

Our Father in the Heavens

Father

We call God *Father*. We do so with such familiarity that we may be surprised to hear that Jesus was condemned for calling God his Father. “‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was his Father, *making himself equal with God*” (Jn 5:17-18; emphasis added). The reasoning is very simple. When we call someone our father we are making a claim not only about that person but about ourselves. The child of a human is a human. The child of God is a god. It’s an audacious claim--like many of the truths of our faith with which we have become too accustomed. We have a human nature because we are begotten from human parents. Jesus has a divine nature because He is the only-begotten of his Father--begotten, as we say in the Nicene Creed, before all ages.

When we call God ‘Father,’ then, we are making a claim about ourselves--that we are his children, that we are not *merely* human but also divine. We, according to St. Peter, *share* or *participate* or *partake* of the divine nature of the Father (2 Pt 1:4). This participation in the divine life has its origins in a *spiritual* birth, language that is pervasive in the New Testament. St. John emphasizes it this way: “As many as received him, to them he gave *the power to become children of God*, to those who believe in his name: ¹³ *who were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but *of God*” (Jn 1:12-13; emphasis added; see also Jn 3:1-8). Being born spiritually means that we are God’s children, we are “of God,” i.e., of his nature--by participation. “We become by grace,” St. Athanasius teaches, “what God is by nature” (*On the Incarnation*, I).

The boldness of these claims is expressed in the introduction to the The Lord’s Prayer in the Divine Liturgy, “And make us worthy, O Master, that with confidence, and *without fear of condemnation*, we may dare to call you, the God of heaven, Father, and say,” It is daring to call God ‘Father’ precisely because of the claim that we are making *about ourselves*. We do well if we can say these words with humility and sobriety, not inattentively or carelessly.

The question arises, then, do we look like our Father? St. Cyprian of Carthage exhorts us in this way:

We should remember, therefore, dearest brothers, and realize that when we address God as Father we should act as children of God, so that just as we have pleasure in having God as our Father, so he should have pleasure in us. Let us act as temples of God (1 Cor 6.19), *so that it may appear that God dwells in us*. Let our conduct not fall away from the spirit; rather, we, *who have begun to be* spiritual and heavenly, should think and

perform spiritual and heavenly things. (Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord's Prayer*, §11; emphasis added.)

We should look like our Father, or, at least, be beginning to look like him; a family resemblance should be emerging in us. When people looked at Christ, they were to see his Father (Jn 14:9). When people looked at Mary, they were to see Christ magnified (Lk 1:46). The icon of every saint is ultimately an icon of Christ--what Christ looks like in that person. So, if we--together with his Son, the Holy Theotokos, and all the saints--are to call God Father, then we have to ask: What do people see when they look at us?

Our

We pray "*Our* Father." Since we often say this prayer in communal contexts it may not seem unusual to say 'our', but consider how Jesus introduces this prayer: "When you pray, *go into your room and shut the door* and pray to your Father who is *in secret*. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Mt 6:6; emphasis added). The implication is that we will be praying the prayer alone. Why, then, do we say "Our" when we are alone?

When we go into our prayer closet to pray in secret, we discover that we are not alone. Christ is there, praying with us. Indeed, only Christ may say '*my* Father'. *We* call God 'Father' in virtue of being in Christ, and having Christ in us--in virtue of the spiritual birth that makes us not alone wherever we go. "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father" (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-17). It is important for us to pray the Lord's prayer alone, in our prayer closets, so that we can learn *experientially* that Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, and thus that we are not alone.

With practice, praying to our Father in secret, we come to experience the Church's deeper understanding of our Lord's instructions, that we enter into the closet of our heart and close the door of our mouth and senses. It is here, in the 'inner chamber,' that we experience the rewards of encountering our Father. We will struggle to experience this spiritual communion, this 'our' which makes us inseparable from Christ, however, unless we cultivate it in times of solitude. In our prayer closet, in seclusion from the distractions of this world, we gradually learn how to commune with Christ in the closet of our heart. As St. John Climacus tells us, while at first we cannot be still even when are all alone in our closet, in time--though vigilant practice--we can experience inner stillness in the midst of a bustling crowd (Step 27).

When we become accustomed to entering the closet of our heart, together with Christ calling God 'Our Father', we gradually notice that Christ does not come alone but brings others with him. We are united to Christ, and so are many others. The body of Christ is made up of many

members. In our prayers, we are not merely reminded of others but united with them. St. Cyprian puts it this way:

We do not say: “*My father, who are in the heavens,*” nor “*Give me my bread this day.*” Nor does anybody request that his debt be pardoned for himself alone, nor ask that he alone be not led into temptation and delivered from the evil one. Our prayer is common and collective, and when we pray we pray not for one but for all people, *because we are all one people together.* The God of peace and master of concord, who taught that we should be united, wanted one to pray in this manner for all, as he himself bore all in one. (Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord’s Prayer*, §8; emphasis added.)

Some of Christ’s companions that enter our heart may be easily received with joy; we count them among our friends. But he brings others too; people we are distant from, in tension with, angry toward, disappointed in, and so forth. In short, he brings our enemies with him so that we might let them join us in giving voice to *Our Father*. If we reject them, we reject the Christ who brought them to us.

In the Heavens

Our true Father is the Father in the heavens, our *heavenly* Father. In teaching us to pray this way, Jesus is redirecting our attention from our biological father to our heavenly Father, from our earthly relationships to our heavenly relationships. He emphasizes this point later in the Gospel of Matthew: “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, he who is in heaven” (Mt 23:10). Jesus’ point here is not so much about language, but in whom we are placing our trust, on whom we are relying. Do we look to our earthly father, family, and friends, our priest and bishop, for what only God can provide?

Jesus is aware that we are so often disappointed in our earthly relationships, and he’s here telling us that that is because we look to them for what only God can provide. If we learn to look to our heavenly Father for all our needs, we are free to love unconditionally those God puts in our life without expectation of what they can do for us. Jesus is consistently emphatic in the Gospels, as St. Paul is in his Epistles, that our true family is a spiritual family, and we are to look to God our Father not only as the *source* of this spiritual family via our spiritual birth, but also as the *provider* for and *protector* of it.

Our heavenly Father is our *provider*. When Jesus is instructing us to pray relentlessly using the images of asking, seeking, and knocking, he goes on to assure us how our heavenly Father will respond: “What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things

to those who ask Him!” (Mt 7:9-11). Our heavenly Father longs to give us everything we need, but he especially *delights* to give us the kingdom (Lk 12:32).

When we forget about the kingdom, however, forget that God is our provider, we become anxious, worried, fearful, judgmental and so forth. Jesus warns us about this, and invites us to redirect our attention back to God as our provider. “Therefore do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or ‘What shall we wear?’³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For *your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.*³³ But *seek first the kingdom* of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Mt 6:31-33; emphasis added)

Our heavenly Father is also our *protector*. St. Peter warns us, “Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pt 5:8). We live in a dangerous world, spiritually dangerous, but St. John comforts us with the assurance, “Greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). If we are born into God’s family, we become Christ’s sheep and are comforted with these words: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.²⁸ And I give them eternal life, *and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.*²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.* (Jn 10:27-29; emphasis added; cf 6:37; Rom 8:31-39) It is a beautiful image to see ourselves as secure in the loving hands of our heavenly Father, and of his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Church supplies a host of prayers to remind us to ask God for protection. We pray for the protection of our gardens from pests, of our safety when travelling, of our health when undergoing surgery, of our souls from temptations and demonic influences, along with countless other prayers. We do well to make these prayers our friends, inviting God into our every activity. For *our Father in the heavens* longs to shield us in the hollow of his hand.

Summary

We call God *Father* because he is the *source* of our spiritual life, making us his children to grow into his likeness--to look like him. We call God *our* Father because we are united to his Son, Jesus Christ, and through him to all who are in him. We call God our Father *in the heavens* because he is the loving *provider* of all our needs and our faithful *protector* from all dangers.