

## THE 'OUR FATHER'

## A RETREAT

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## I

**I**N the *Our Father* we have not merely a plan for addressing God, a formula of prayer, but a command: 'Thus shalt thou pray'. Prayer is the expression of our attitude towards God. Our Lord says, 'This is the way you've got to ask God for things—this is the way you've got to think of God and address him; the way I wish you to approach him.'

Take the *Lord's Prayer* in that sense. 'What is God to you?' says our Lord; and he begins 'Father'.

St Thomas says that we are entitled to take as intended for us every meaning of our Lord's words and actions which they will legitimately bear. Therefore we must take God as an ideal Father. 'I am your Father, I want you to think of me as your Father; and not merely to think of me but to *know* that I am your Father.' Look at a little child and his father; he receives all he has and is from his parents, but quite soon goes on independently of them. But that is not the way between me and God. At no instant of my existence am I independent of God. My existence is the result of God's will that I should exist. I could not be thinking about it if God wasn't thinking of me at this very moment. I'm never out of his sight, will, thought. I am utterly dependent on him for every single thing I can give a name to in myself. God goes on giving all the time. He does not cast out gifts as you throw grain to chickens, for some to get a lot and some to get none. Although his gifts pass into my hands, they never leave his hands. Any good thing we can say of creatures we can say in an infinite degree of God.

As a child thinks there is no one more beautiful than his mother or more magnificent than his father, so that is the way we have got to think about God. Who feeds the birds of the air, paints the flowers, gives them their lovely form? God your Father! And if God clothes the fields like this and cares for the little sparrow, what about you? God is my

Father to whom, with complete, utter, and absolute confidence I turn, because I know that he has nothing but my happiness in his heart. Like a child, I shed tears because I have not got what I want, and even stamp my foot, but I know this is only a passing thing. I am going to rely on God, never mind what anybody says. 'They say'—Who say? Let them say!

The concept of a father, parent, one from whom we receive things, is multiplied infinitely in God. So I want to be thanking God for everything, as if it were happening at this very instant: my very being—not long ago, but *now*, he is keeping me in existence. I should have an attitude of thankfulness—inexhaustible—for everything. What have we that we have not received—are not receiving? So the first idea of the Lord's Prayer is the thought of God giving and giving and going on giving.

We call it the 'OUR FATHER', and it seems to bring it closer to us than the title, '*The Lord's Prayer*', although that is good as it reminds us that God has given it to us. But it is '*Our Father*' which should create the atmosphere of the immeasurable closeness of God to us. Think what you owe to God: your very existence he is giving you at every moment.

Many people go through life thinking of God as a benevolent being, like a Constitutional Sovereign. No, that is completely off the line. I am as much to God as if I were his only creature. The dependence of the creature on the Creator has no parallel in this life, and you can never understand a thing unless you have something to compare it with. Nothing in this world is dependent as we are dependent on God. Some people are terrified by that and say they feel suffocated! But St John said, 'God is love'. So I must not think of God as an 'All' producing these little creatures and going on producing them, but as One who is love. All his acts are love; and it is out of his love for me that he designed me and goes on creating me.

God is simple. In him everything is one in some mysterious way we cannot understand, and therefore everything is involved in that love of his for me. You may say that is reading a lot into God's title of *Father*. Our Lord

invites us to think of God as Father, in whom we have our being. We have a word for it—Creator: Creation does not mean forming something out of something else, but out of the will of God, and the will of God is the love of God. I *am*, and everything else *is* or *does* because at this instant God wills it to be so. And when I say 'why?' the answer is love. Fatherhood implies love; it is the utterance of love, the starting point, the aim of love.

Love has a host of different degrees. It is an expression of will: 'I wish this, I prefer that, I love this more than the other'. All these different words we use are degrees of love, meaning that love is the expression of the will. I only exist from instant to instant because from instant to instant (though there is no time with God) God loves me. Since the Incarnation there is specially a bond of love tending towards identification. 'With an everlasting love I have loved you.'

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' But fear must not be taken to mean fear in the craven sense. We are inclined to think we must be afraid of offending God—that God sees our faults and weaknesses more than our good, and that therefore our attitude must be always asking forgiveness. But what is the attitude of a really good father and mother? Are they always looking out for faults? 'What is he up to now?' No: they think of the good things in their child, take pleasure in him. So God takes pleasure in us. I am an object of delight to God, and he looks on me with a smile, as it were. I know I am dirty, that I have torn my clothes, and my hands are grubby, but God does not look out for that. 'My delight is to be with the children of men.' That is what gives me the sort of liberty with God that the saints had.

We know there are bad parents who are always metaphorically slapping their children, who are always correcting them and so on, but we all know how children can be injured by that sort of nagging. The really good parent does not nag, but gives the most loving explanation of what the child does. The reaction is that they obey their parents more. I am happy in the knowledge that God judges me so lovingly.

'Perfect love casteth out fear'; and therefore God, representing himself as a Father, says: 'Don't be afraid of me but trust me to the very limit'. Our Lord says: 'Think of him, talk to him as a Father; I who am one with the Father tell you that is the right attitude.'

I am giving something to God that he would not have without me. I am giving him his Fatherhood of me. I can say, 'You are my Father, therefore I am your child'. I don't like those prayer books that ask us to look upon ourselves as grains of dust or worms! I cannot at the same time call myself a beloved child of God and a worm. I want to imbue myself with the conviction that God is my loving Father.

People setting out on the spiritual life think what it is going to involve: a long frightening vista of mortification, self-denial, humility, charity. What a labour in the saints! What marvellous perseverance and courage and faith and hope had to be brought into play every instant of their lives; and I am discouraged and say 'It can't be!' One has heard of people saying they wished they did not believe in God because it was a torment to think how perfect they ought to be, and how frightfully difficult it was.

And so, looking forward to growth in holiness, getting closer to God, I always have the idea that it is on my part, that I have got to labour for it, and that God is there but I have got to shorten the distance between us. Well, if (instead) I get this idea of God eagerly getting to me, if I think of Christ's idea of the Father, I know that God is labouring to get to me; and why he has to labour is because it is I who make the obstacles. 'If only you'd "*be still*" and let me come to you!' one can imagine God saying.

No one ever suggested that the christian life was an easy one—that sanctity was easy to attain. The '*Our Father*' shows us the closeness and immeasurable love between us and God—God who loves us as a Father loves his children; who will not let us go; up to the limit of our free wills drawing us. There we have the establishment between God and ourselves of an intimacy such as is feebly paralleled by the relationship between a child and its parents.

Anyhow, our Lord says 'Father', and without any further comment leaves it to us.