



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 16 January 2019 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Continuing the catecheses on the 'Lord's Prayer', today we shall begin with the observation that in the New Testament, the prayer seems to arrive at the essential, actually focusing on a single word: *Abba*, Father.

We have heard what Saint Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans: "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!'" (8:15). And the Apostle says to the Galatians: "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, '*Abba*! Father!'" (Gal 4:6). The same invocation, in which all the novelty of the Gospel is condensed, recurs twice. After meeting Jesus and hearing his preaching, a Christian no longer considers God as a tyrant to be feared; he is no longer afraid but feels trust in Him expand in his heart: he can speak with the Creator by calling him 'Father'. The expression is so important for Christians that it is often preserved intact, in its original form: '*Abba*'.

In the New Testament it is rare for Aramaic expressions to be translated into Greek. We have to imagine that the voice of Jesus himself has remained in these Aramaic words as if 'recorded': they have respected Jesus' idiom. In the first words of the 'Our Father' we immediately find the radical newness of Christian prayer.

It does not simply use a symbol — in this case, the father figure — to connect to the mystery of God; it is instead about having, so to speak, Jesus' entire world poured into one's heart. If we do this, we can truly pray the 'Our Father'. Saying '*Abba*' is something much more intimate, more moving than simply calling God 'Father'. This is why someone has proposed translating this original Aramaic word '*Abba*' with 'Dad' or 'Papa'. Instead of saying 'our Father', saying 'Dad, Papa'. We shall continue to say 'our Father' but with the heart we are invited to say 'Dad', to have a relationship with God like that of a child with his dad, who says 'dad' and says 'papa'. Indeed,

these expressions evoke affection, they evoke warmth, something that casts us into the context of childhood: the image of a child completely enveloped in the embrace of a father who feels infinite tenderness for him. And for this reason, dear brothers and sisters, in order to pray properly, one must come to have a child's heart. Not a self-sufficient heart: one cannot pray properly this way. Like a child in the arms of his father, of his dad, of his papa.

But of course the Gospels better explain the meaning of this word. What does this word mean to Jesus? The 'Our Father' takes on meaning and colour if we learn to pray it after having read, for example, the Parable of the Merciful Father, in Chapter 15 of Luke (cf. Lk 15:11-32). Let us imagine this prayer recited by the prodigal son, after having experienced the embrace of his father who had long awaited him, a father who does not remember the offensive words the son had said to him, a father who now simply makes him understand how much he has been missed. Thus we discover how those words become vibrant, receive strength. And let us ask ourselves: is it possible that You, O God, really know only love? Do you not know hatred? No — God would respond — I know only love.

Where in You is vengeance, the demand for justice, anger at your wounded honour? And God would respond: I know only love.

In that parable the father's manner of conduct somehow recalls the spirit of a *mother*. It is especially mothers who excuse their children, who protect them, who do not suspend empathy for them, who continue to love them, even when they would no longer deserve anything.

It is enough to evoke this single expression — *Abba* — for Christian prayer to develop. And in his Letters, Saint Paul follows this same path, because it is the path taught by Jesus: in this invocation there is a force that draws all the rest of the prayer.

God seeks you, even if you do not seek him. God loves you, even if you have forgotten about him. God glimpses beauty in you, even if you think you have squandered all your talents in vain. God is not only a father; he is like a mother who never stops loving her little child. On the other hand, there is a 'gestation' that lasts forever, well beyond the nine months of the physical one; it is a gestation that engenders an infinite cycle of love.

For a Christian, praying is simply saying '*Abba*'; it is saying 'Dad', saying 'Papa', saying 'Father' but with a child's trust.

It may be that we too happen to walk on paths far from God, as happened to the prodigal son; or to sink into a loneliness that makes us feel abandoned in the world; or, even to make mistakes and be paralyzed by a sense of guilt. In those difficult moments, we can still find the strength to pray, to begin again with the word '*Abba*', but said with the tender feeling of a child: '*Abba*', 'Dad'. He does not hide his face from us. Remember well: perhaps one has bad things within, things he does not

know how to resolve, much bitterness for having done this and that.... He does not hide His face. He does not close himself off in silence. Say 'Father' to Him and He will answer you. You have a father. 'Yes, but I am a delinquent...'. But you have a father who loves you! Say 'Father' to him, start to pray in this way, and in the silence he will tell us that he has never lost sight of us. 'But Father, I have done this...'. — 'I have never lost sight of you; I have seen everything. But I have always been there, close to you, faithful to my love for you'. That will be his answer. Never forget to say 'Father'. Thank you.

Special Greetings

This coming Friday, with the celebration of Vespers in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls, the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* begins, with the theme: 'Justice and only justice you shall pursue'. This year too we are called to pray, that all Christians may return to being one family, consistent with the divine will that "they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). Ecumenism is not an optional thing. The intention will be that of maturing a common and universal witness in the affirmation of true justice and in support of the weakest, through concrete, appropriate and effective responses.

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups coming from Korea and the United States of America. In the context of the forthcoming Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I offer a special greeting to the group from the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. My cordial greeting also goes to the priest alumni of the Pontifical North American College. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

I address a particular thought to *young people*, to *the elderly*, to *the sick* and to *newlyweds*, who are so numerous. I wish that for each one this encounter may revive communion with the universal ministry of the Successor of Peter and, at the same time, be an occasion of renewal and spiritual grace. I invoke the joy and peace of the Lord Jesus upon you all!