

The first stage of prayer  
EXPERIENCING GOD'S LOVE  
Teaching for September 21, 2005 Prayer Session  
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Introduction

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Last week we discussed in some detail the need of contemplation, the need of learning to practice in-depth prayer. We saw that we have a natural, inherent thirst for God and that thirst is quenched only through deep prayer or contemplation. We also realized that a person who prays zealously and fervently becomes quite happy, wise, strong, loving and successful in all his endeavors because he is in intimate communion with God, the source of all happiness, wisdom, love, strength and so on. Hence it is not wrong to say that without contemplation we will never reach fulfillment of life. Moreover, it is also a foretaste of the heavenly life which is nothing but a continuous gaze on the beauty of God for all eternity.

We concluded our last weeks reflection by making a firm resolve that we will acquire this unique skill to contemplate on the basis of Our Father, the only prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and all of us through them.

**Abba experience, the first stage of prayer**

The first thing Jesus wanted of his disciples was to address God as “Our Father” at the very outset of the prayer. And that was the perennial desire of God: “*You would call me, “My Father”, I thought, and never cease following me*” (Jer. 3:19). It is not a mere suggestion to address God by some respectful name, but a command to experience God as He is- as Father. It is an invitation to experience the infinite love of God because “father” is the symbol of most intimate love. Hence addressing God as “Father” is a call to enter into a deep intimacy with God becoming of God’s child. It is an invitation to pray just as Jesus, the only begotten Son prayed. It is an invitation to enter into a profound love relationship with God in the same way as Jesus did.

Beloved-ness—the core of prayer experience

The Gospels give a spectacular account of Jesus’ prayer at the start of his public life: “*After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*” (Mk.3:21—23). The prelude to Jesus’ public life was this prayer at his baptism when Jesus heard the affirmation, “*You are my beloved on whom my favor rests*”. That is the most vital part of the great redemptive mission of Jesus. His true identity is revealed through direct divine intervention. The temptations in the desert are devised by Satan to provoke him into casting off that spiritual identity. He was tempted to believe he was a lesser one: “*You are the one who can turn stone into bread. You are the one who can jump from the temple tower. You are the one who can make others bow to your power*”. But Jesus said, “No, No, No. I am the beloved of the Father”.

It is this consciousness that he is the Beloved of the Father that led Jesus to the hills so often to converse with the Father, spend hours, even whole nights in communion. In fact, this

experience permeated his whole public ministry. It was this “beloved-ness that inspired him to do all his deeds: *“I tell you the truth: the Son can do nothing on his own; he does only what he sees his Father doing...The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me”* ( Jn. 5:19, 36). Jesus also revealed that all his teachings came from this relationship: *“Jesus answered them and said, “My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me”* ( Jn. 7:16). And it is this irresistible tenderness reflected in the words “my beloved Son” that sustained Jesus all through his ordeals- the unfaithfulness of his own disciples and the rejection and persecution of the public. The unshakeable trust in this enduring paternal love certainty gave him courage to face his dolorous suffering and death alone, when deserted and forsaken by everyone else. Several times he testified to this assurance of the Father: *“The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone”* (Jn. 8:29).

It was because of his identity as “beloved Son of the Father” that Jesus was sentenced to die on the Cross. But it was only a thrill for him to testify to his identity even by giving his life as the price for it: *“For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God”* (Jn. 5: 18). “The high priest rose and addressed him, “Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?” But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, *“I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”* Jesus said to him in reply, *“You have said so. But I tell you: From now on you will see ‘the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power’ and ‘coming on the clouds of heaven”* ( Mt. 26: 62-64). In Mark Jesus emphatically proclaimed that He was the Son of the Father as he faced death: *“Again the high priest asked him and said to him, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?”* Then Jesus answered, *“I am; and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven”* ( Mk. 14: 61-62). In John’s gospel we see Jesus adding one more statement that he came to this world to testify to this truth: *“Pilate answered, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?”* Jesus answered, *“My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants (would) be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.”* So Pilate said to him, *“Then you are a king?”* Jesus answered, *“You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice”* ( Jn. 18: 35-37).

Jesus’ last words before death is the crowning proclamation that he is the beloved Son of the Father: *“Jesus cried out in a loud voice”, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”; and when he had said this he breathed his last”* ( Lk. 23:46). Thus, we can say that Jesus’ whole life and even death on the cross was the result of this awareness that he is the beloved Son of the Father.

Remember, it was Jesus’ prayer experience at Jordan when the Father told him *“you are my beloved Son”* that enabled him to accomplish the great redemptive work! Therefore, the core of our prayer experience should be the experience of son-ship—the enlightenment that: “I am the Beloved son of God” if we are to be able to accomplish what God expects from each one of us. Hearing these soothing, inspiring words from the Father, experiencing this abundance of God’s love is the core of our prayer experience. It is an ecstatic and rapturous experience of: *“God is love”* ( I Jn.4:16). Note that what the Scripture says is not that “God has love” but God *is* love. Love in full and nothing but love! Therefore, to experience the Father means to drink from the infinite LOVE incessantly and insatiably.

Trinity explains the deepest meaning of God’s love.

The statement—God is love—is not adequately explainable in any human term or by any earthly example. Only the doctrine of “Trinity” can explain this infinite love of God. Jesus revealed the doctrine of the Trinity at the end of his earthly ministry when he commanded his disciples to baptize people “*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Mt. 28:19).

It is to be noted that it is only through Jesus Christ that God as Trinity is fully revealed. The reason is, only in relation to the Son the depth of the love of God the Father is comprehensible; and the Holy Spirit is the fruit of the mutual love of the Father towards the Son and the Son towards the Father. Hence, ultimately, the doctrine of Trinity is the best expression of the infinite love that exists between Father and Son, Son and Father. That is why Christian doctrine of God is Trinity rather than a single person. The doctrine of Trinity means, God is a plurality of three Persons loving each other in such a profoundly intimate way that the three Persons constitute only ONE God. It is the incomprehensibly profound nature of God’s love that is stressed in the doctrine of Trinity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, though entirely three different persons, are one because of their all- embracing love. Jesus was always aware that the Father was greater than him: “The Father is greater than I” ( Jn. 14:28). But this beloved-ness compelled him to say that he is equal to the Father: “The Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:30); and that the Father lives in him: “*“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves”* (Jn. 14:10-11).”

Therefore, Jesus’ command to baptize his followers “in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit is a command to bathe them in the depth of God’s love. That is the meaning of being born again in the Spirit and Truth. This is so radical a birth that one who is born again in such a way never wants any sinful pleasures. This is what John says: “*No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain*”(I Jn. 3:9-10).

Therefore, we can say that the “Abba” experience in prayer is an experience of regaining the original Baptismal grace. It is an experience of bathing in the infinite love of God, which is well expressed in the Three-in-One God.

Experience the “Father” with the same intensity with which Jesus experienced

It is in this context of this Trinitarian understanding of God that the experiencing of the “Father” in prayer becomes intense and intimate. That is, to *experience* the Father means to drink the Father’s love as deeply as Jesus drank. In this sense what a great privilege it is to address God “Father” or to experience “the Father” in prayer! Jesus *called* God as Father because he *made* God our Father. Except through him God is not Father to us. It means Jesus did not change God, he changed us. He radically changed our relationship with God: he made us children of God and thus made God our Father. It means, by Jesus’ incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection we are born of God. About this the Scripture says : “*But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man’s decision but of God*” (Jn. 1: 12—13). We received the gift of adoption and a share in the divine life by faith in what

Jesus has done for us: “For *all of you are children of God, through faith in Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 3:26). Hence we are really the children of God. The Scripture gives this assurance thus: “*See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now*” (I Jn.3:1-2). Moreover, Jesus has reassured us that the Father loves us as much as he loved Jesus: “*As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love*” (Jn. 15:9).

#### Creation—expression of God’s love for me

The best monument of the Father’s love for each one of us is the Creation itself. The Creation account of the book of Genesis shows that the light, the skies, the air and all that flies, the earth and all its creatures and plants, the Sun, the moon and all other planets, the sea and all its creatures—all are created for Adam, through him for each one of us. Is not our life itself a great wonder—a glittering sign of God’s marvelous love!

To ponder over the marvels of Creation is one of the ways of appreciating and enjoying God’s personal love for us. Looking at the beauty of creation, the richness of creation we can experience God’s love and care. Most of all, the miraculous working of my body speaks aloud powerfully how great is God’s love for me.

#### Gift of Jesus --the greatest expression of God’s love

Abraham’s love for God was great, so great that he did everything God asked of him, leaving his country, his kindred, and his ancestral house etc. And he believed all the promises God gave, even when they were not fulfilled in time. But it was in his readiness to sacrifice his only son—the sole scope for the realization of God’s promise to make him a “great nation”—as a burnt offering on Moriah mountain that his love for God was proved beyond doubt. In the same way, the greatest expression of God’s love for us is that he gave his only Son as expiation for our sins: “*In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins*” (I Jn. 4:9-10).

#### Enjoying the gift of Jesus—the greatest contemplation

If contemplation is understood primarily as experiencing the love of God, celebrating the gift of Jesus is the supreme way of contemplation because the gift of Jesus is indeed the greatest expression of God’s love.

That is why the Church teaches by Vatican Council document that Eucharistic Liturgy is the greatest form of prayer because the Holy Mass is the celebration of the gift of Jesus—Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Seeing Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection on the altar we should really weep and sob out of joy because by these paschal mysteries our sins are forgiven unconditionally and we are reinstated as the beloved children of God. It is to be understood well that Mass is not mere a commemoration of the past events of Jesus’ suffering and death that took place 2000 years ago just as the commemoration of the life and death of our parents on their death anniversary day. Rather, at every Mass Jesus dies. This is revealed very clearly in the Scripture: “*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes*” (I Cor. 11:26). And the Church’s teaching in this matter is very

important. The Church says that the paschal mysteries—life, death and resurrection of Jesus—are re-enacted sacramentally and really on the altar.

The Most Holy Rosary is also a great contemplation because, primarily Rosary is intended to ponder over the birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, descent of the Holy Spirit, and the glorification of Blessed Virgin Mary. Here the focus is on the gift of Jesus, the greatest expression of God's love. Here we also rejoice in the Love of God, shown in adorning the Blessed Virgin Mary with the fullness of grace. The Stations of the Cross is also a great contemplation as we penetrate into the mystery of Jesus' suffering and death there, the greatest expression of his love for us.

Reflection on the Creed also is a great contemplation because it is the marvelous deeds of God's love that are enumerated all through the Creed. There again, the supreme gift of Jesus is the center of our attention. It is his Incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, descent of the Spirit, institution of the Church that are recalled there.

### Celebrating the gift of Jesus in Contemplative Prayer

What a thrill will it be to receive Jesus from the hands of the Father at every contemplative prayer as the greatest expression of God's infinite love for me! Should we not share the overwhelming emotion of Simon who had the extraordinary privilege to take the infant Jesus in his hands at the Jerusalem Temple? See Simon's feelings as he received the child Jesus from Mary: *"Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him.... He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Lk. 2:25-29).*

Can anyone sit indifferently at this sight without crying in great joy and refusing to offer his life completely to Him!

### The Holy Spirit—through whom God's love is poured out

Just as giving Jesus is the expression of God's love for us, the gift of the Spirit too is the concrete expression of God's love. The Scripture says: *"The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).* Therefore, in contemplation we need to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit too. He is given to each one of us as our personal helper, comforter, teacher, and the Lord of our life (cfr. Jn. 14:16, 26; Rom.8:14) What a joyful experience it is to receive the Holy Spirit from the Father as the expression of the out pouring of his love for me! In joy, love and gratitude! What a privilege it is to have the Holy Spirit always with me! What a great blessing it is to be the temple of the Holy Spirit in this world!!! (I Cor. 6:19).

What is the Holy Spirit's work in us? St. Paul says: He enables us to experience God as Abba: *"For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:15-17).*

## A Practical Method

### Sit in the bosom of the Father and enjoy his fondness and love

As we need to pray, just as Jesus did, the first thing we need to do is to sit in the lap of the Father. It is the expression of son-ship because, the Scripture testifies that the place where Jesus sits is the bosom of the Father: *“No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father...”* (Jn. 1:18)

As you begin to pray, imagining yourself sitting in the lap of the Father, in all humility accept the fact that as a human being you are incapable of experiencing the true depth of God’s love for you, His darling. Yet, you must be conscious of its immensity: *“Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee”* (Is. 49:15).

As you sit in the lap of God, recall his promise: *“You will be like a child that is nursed by its mother, carried in her arms, and treated with love. As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you”* (Is.66: 12-13). Experience this promise being fulfilled right now for you! Strongly feel: God embraces you and chokes you with kisses. Experience the overwhelming joy of being fully drunk with the fondness and love of the Supreme Father.

### Taste and see how sweet the Lord is by hearing him say, and looking into your face and eyes:

‘You are my darling, my dear son’ (Jer. 31:20).

‘My love for you is infinite’ ( Jer.31:3).

‘Fear Thou not. I have called thee by name. Thou art mine’ (Is. 43:1).

‘Thou art precious to me and honored and I love thee’ ( Is.43:4).

‘I have carried from your infancy. Even to your old age I am the same, even when your hair is gray I will bear you’ (Is. 46:4).

‘I will cure you of your faithlessness. I will love you with all my heart’ (Hos. 14:4).

‘Even if your father and mother abandon you, I will welcome and accept you’ (Ps. 27: 10)

‘He who has become your husband is your Maker; his name is the LORD of hosts (Is. 54: 5).

‘As a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall I rejoice in you’ (Is 62:5).

‘I will never, never fail you nor forsake you’ (Heb. 13:5).

Accept the gift of Jesus from the Father and celebrate him

At this point receive Jesus from the Father's hands with overwhelming love and joy. See Jesus as a precious personal gift from God, as the ransom for the huge debt of your past sins, as the expiation for your horrible sins. Look intently at Jesus' innocent eyes, radiant face, wounds, and bleeding body—all for the love of you! Just for you!

Imagine if all those wounds in Jesus' body were in your body how miserable you would be! Listen to what he says to you pointing at all his wounds and blood: "Beloved....., this much I love....."

Rejoice overwhelmingly in this incredible love of the Father shown in giving Jesus! Praise and thank Him for this most precious gift.

**Proclaim (in the heart) faith in and allegiance to Jesus:**

**My heavenly Father, I accept Jesus Christ, whom you sent to this world for my redemption as my Lord and Savior. I believe Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, an incarnation of God, for my sake. He carried my sin on his shoulders and died on the cross. I believe that he offered himself as a sacrifice in order to free me from all my sins and transgressions. I accept Jesus as my Savior and healer. I avow that no other name under the heavens has been given for our salvation.**

**O Jesus, the Lamb of God, your blood cleanses me of all my sins. You are the Lord, who heals me. It was my pains and sorrows that you took upon yourself. Jesus, I adore you and praise you. You paid a befitting price for saving me from the punishment of my sins!**

Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Father.

Welcome the Holy Spirit into your heart. Experience the love of God, which the Holy Spirit pours out into your heart. Accept him as your Comforter and help. Praise and thank the Father for giving this sublime gift.

**Adore and praise the Holy Spirit**

**God, the Holy Spirit, I accept you as the dispenser of my life. May you rule over me and all my family. I adore you, praise you, and love you.**

**God, the Holy Spirit, who fills my heart with the love of God, I adore you, praise you and love you.**

**God, the Holy Spirit, who makes me aware of my sins and who always helps me, I adore you, praise you and love you.**

**Oh, God, the Holy Spirit, who teaches me everything that I should know and paves the way for my salvation, I adore you, praise you and love you with all my heart and soul. Amen.**

## Entrust all your problems in the hands of God

In this state of being filled with God's love, you should believe that God will take care of your life and all your problems. The Scripture says that God is concerned about your problems: "Let him have all your worries and cares. For he is always thinking about you and watching everything that concerns you" (I Pet. 5:7). And this scripture gives us a further assurance: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?" (Rom. 8:32). Paul gives us the assurance again: "The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17).

Therefore, entrust each problem to God and enjoy peace and joy, saying to yourself: "***The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack***" (Ps. 23:2).