

# GOD'S FATHERLY LOVE

*[Italicized quotes – Pope Francis – General Audiences on Feb. 20 & 27, 2019]*

The first step of every Christian prayer is to enter into the mystery of the fatherhood of God. We begin by considering our own parents, recognizing that they were not perfect parents – nor are we, for we all have shortcomings. As much as they – or we – profess our love, there are times when our limitations or our ego tarnish our loving relationships. We may even feel anger or hostility at times.

*For this reason, when we speak of God as “father,” as we consider the image of our parents, especially if they loved us, at the same time we must go further. Because God’s love is that of the Father “who art in Heaven.” according to the expression that Jesus invites us to use: he is the total love that we can savor only imperfectly in this life.*

As humans, we are always looking for, and in need of, love. But so often the love we experience is ambivalent – flourishing one day but withering all too soon.

*There is an expression of the Prophet Hosea that mercilessly contextualizes the congenital weakness of our love: “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away” (6:4). This is what our love often is: a promise we struggle to keep, an attempt which soon dries up and evaporates, a little like when the sun comes out in the morning and takes away the night’s dew.*

Even the greatest love, when challenged, can falter because of our limitations. St. Peter boldly declared his love for Jesus, yet he denied him three times and ran away. Despite our need for love, our weakness can make us fall away from it.

However, there is another type of love -- that of the Father “who art in Heaven.” He loves us – he loves ME. Even had our father and mother not loved us, God in heaven loves us like no one else in this world ever has or ever can. God’s love is forever. “I have graven you on the palms of my hands,” says the Lord (Is. 49:16). He has tattooed us on his hands – we are his forever.

*Even if all our earthly loves were to crumble and we were left with nothing but dust in our hands; God’s unique and faithful love is always burning for all of us.*

*The expression “in Heaven” is not intended to express a distance, but rather a radical difference of love, another dimension of love, a tireless love, a love that will always be there, that is always at hand. It is enough to say “Our Father who art in heaven,” and that love comes. ... You are a **most deeply beloved son or daughter of God**, ... there is nothing in life that can extinguish his heartfelt love for you.*

There are seven requests in the “Our Father” – the first three focused on God the Father; the other four, on our human needs. First, we join with Jesus in his wishes for the fulfillment of God’s glory -- “hallowed be *thy* name, *thy* kingdom come, *thy* will be done.” Then we speak of our needs: daily bread, forgiveness of sins, help in temptation and deliverance from evil.

*Herein lies the matrix of every Christian prayer — I would say of every human prayer — which is always done, on the one hand, as a **contemplation** of God, of his mystery, of his beauty and goodness, and on the other, as a sincere and courageous **request** for what we need for life, and to live properly.*

In its simplicity, the “Our Father” teaches us not to multiply empty words, because God knows what we need before we ask him (Mt 6:8). We don’t speak with God to reveal to him what’s in our heart (he knows better than we do), but to become more aware of our need for him, giving ourselves hopefully to His providence.

*Although God is a mystery for us, we are not an enigma in his eyes. ... It is as if to say: “Lord, you know everything; I do not even have to tell you about my pain; I ask only that you be here beside me: You are my hope.”*

Immediately after teaching his disciples to pray for their daily needs, he tells them not to be worried or troubled about things, asking, “What shall we eat?” “Or drink?” “Or wear?” This only seems like a contradiction -- a Christian’s request in prayer expresses trust in the Father; and it is precisely this trust that enables us to ask for what we need without worry or agitation.

Prayer drives away all fears as we surrender ourselves to God’s love.