

1 Lent C -2010
Divine Mercy

As you are well aware during the Advent and Lenten seasons I like, if possible, to highlight a part of Mass so as to make it a bit more special. This year I decided that it might be good to highlight the “Our Father” and so we will be singing it every weekend during Lent. But as the discussions continued at our planning meeting I decided it might be good to do something that I have not done in quite a few years and that is to dispense with the homily based on the readings and instead do a series of sermons based on the “Our Father” itself. As I began to study this prayer given to us by the Lord it became obvious very quickly that there is more than enough material to take us all the way through Lent. I have to warn you though. This will be rather meaty. I have discovered things I never realized about this prayer even after being a priest thirty some years. This will not be just milk from the bottle given to the babies. Much of this is solid spiritual food that you will have to get your teeth into and chew if you want it to give you nourishment. And since many of you are visual learners the texts will be posted on the parish web site.

Last week I made a couple of comments contrasting Luke’s Sermon on the Plain with Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount. Even though we are in cycle C of the readings, which is Luke’s year, we will be using the text of the “Our Father” that is from Matthew’s gospel. Everyone knows Matthew’s version. The ones who know Luke’s by heart could probably fit into a phone booth. I will make just a few quick comments about the structure of the prayer. The prayer begins with a salutation. Then there are seven petitions. The first three are directed to God. They are the “thy” petitions. Then there are the four dealing with the disciples of Jesus, and they are the “us” petitions. In many ways

they parallel the Ten Commandments which have three commandments dealing with the love of God and then seven with the love of neighbor. So too in the “Our Father” both God and human relationships are prayed about. It is really a way of fulfilling the great commandment of love for both God and neighbor. Also, from the earliest centuries the prayer was ideally seen as being prayed three times a day: at Morning Prayer (lauds), evening Prayer (vespers) and at Mass. The “Our Father” was given to us by Jesus, and it is the perfect prayer. As St. Cyprian wrote, “We pray to God with words give by God.”

“Our Father who art in heaven.” God is our Father in that He is our Creator. And just as every child is unique, God has created, has willed, each of his children to be a unique expressions of His love. We are nothing without Him. And because He is our creator, the source of our life and being, we have obligations to God. But why did God create us? Because He loved us, and we try to respond back to this love with love. But I think there are a good number of people who have difficulty believing in a good and loving Father-God because they have such a distorted image of fatherhood. If one has had an abusive father, a deadbeat dad, or no experience of a true father it is very difficult for them to comprehend the Fatherhood of God. You dads have a very special role in the religious development of your children because in many ways their relationship with God the Father will be based on their relationship with you. Little children, who have good relations with their fathers, if they are pushed, will say something like, “God is like my dad only bigger.” That is a real challenge for you. To give them the experience of a loving but firm, a gentle but demanding, a kind but just father is the experience that they will take as they come to the understanding of God as their Father.

In many ways we have to allow the Son to teach us about that Father because He is the only one who knows Him perfectly. What does Jesus tell us about the Father? He reminds us that fathers do not give their children stones when they ask for bread, and He continues, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?" Luke takes it a step further and specifies the good gift, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Jesus tries to help us see the love of the Father through the love of enemies. At the Last Supper Philip asks the Lord to "show us the Father." Jesus replies, "He who sees me sees the Father. " And what did he do? He died on the cross and even from there with his dying breath he says, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." The forgiveness that comes from God is an element in the love the Father has for us. One other point about the forgiveness of the Father and the Son, when we name God Father it becomes a summons to us to live as a child "a son or daughter." Jesus in his high priestly prayer to the Father in John's gospel says, "All that is mine is yours." The father in the parable of the Prodigal Son says the same thing to the elder brother, "all that is mine is your." The word Father is the invitation to live out of the awareness of this reality, the reality of the loving and forgiving Father to whom we respond with love and who sustains our existence. For alone we can do nothing.

Only Jesus was entitled to call God "my Father," because he is the only begotten son of God. All the rest of us can only rightly say "our." We are God's children only because of our communion with the Son. We can call God Father because Jesus is our brother. This "our" is rather demanding because it means we have to step out of the "I"

and surrender ourselves to communion with the other children of God who are also our brothers and sisters. When we say the word “our” we say “yes” to the living Church in which the Lord wanted to gather his new family. Look at the language we use: God the Father, Holy Mother Church, God the Son, brothers and sisters in Christ. It goes on and on. It is language of family; it is language of “our; it is language of community and relationships, language of Church. When we pray the “Our Father” we have to pray totally with our own heart, but at the same time we prayer in communion with the whole family of God, with the living and the dead, with people of all races, conditions and cultures. The “Our Father” overcomes all boundaries and makes us one family of God.

The “our” leads us to “Who art in heaven.” This phrase does not mean that we are pushing God away to some distant place. It rather means that though we all have different earthly fathers, we all have been called into being by one single Father who is the source and measure of all fatherhood. Again guys look to God as the model of your relationship with your children. In the background I hear the words of Jesus, and I am sensitive to this being a priest, “Call no man father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.” God’s fatherhood is more real than human fatherhood, because He is the ultimate source of our existence. He has thought and willed us into being from all eternity. It has been said that we exist because we are being thought in the mind of God. That if He ever forgot us we would cease to exist. So at this moment we are all being thought about personally in the mind of the Father. He has called us into existence, and He wills to keep us there, and He is thinking about you at this moment. Earthly fatherly bloodlines may divide but heavenly fatherhood unites. We are being pulled together toward a divine summit from which we all come and to which we are all meant to return.

The fatherhood in heaven points us to the greater “we” that goes beyond all barriers, breaks down all walls and creates peace. “Our Father who art in heaven.” The heaven to which we are striving to return and to which we are being drawn by our Father.