

"That First Prayer of a Child of God" (with audio)

On 16 October 1931, Saint Josemaria, beset with many worries, deeply experienced the reality that he was a child of God, which he called a "new Mediterranean" in his life.

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“Now is the time, my daughters and sons, to go deeper and deeper into the ‘paths of contemplation’ in the middle of the world.”^[1] With these

words the Prelate of Opus Dei points to one of the priorities of the present time. The apostolate of Christians is, today as always, “an overflowing of our interior life.”^[2] First of all, because it means communicating to others Christ’s Life, the Life in which we share. Secondly, because if we are to bring the Faith to the world, we first need to understand and live it deeply ourselves. In short, as Saint Josemaría said, it is a matter of “going deeper into the depths of God’s Love, so that we’ll be able to show that love to other people through what we do and say.”^[3]

This effort to “go deeper” into the faith has a special mark. It is not a question of going from a known place to an unknown one. Rather it means entering more deeply into what is already known, into what seems obvious, what we have so often heard. We then “discover” something that we already knew, but

that we now grasp with new strength and depth. Saint Josemaría refers to this experience as discovering “new Mediterraneans” that open up before our eyes in an unexpected way. For example, in *The Forge* he says:

“In the interior life, as in human love, we have to persevere. Yes, you have to meditate often on the same themes, keeping on until you discover a ‘new Mediterranean.’

“‘How could I not have seen this so clearly before?’ you’ll ask in surprise. Simply because sometimes we’re like stones that let the water flow over them, without absorbing a drop.

“That’s why we have to go over the same things again and again—they aren’t the same things!—if we want to soak up God’s blessings.”[4]

“To go over the same things again and again” in order to open up all the riches contained there, and thus

discover that “they aren’t the same things!” This is the path of contemplation to which we are called. It means sounding the riches in a sea that, at first sight, contains nothing new, because it already forms part of our daily landscape. The Romans called the Mediterranean *Mare nostrum*, our sea: the sea that was well known to them, the sea that was part of their daily life. Saint Josemaría spoke about discovering new Mediterraneans because, when we go further into seas that we think we know well, broad and unexpected horizons open before our eyes. Then we can tell the Blessed Trinity, along with Saint Catherine of Siena: “you are like a deep sea; the more I enter you the more I discover, and the more I discover the more I seek you.”[5]

These discoveries are lights that God gives when and as he wishes. But our

diligent seeking and pondering can also prepare our soul to receive these lights from God. “Just as someone who had previously been in darkness and suddenly beholds the sun is enlightened in his bodily sight, and sees plainly things that he did not see before, so likewise a person who receives the Holy Spirit is enlightened in his soul.”[6]

In this new series of editorials we will consider some of these Mediterraneans that Saint Josemaría discovered in his interior life, in order to enter more deeply with him “into the depths of God’s Love.”

Abba Pater!

One of the most deeply rooted convictions in the first Christians was that they could address God as beloved children. Jesus himself had taught them: *Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven...* (Mt 6:9). He had presented himself to the Jews

as the beloved Son of the Father, and had taught his disciples to act in like manner. The Apostles had heard him address God with the term the Hebrew children used to address their own fathers. And on receiving the Holy Spirit, they themselves had begun to use that term. It was something that was radically new, with respect to the piety of Israel, but Saint Paul made reference to it as something familiar to everyone: *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:15-16).*

It was conviction that filled them with confidence and gave them an unexpected boldness: *if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17).* Jesus is not only the only-begotten Son of the

Father, but also the firstborn among many brethren (cf. *Rom 8:29; Col 1:15*). The new Life brought by Christ was shown to them as the life of God's beloved children. This was neither a theoretical nor an abstract truth, but rather a reality that filled them with overflowing joy. We see this reflected in the joyful words of the Apostle Saint John in his first letter: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are (1 Jn 3:1)*.

God's fatherhood, his very special and tender love for each one of us, is something that we Christians learn about right from childhood. And nevertheless we are called to discover it in a personal and lively way that transforms our relationship with God. On doing so, a Mediterranean of peace and trust opens up before our eyes, an immense horizon into which we can

go more deeply throughout our whole life. For Saint Josemaria, this was an unexpected discovery, the sudden opening up of a panorama that was hidden in something he already knew quite well.

This happened in the autumn of 1931, as he recalled many years later: “I can tell you when, to the very moment, and where my first prayer as a son of God took place. I had learned to call God Father, as in the Our Father, from my childhood. But feeling, seeing, being amazed at that desire of God that we be his children... that was on the street and in a streetcar. For an hour or an hour and a half, I don’t know, I had to shout *Abba, Pater!*”[7]

In the following months, Saint Josemaria repeatedly came back to this consideration. In the retreat he made a year later, for example, he wrote down: “*First day. God is my*

Father. And I'm not departing from this consideration.”^[8] The whole day spent considering God's Fatherhood! Although such an extended period of contemplation might at first surprise us, in fact it shows how deeply the experience of his divine filiation took hold in his heart. We too, in our prayer and whenever we turn to God, should first foster an attitude of trusting abandonment and gratitude. But for our relationship with God to take on this tenor, we need to personally discover once again that he truly wishes to be our Father.

Who is God for me?

Like Saint Josemaría, perhaps we too learned when very young that God is our Father. But we may still have a long way to go before we actually make the radical truth that we are God's children an integral part of our life. How can we facilitate this discovery?

In first place, to truly discover God's fatherhood, we will often need to *restore his authentic image*. Who is God for me? Consciously or unconsciously, some think of God as Someone who imposes laws, and threatens punishments for anyone who doesn't obey them. Someone who expects his will to be followed and grows angry when disobeyed; in a word, a Master with us merely as his unwilling subjects. In other cases (and this holds true also for some Christians), God is viewed basically as the reason why we have to behave well. He is seen as the reason we need to strive for a goal we *ought* to seek but don't really *want* to.

Nevertheless, God "is not a tyrannical Master or a rigid and implacable judge: he is our Father. He speaks to us about our lack of generosity, our sins, our mistakes; but he does so in order to free us from them, to promise us his Friendship and his Love."[9]

The difficulty in grasping that *God is Love* (1 Jn 4:8) is also due at times to the crisis that fatherhood is undergoing in various places. Perhaps we have seen this when speaking with friends or colleagues; the thought of their own father doesn't stir up good memories in them, and a God who is Father does not particularly attract them. When speaking to them about the faith, it is good to help them see how their pain over this lack in their life shows how deeply the need for fatherhood is engraved on their heart: a fatherhood that precedes them and calls out to them. A friend, or a priest, can help them by their closeness to discover the love of the *Father from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name* (Eph 3:14); and also to experience this tenderness in “the vocation of being a ‘protector’”[10] that everyone’s heart harbors, and that finds expression in the father or

mother that *they themselves already are*, or would like to be one day. Thus they can continue to discover in the depth of their soul the authentic face of God and the way we his children are called to live, knowing that we are looked upon by him with infinite affection. A father doesn't love his child for what he or she *does*, for the results shown, but simply *because it is his child*. He wants his child to do well in life and tries to draw the best out of each one, but is always aware of how much value the child already has in his eyes.

It can help us to remember this, especially when we fail in something or when the gap between our own lives and the “models” the world holds up for us results in low self-esteem. “That is our real ‘stature,’ our spiritual identity: we are God’s beloved children, always. So you can see that not to accept ourselves, to live glumly, to be negative, means not

to recognize our deepest identity. It is like walking away when God wants to look at me, trying to spoil his dream for me. God loves us the way we are, and no sin, fault or mistake of ours makes him change his mind.”[11]

Realizing that God is our Father also involves letting ourselves be looked upon by him as *dearly beloved children*. Then we come to understand that our “worth” doesn’t depend on what we have—our talents—or on what we do—our successes—but rather on the Love that has created us, that has “dreamed about” and affirmed us *before the foundation of the world* (*Eph 1:4*). Given the cold idea of God that is found at times in the contemporary world, Benedict XVI wanted to recall right from the beginning of his pontificate that “we are not the accidental and senseless product of evolution. Each of us is

the fruit of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”[12] Does this idea truly influence our daily lives?

The trusting hope of God’s children

Saint Josemaría frequently reminded the faithful of Opus Dei that “the foundation of our spiritual life is the sense of our divine filiation.”[13] He compared it to the “thread that unites the pearls of a marvelous necklace. Divine filiation is the thread tying together all the virtues, because they are the virtues of a child of God.”[14] Thus it is very important to ask God to open for us this “new Mediterranean,” which sustains and gives shape to our whole spiritual life.

The “thread” of divine filiation leads to “a daily attitude of hopeful abandonment,”[15] an attitude found in children, especially when they are small. Therefore in the life and

writings of Saint Josemaría, divine filiation is frequently closely tied to spiritual childhood. What importance does a child give to the frequent falls he undergoes when learning to ride a bicycle? None at all, as long as he sees his father nearby, encouraging him to try again. That's what his hopeful abandonment means. "Dad says that I can... so let's go!"

Realizing we are God's children gives us the security we need to carry out the mission our Lord has entrusted to us. We will feel like that child whose father says to him: *Son, go and work in the vineyard today* (Mt 21:28). Perhaps our first reaction will be to feel apprehensive, imagining all kinds of possible difficulties. But right away we will consider that it is our Father who is asking us for this, showing such great confidence in us. Like Christ, we will learn to abandon ourselves into the Father's hands and

to tell him from the depths of our soul: *yet not what I will, but what thou wilt* (Mk 14:36). Saint Josemaria taught us with his life to act in this way, in the image of Christ: “Over the years, I have sought to rely unfalteringly for my support on this joyous reality. No matter what the situation, my prayer, while varying in tone, has always been the same. I have said to him: ‘Lord, You put me here. You entrusted me with this or that, and I put my trust in you. I know you are my Father, and I have seen that tiny children are always absolutely sure of their parents.’”[16]

We cannot deny that there will be difficulties. But we will face them with the knowledge that, no matter what happens, our all-powerful Father accompanies us; he is by our side and watches out for us. He will do what we are trying to do, since in the end it is his work; he will do it perhaps in a different way, but a

more fruitful one. “As soon as you truly abandon yourself in the Lord, you will know how to be content with whatever happens. You will not lose your peace if your undertakings do not turn out the way you hoped, even if you have put everything into them, and used all the means necessary. For they will have ‘turned out’ the way God wants them to.”[17]

Strengthening our “sense of divine filiation”

Saint Josemaría, we should note, didn’t point to *divine filiation* as the foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei, but rather to the *sense* of our divine filiation. It is not enough to *be* God’s children; we need to *realize* we are children of God, so that our life takes on that “sense.” Having that certainty in our hearts is the most solid foundation possible; the truth of our divine filiation then becomes an

active reality, with specific repercussions in our lives.

To strengthen this “sense,” it is good to enter more deeply into that reality with our mind and heart. *With our mind*, first, by meditating in our prayer on the passages in Scripture that speak about God’s fatherhood, about our filiation, and about the life of God’s children. Here we can draw a lot of light from many texts by Saint Josemaría on what it means to be God’s children,[18] or from the reflections of other saints and Christian writers.[19]

With our heart we can go more deeply into the reality that we are God’s children by having trusting recourse to God the Father, abandoning ourselves in his Love. We can stir up our filial trust, with or without words, by always trying to be aware of his Love for us. One way of doing so is to turn to him with

short invocations or aspirations. Saint Josemaría suggested: “Call him ‘Father’ many times a day and tell him—alone, in your heart—that you love him, that you adore him, that you feel proud and strong because you are his child.”[20] We can also make use of some short prayer that can help us to confront each day with the security of realizing we are children of God, or to end it with a prayer of thanksgiving, contrition and hope. Pope Francis suggested this prayer to young people: “*Lord, I thank you for loving me; I am sure that you love me; help me to be in love with my own life!* Not with my faults, that need to be corrected, but with life itself, which is a great gift, for it is a time to love and to be loved.”[21]

Returning to the Father’s house

The family has been described as “the place to which we return,” where we find refuge and rest. As

Saint John Paul II liked to say, it is the “sanctuary of love and life.”[22] For there we find once again the Love that gives meaning and worth to our life, because it is at its very origin.

Similarly, sensing that we are God’s children enables us to return to him trustingly when we are tired, when others have mistreated us or we feel wounded... and also when we have offended him. *Returning to the Father* is another way of living “hopeful abandonment.” We should often meditate on the parable of the father who had two sons, recounted to us by Saint Luke (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*). “God is waiting for us, like the father in the parable, with open arms, even though we don’t deserve it. It doesn’t matter how great our debt is. Just like the prodigal son, all we have to do is open our heart, to be homesick for our Father’s house, to wonder at and rejoice in the gift which God makes us of being able to call

ourselves his children, of really being his children, even though our response to him has been so poor.”[23]

Perhaps that son gave little thought to the suffering he had caused his Father; what he missed above all was the way of life he had had in his father’s household (cf. *Lk 15:17-19*). He set out for home with the idea of being simply another servant there among the others. Nevertheless, his father received him—he went out to meet him, embraced him and covered him with kisses!—reminding him of his deepest identity: he was *his son*. And right away he gave orders for his clothing to be returned to him, his sandals and his ring—the signs of the filiation that not even his bad behavior could erase. “And yet, after all, it was his own son who was involved, and such a relationship could never be altered or destroyed by any sort of behavior.”[24]

Even though at times we may look upon God as a Master whose servants we are, or as a cold-hearted Judge, he remains faithful to his Love as Father. The possibility of drawing close to him after we have fallen is always a marvelous opportunity to truly discover him. And it also reveals to us our own identity. It is not simply the fact that he has decided to love us, because he wishes to, but rather that we truly *are*, through grace, *God's children*. We *are* children of God: nothing and nobody can ever rob us of that dignity. Not even we ourselves. Therefore, on seeing the reality of our weakness and our conscious and voluntary sin, we should never lose hope. As Saint Josemaría said: "That is not all. It is God who has the last word—and it is the word of his saving and merciful love and, therefore, the word of our divine filiation."[25]

Occupied with loving

The “sense” of divine filiation changes everything, as it changed Saint Josemaría’s life when he unexpectedly discovered this “new Mediterranean.” How different is the interior life when, instead of basing it on our own progress or resolutions for improvement, we center it on the Love that goes before us and awaits us! If we give priority to what we ourselves *do*, we make our spiritual life revolve almost exclusively around our personal improvement. In the long run, this way of living not only risks leaving God’s love forgotten in a corner of our soul, but also leads to discouragement, since we stand alone in our struggle against failure.

But when we center everything on what God does, on letting ourselves be loved by him, on welcoming his Salvation each day, our struggle takes on a very different tone. If we are victorious, gratitude and praise will

spring up quite naturally from within us; and if we suffer a defeat, we will return trustingly to God our Father, asking for forgiveness and letting ourselves be embraced by him. Thus we come to realize that “divine filiation is not a specific virtue with its own acts, but rather the permanent state of the subject of the virtues. All of our activity, the exercise of our virtues, can and should be the exercise of our divine filiation.”[26]

Defeat does not exist for a person who seeks to welcome God’s Love every day. Even sin can become an opportunity to remember our identity as children and return to God our Father, who insists on coming to greet us saying “Son, my son!” And as it did Saint Josemaría, this realization will give us the strength we need to follow our Lord once again. “I know that you and I will surely see, with the light and

help of grace, what things must be burned and we will burn them; what things must be uprooted and we will uproot them; what things have to be given up and we will give them up.”^[27] But we will do so without becoming anxious or discouraged, trying never to confuse the ideal of Christian life with perfectionism.^[28] Then we will center our lives on God’s Love for us, occupied with loving. We will be like small children who have discovered a little of their Father’s love, and who seek a thousand ways to show their gratitude and respond with all the love, little or much, they are capable of expressing.

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Mediterraneans”**

[1] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14 February 2017, no. 30.

[2] *Ibid.* Cf. Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 961; *Friends of God*, no. 239.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 97.

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 540.

[5] Saint Catherine of Siena, *Dialogues*, ch. 167.

[6] Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 16, 16.

[7] Saint Josemaría, Meditation, 24 December 1969 (in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 334).

[8] Saint Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, no. 1637 (in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 1, Scepter, p. 400).

[9] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

[10] Pope Francis, Homily at Mass inaugurating his pontificate, 19 March 2013.

[11] Pope Francis, Homily at World Youth Day in Poland, 31 July 2016.

[12] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass inaugurating his pontificate, 24 April 2005.

[13] Saint Josemaría, Letter, 25 January 1961.

[14] Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, 6 July 1974.

[15] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

[16] *Friends of God*, no. 143.

[17] *Furrow*, no. 860.

[18] Cf. Fernando. Ocáriz, “Filiación divina” in *Diccionario de san*

Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, Monte Carmelo, Burgos 2013, pp. 519-526.

[19] The Jubilee Year of Mercy has helped to highlight some of these. Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Merciful Like the Father. Resources for the Jubilee of Mercy 2015-2016*.

[20] *Friends of God*, no. 150.

[21] Francis, Homily, 31 July 2016.

[22] Saint John Paul II, Homily, 4 May 2003.

[23] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 64.

[24] Saint John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), no. 5.

[25] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 66.

[26] F. Ocáriz and I. de Celaya, *Vivir como hijos de Dios*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1993, p. 54.

[27] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 66.

[28] Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

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