

On the way to the Father as pilgrim.

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This reflection is the author's intervention before a group of religious educators from various congregations in Venezuela on June 11, 1999. The framework of the talk was the Year of the Father in preparation for the Jubilee Year in 2000.

Towards what do we journey?

God, Father and Mother

The decision to journey impacts on one's vital drives both in terms of nature as well as grace. The decision as regards towards what do we journey is for each to decide. The expression "a sleeping shrimp is swept away by the current" tells us that not to decide is really to decide that the current will sweep you away.

The last year in preparation for the Jubilee is dedicated to the Father. We received an invitation to become pilgrims on the way to the Father.

Now then how are we motivated or what moves inside us when we hear the invitation to journey towards the Father? Are we filled with peace, calm, hope or rather with feelings of rigidity, order or fear? I am sure that our experiences will condition our feelings and emotions. What images do we have of a father or a mother? What image do I have and does each of you have? What feelings, what memories are brought to mind in us? If there are hurts that have not healed then the journey will not be so bright. I am not saying that it is necessary to go through life without hurts. I am referring to hurts that have not healed which is a different thing.

It is very likely that the first impression might be to transfer the parental image that we have to our image of God. I would like to go beyond this a bit. How does the word or the memory of hearing the title "father" resound in me? What about when I hear the word "mother"? Are there similar feelings or are they contrary to one another? At home do we speak of "dad" or my "dad"; "mom" or my "mom"? With the possessive MY we would be thinking about an exclusive adaptation. This is an interesting fact which will help one to see one's relationship with God down the road.

On top of all that has been said, the image that each one has of the word father in small letters and its transfer to Father in capital letters is one thing. Another thing entirely is what the image is that is presented to us as followers of Jesus.

One of the more characteristic images of Jesus is the way in which Jesus deals with God. This is the result of the relationship he has with God. When Jesus refers to God in terms of his person he speaks to us about "my Father". When he prays he refers to God in a familiar way as a child would, as "Abba" or "daddy". This is shocking to a community which is not accustomed to using the name of God. It is precisely for this reason that they searched for semantic turns of phrases to refer to God without mentioning God's name. They used language such as "the heavens" as in the "kingdom of the heavens" instead of the "kingdom of God" or simply "the name". There are other examples of this as well. This shows us that within the community where Jesus was raised there was a reverence that almost approached fear itself.

Nevertheless in Genesis we are presented with God as a creator who goes out into the garden in order to be refreshed, to take a walk with his preferred creatures, man and woman. (Genesis 3:8).

So where does this distance come from?

The people of Israel after their exiles and deportations took in other religious sources in which the gods were warriors and they settled scores with blood! Many of these ideas were taken up and they placed God on a celestial throne before which all mortals and all creation had to surrender. Everything would come to pass in another life, in the hope of a triumphant coming to renew heaven and earth.

Within the Old Testament we find vestiges of the revelation of God as father and as mother in which are present tenderness and loving care.

– *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you* (Isaiah 49:15).

– *Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD* (Jeremiah 31:20).

– *If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up* (Psalm 27:10).

– *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me;...my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not again destroy Ephraim.* (Hosea 11:8-9).

– *But you are a God ready to forgive.* (Nehemiah 9:17).

– *The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love* (Psalm 103: 8).

– *As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust* (Psalm 103: 13-14).

– *You are my Father, my God* (Psalm 89: 26).

God is collectively taken on as father of the people of Israel.

The road walked by Jesus

Jesus' appearance makes us take a qualitative leap. God the Father of the collective people becomes considered as father of each person. A more personal relationship can now be established. Jesus experiences within himself his consciousness of being the beloved son of God, his Father, at his baptism on the banks of the Jordan river. That

experience leads him to journey towards a distant, faceless God in search of an encounter with his Father. It is up to him to journey from a relationship between adults to a filial relationship which leads him to cry out: abba, father.

As he senses his call to Messiahship he must journey and discern between a triumphant, warlike Messiahship which goes from conquest to conquest and a Messiahship which involves closeness with his people, with their sadness, with obedience, becoming one among many (Philippians 2: 5 ff), experiencing the tragedy of death, learning in this way what it means to be a son (Hebrews 5: 8). He opts for the God of the prophets, the one who desires mercy and not sacrifices (Hosea 6: 6).

In the Gospel passages we do not have a complete record of the prayers Jesus said when he withdrew to pray. We have only two prayer occasions.

– *I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants* (Luke 10: 21).
– *Abba, Father, for you all things are possible*. He was in the Garden of Olives (Mark 14: 36).

Which Father does Jesus speak to us about? What is the goal of our journeying?

- **Father of the people:**

This is the first step. The God of our parents, the God of Adam, the son of God.

Mary in her inmost being understands that the God of Israel is coming to fulfill his promise.

The God of Jesus when he says that they have turned his Father's house into a den of thieves.

The God about which Jesus is concerned at the age of twelve in the Temple.

This is the God whom each person has experienced within the family, based on the spirituality which gave birth to our vocation.

- **The Father who is incomprehensibly good**

This is the one who makes rain fall upon all, both the good and the evil (Matthew 19: 17).

He is the one who gives growth, who cares for birds and lilies of the fields.

It is he who provides for our needs even before we ask.

It is he who listens to the prayers we make in the quiet of our room (Matthew 6: 6).

- **The Father who wants us to be free and to be masters of our own destiny.**

This is reflected in the Father who forwards half of his inheritance to his son for him to experience and discover life, even to the point of drawing away from him (Luke 15: 12).

This can also be seen in the vine grower who leaves the vineyard in the care of his employees so that they might benefit from it. The same goes for the one who gave out talents so that each one might use them well.

All this searching will not keep us from temptations nor from uncertainties.

- **The Father who goes out in search and who is patient.**

He goes out on the road each day. He waits. He believes that his son or daughter is capable. He does not grow tired.

Seventy times seven.

He believes in human beings as those who are on a journey, on a program.

The Father is the worker in the vineyard, he sees within the seed, in the origin, the fruits already realized. (John 15: 1).

- **The Father of celebration and of happiness.**

He throws a party when he sees the son returning, convinced that it is his son, not a journeyman nor a hired hand.

He is happy along with the angels and he celebrates over just one sinner who repents.

- **The Father who wants us to be brothers and sisters.**

My Father and your Father (John 20: 17).

In the teaching on prayer he invites us to pray not our "my" Father but to "our" Father, give US, pardon US, free US, etc. (Luke 11: 2-4).

In the measure that we live as brothers and sisters we make true the faith which we profess in the paternity of God with the entire world.

The parable of the Samaritan ends with a question and with a command. The question: *Who acted as his neighbor?* The command: *Go and do the same*. (Luke 10: 29-37).

Those blessed by my Father will come to eternal life and to eternal rejoicing because they did it to me. (Matthew 25: 34). This is fraternity, pure and simple.

Therefore call no one Father on earth so that no one might feel superior since we are all brothers and sisters (Matthew 23: 9).

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings (Luke 13: 34).

All these characteristics which I have singled out may remind you more of your father or your mother. We have the opportunity to sense the God revealed by Jesus as Father, Abba, father or as Mother, Imma, mother. We ought to refer to God in the way in which we feel best. In any case this reflection would be a good time to renew the call to this horizon of love and mercy which seeks us, which loves us. Since its arrival in this way we did not even realize it. The God who created us without counting on us wants to see us fulfilled and with good designs. He has placed in each of us all the responsibility for hope and for dreams of which he is capable.

And we are not alone on this journey. Jesus made the journey, Jesus is the way, Jesus becomes the meeting point with us on the road.

Our communities with Jesus are tables for encounter which encourage us to travel new courses with burning hearts.

As teachers - especially in Catholic, Christian institutions - we are also responsible for the image of God which our students can have. By our attitudes more than by our words we foster feelings of compassion, affection, tenderness, hope - or rather those of confrontation, mistrust and hopelessness. Is my student my brother or sister, or is he my rival?

Let us journey as pilgrims with the entire world towards the dream which God has of his most loved creature, the human family. •