love.”

“Where in You is vengeance, the demand for justice, anger at your wounded honor? And God would respond: I know only love.”

“In that parable the father’s manner of conduct somehow recalls the spirit of a mother. It is especially mothers who excuse their children, who protect them, who do not suspend empathy for them, who continue to love them, even when they would no longer deserve anything.”

“It is enough to evoke this single expression — Abba — for Christian prayer to develop.”

God seeks us, loves us, sees value in us, even when we forget about him and consider ourselves wasted. God is both father and mother, always loving the little child. For a Christian, praying is saying “*Abba*” – “Father” – but with a child’s feeling and trust. No matter what we have done or failed to do, we have a loving Father.

“Say ‘Father’ to him, start to pray in this way, and in the silence he will tell us that he has never lost sight of us. ‘But Father, I have done this...’. — ‘I have never lost sight of you; I have seen everything. But I have always been there, close to you, faithful to my love for you’. That will be his answer. Never forget to say ‘Father’.”

There’s a word we use daily that’s missing from the Lord’s Prayer: the first person singular – I / me / my. I don’t begin my prayer dialogue focused on myself, but on the Father whom I address, saying, “holy be YOUR name, YOUR kingdom come, YOUR will be done” – not MY name, MY kingdom, or MY will. In the second part of that prayer, I ask the Father to “give US OUR daily bread ... forgive US OUR trespasses ... lead US not ... deliver US.” I don’t pray for just myself, but with the community always in mind.

“There is no display of our own problems as if we were the only ones suffering in the world. There is no prayer raised to God that is not the prayer of a community of brothers and sisters. ‘We’: we are a community; we are brothers and sisters; we are a people who pray: ‘we’.”

Christians must be aware of the sufferings and needs of those around them, and plead to the Father on their behalf. Only those with hearts of stone can ignore the sufferings of others – in which case, they should ask the Lord to soften their hearts by the power of his Spirit. Christ himself responded with heartfelt compassion to the physical or spiritual pain he saw in others. Feeling compassion is one of the key concepts of the Gospel – it is what moved the Good Samaritan to help the stranger by the wayside, unlike others who were hard-hearted. Compassion is at the heart of being Christian.

“We can ask ourselves: when I pray, am I open to the cries of many people near and far? Or do I think of prayer as a type of anesthesia, in order to be more at peace? ... That ‘we’ that Jesus taught us prevents me from being at peace by myself, and makes me feel responsible for my brothers and sisters.”

We must pray not just for those in our faith community, but also – and especially – for those who do not seem to seek God at all, because God seeks them so much. Jesus did not come for the healthy, but for the sick and the sinners, that is, for all of us.

“Brothers and sisters, saints and sinners, we are all ... loved by same Father. And, in the evening of life, we will be judged on love, on how we have loved. Not merely sentimental love, but compassionate and tangible love.”