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“Beloved Father”

Letter 48

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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“God has sent forth into our hearts the Spirit of his Son who cries out ‘Abba!’ (‘Father!’)” (Gal 4:6). When we speak of Christian prayer, we must always come back to this verse, from the *Epistle to the Galatians*, which defines its hidden meaning. But we must read it correctly, and not pass over the essential word. The fact that Paul thought it wise to preserve the Aramaic word *abba* in his Greek text deserves attention. He would not have done so, had he thought that the Greek term *pater* was its meticulously exact translation.

He wrote to the Romans, using almost the same words: (you received) “a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’)” (Rm 8:15). We find the same word in Mark’s Gospel. At the hour of Christ’s unimaginable anguish at Gethsemane, this is the word that came to his lips: “Abba (O Father), you have the power to do all things. Take this cup away from me” (Mk 14:36).

Some of the greatest exegetes conclude, from the use of this term by Paul and Mark, that the primitive communities preserved this word with great devotion and infinite veneration. These communities had no relics of Christ. They had something much better—the very word that sprang from his heart in his dialogue with God: *Abba!* It was a great delight for these first Christians, when they spoke to the Father, to be able to use the very word of the mother tongue of Christ Jesus.

But this was not only a demand of the heart. They had no term that could express the exact nuance of meaning of the word *abba*, the diminutive that Aramaic speaking children used in addressing their fathers. It was the word that the child Jesus called out to Joseph: *abba, abba!* To render the nuance of intimate and trusting tenderness contained in this *abba*, we must translate it as “beloved father” or “my dearest father.”

Do you understand now why this word was so precious to the primitive Church? The Apostles had been deeply moved when they heard Christ use it to pray to the Lord of heaven and earth (cf. Mk 14:36). What Jew would have dared to have invoked God in

this way, he whose holiness caused the seraphim and the prophets to tremble? There were times when God was called “our Father” (*abinou* in Hebrew, *abunan* in Aramaic), or more rarely and solemnly “my Father” (*abi*). But never, absolutely never, would anyone have used a term expressing such childlike trust as *abba*.

For Christ, the use of the term *abba* to address God was a way of expressing and affirming his divine Sonship to his friends and followers.

But Christ did not monopolize this filial and trusting familiarity. He taught it to his disciples. In their Gospels, St. Luke and St. Matthew each give us a version of the Lord’s Prayer. It is shorter in Luke, and longer and more solemn in Matthew. It is generally thought that Luke gives us the primitive version, the one Jesus himself taught. It begins in this way: “*Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread...*” (Lk 11:2-3).

Some exegetes think that the first word was “*Abba!* Beloved Father.” Thus, the disciples could address God with filial tenderness, as did their Master. Indeed, this is the great revelation that Jesus Christ brought the world. Those who believe in him are children of God in a very real, and not a metaphorical, sense. For they are “begotten of God,” “born of God,” “sharers in his nature.”

What an astounding revelation! Whenever the first Christians said to God, “Beloved Father!”, their hearts leaped with joy. How is it for us?

To the man or woman who prays to him in this way, God responds, as he does to Jesus: “*you are my beloved Son*” (Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22).

Jesus did more than teach his followers the terms they should use in prayer. Beginning with Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit, who murmurs *Abba!* in the depths of every Christian heart. If we knew how to live inwardly, we could not fail to recognize his voice. It seems that St. Paul’s correspondents were more keenly attuned to the inspirations of the Spirit than we are. In fact, to remind them that they were sons of God, the Apostle did not hesitate to write to them (I am slightly paraphrasing his text):

“When you recollect yourselves, a word, a cry, leaps from the depths of your consciousness: *Abba!* That should not surprise you. You have received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Son. He inspires the sentiments of the Son within you, and brings to your lips the very invocation of Christ: ‘*Abba*, beloved Father!’ What better proof could you want of your divine sonship?”

Is it because St. Matthew feared that the Christian’s filial familiarity might degenerate into impertinence, that he put an adjunct in his version of the Lord’s Prayer: “*Our Father in Heaven*” (Mt 6:9)? This keeps us from putting God on the same footing as the fathers of earth, forgetting his supreme greatness. But the clarification is not an invitation to moderate our filial trust. It is meant far more to make us aware of a magnificent reality.

The holy, eternal, all-powerful God has invited us to address him with the tenderness of a little child: “*Abba*, Dearest Daddy! My beloved Father!”