

"You are a beloved child of God"

"If all our earthly loves were to disintegrate, there is always for all of us, ardent, the unique and faithful love of God." In his February 20 general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the Lord's prayer.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today's audience takes place in two places. First I met with the faithful of

Benevento, who were in Saint Peter's, and now with you. And this is due to the delicacy of the Prefecture of the Papal Household, who did not want you to get cold: let us thank them, they did this. Thank you.

Let us continue the catechesis on the Lord's Prayer. The first step of every Christian prayer is the entry into a mystery, that of *God's paternity*. We cannot pray like parrots. Either you enter into the mystery, in the awareness that God is your Father, or you do not pray. If I want to pray to God my Father the mystery begins. To understand the measure to which God is Father, let us think of the figures of our parents, but to some extent we have to "refine" them, purify them. The Catechesis of the Catholic Church also says so: "The purification of our hearts has to do with paternal or maternal images, stemming from our personal and

cultural history, and influencing our relationship with God" (2779).

None of us has had perfect parents, no-one; just as we, in turn, will never be perfect parents or pastors. We all have flaws, all of us. Our relations of love are always lived in terms of our limits and also of our selfishness; therefore they are often contaminated by desires to possess or manipulate the other. For this reason, at times declarations of love transform into sentiments of anger and of hostility. But look, these two loved each other so much last week, today they mortally hate each other: we see this every day! It is for this reason, since we all have bitter roots inside, that are not good and at times come out and do harm.

This is why, when we speak about God as a "father", while we think of the image of our parents, especially if they have loved us, at the same time

we must go beyond. Because God's love is that of the Father "who is in heaven", according to the expression that Jesus invites us to use: it is the total love that we in this life taste only in an imperfect way. Men and women are eternally mendicants of love – we are mendicants of love, we need love – they seek a place where they can finally be loved, but they do not find it. How many disappointed friendships and how many disappointed loves are there in our world; so many!

The Greek god of love, in mythology, is the most tragic one of all: it cannot be understood if he is an angelic being or a demon. The mythology says that he is the son of Poros and Penía, that is, of astuteness and poverty, destined to carry within himself a little of the features of these parents. From this we can think of the ambivalent nature of human love: capable of flourishing

and of overbearing living at one time of the day, and immediately afterwards fading and dying: that which it grasps, always flees from it (cf Plato, *Symposium*, 203). There is an expression of the prophet Hosea which outlines pitilessly the congenital weakness of our love: “Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears” (6: 4). This is what our love often is: a promise that we struggle to maintain, an attempt that soon dries up and evaporates, a little like when in the morning the sun comes out and takes away the night-time dew.

How often we men love in such a weak and intermittent way. We all have the experience: we have loved but then that love falls and or becomes weak. Desiring to love, we then come up against our limits, with the paucity of our forces: incapable of maintaining a promise that in the

days of grace seemed easy to fulfil. In the end, even the apostle Peter was afraid and had to flee. The apostle Peter was not faithful to Jesus' love. There is always this weakness that makes us fall. We are mendicants who on the journey risk never completely finding that treasure we seek from the first day of our life: love.

However, there exists another love, that of the *Father* “*who is in heaven*”. No-one must doubt that they are the recipient of this love. He loves us. “He loves me”, we can say. If not even our father and mother loved us – a hypothetical possibility – there is a God in heaven Who loves us like no-one on this earth has ever done or will ever be able to do. God’s love is constant. The prophet Isaiah says: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See,

I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me” (49: 15-16). Today tattoos are in fashion: “I have engraved you on the palms of my hands”. I have made a tattoo of you on my hands. I am in God’s hands, in this way, and I cannot remove this. God’s love is like the love of a mother, who can never forget. And if a mother were to forget? “I will not forget you”, says the Lord. This is the perfect love of God, in this way we are beloved by Him. If all our earthly loves were to disintegrate and nothing were to remain in our hands but dust, there is always for all of us, ardent, the unique and faithful love of God.

In the hunger for love we all feel, let us not seek something that does not exist: this is instead the invitation to know God Who is the Father. The conversion of Saint Augustine, for example, took place through this path: the young and brilliant

rhetorician simply sought among the creatures something that no creature could give him, until one day he had the courage to look up. And on that day he knew God. God Who loves.

The expression “in heaven” is not intended to express distance, but a radical diversity of love, another dimension of love, a tireless love, a love that will always remain, rather, that is always within reach. It is enough to say, “Our Father Who is in heaven”, and that love comes.

So, do not be afraid! None of us is alone. If even by misfortune your earthly father were to forget about you, and you resented him, the fundamental experience of Christian faith would not be denied to you: that of knowing that you are a *beloved son of God*, and that there is nothing in life that can extinguish His impassioned love for you.

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