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## God, the Father

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## God, the Father

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**



AS Catholics we know that all that Christ teaches through His Church is important. But it would not be correct to say that every doctrine the Church teaches is of equal importance. It would be a sad state of affairs, indeed it would be criminal, were the Church to give more prominence to the doctrine of Purgatory than to the doctrine of Christ's death on the Cross. Both are real doctrines, but one is more important than the other.

Catholics do not generally neglect or undervalue Christ's death on the Cross, but there is one doctrine of importance, of very great importance, to which we do not give sufficient attention. In so far as we do not, we are neither Christian nor Catholic. It is the doctrine of God the Father.

We can gain some insight into the place of pre-eminence God the Father should hold in our thinking and praying by learning how Christ thought of His Father. If the Father was often in His mind, if His name was often on His lips, then the question is settled. The Father is important. If we do not give the Father the same prominence in our praying as Christ did, then we go to God stunted, deformed, and hopelessly crippled. Our lives might be Christian in a fragmentary way, but they will never attain anything of the vigor of Christ's strength nor the wholeness of Christ's holiness.

When we attempt to sum up something of great length, whether it is a book, an argument, or a life, we attempt to grasp the essence which explains all else, that center to which all else is related. When Our Lord came to the end of His earthly life, He summed up what, in His own words, He called "His work." Speaking to His Father, Christ said, "Father . . . I have finished the work You gave me to do . . . I have manifested Your Name to man." The whole of what Our Lord did, His birth, His hidden life, His passion and death, are summed up, and their purpose and meaning, in making known the name of the Fa-

ther. Our Lord reduced the span of His earthly life and earthly mission to a double movement: He comes from the Father into the world; He leaves the world and goes to the Father. "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again I leave the world and go to the Father."

These are wondrously simple thoughts. Because they are simple thoughts and we are not simple people, we may miss their meaning. Surely the Apostles did not fully understand, even though they had learned the "Our Father" from the lips of Our Lord, had heard the Sermon on the Mount and Our Lord's priestly prayer at the Last Supper. On these three occasions, and many others, they had heard Him in accents weighted with meaning speak the name of the Father over and over, but still they did not understand the importance of the Father. It was too simple for the Apostles and they missed its meaning.

Our Lord knew that they had not understood. He knew that the Apostles had difficulty grasping a distant God. They could understand that they should bow down in adoration before the Father because He was the Creator, the God of Might and Power. It was simple enough to bow down in adoration before such a One. But a Father, even if He is God, should be more than adored. He should be loved; loved not as a kindly phantom from above, but precisely as Father. And Father implies nearness, understanding, love, concern. But for the Apostles, the Father was a God apart, so above and beyond the flesh of man and its cares that the adoration they offered Him was the prostration of the fearful. Their adoration was a submission to power rather than a surrender to love.

If Our Lord was to lead them to the Father, He would have to bring the Father close to them. They would have to understand. He would have to tell that the Father was pure spirit, that He was before time and above time, that He transcended the heavens by the ter-

ror of His loveliness. But that would not be enough. Our Lord would have to make the Apostles understand that the Father would not be Father were He a sort of spiritualized volcano, ready and eager to erupt, or were He a pleasant old grandfather who is remotely paternal but basically unconcerned. Fear the Apostles understood, and trembling they understood. What man did not? But most of all they understood love. And it is in terms of love that Our Lord explained the Father to them. "I will speak to you plainly of the Father . . . The Father Himself loves you." This they understood.

A difficulty remained for them, however, and it remains for us. We are happy to know that the Father loves us. But for our part we can love the Father intimately only if we know Him intimately. The Father has never taken on a human body. Since we can love only what we first know, how can we love the Father unless we can in some manner see Him? Philip had a similar difficulty, and he made a bold request: "Lord, show us the Father; that is all we ask." Our Lord turned and said "Philip, he who sees Me sees also the Father." This is not an evasive answer. It is truth as raw as truth can be. Christ is the Perfect Son of a Perfect Father. Christ is the Perfect Image of His Father. For this reason Christ can say in all literalness. "He who sees Me sees the Father also." To know Christ is to know the Father.

CHRISTIAN consciousness has always considered the "Our Father" the prayer of prayers. That is why Father Faber wrote. "The devotion to the Father is the devotion of devotion. There is little daring and no novelty in this assertion. It is an old, old truth whose neglect will take its revenge. There will be great holes in our Catholicity and an immeasurable void in our holiness. We will have missed the truth Philip put so well: "Show us the Father, and it is enough."