

Getting to Know the True Image of God

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May the Lord grant you His peace. Hello to all my brothers and sisters in Christ out there continuing with us on this Pray More Healing Retreat. I'm Father Ricardo Pineda with the Fathers of Mercy, and I am very pleased to guide you in this reflection on having a true image of God, our Heavenly Father. Such an important topic today as that plea of the apostle, Saint Philip, echoes in the hearts of so many of us out in the world. Show us the Father. Show us the Father, and that will be enough for us. Let's begin by taking that intention to prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Lord God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we praise you for existing as a Holy Trinity, as a divine family, as an eternal communion of love. We thank you for creating us to become members of that divine family. Heavenly Father, the world does not know you, but your son Jesus Christ knows you and has revealed you to us. Help us to contemplate you in the revelation of your son, that we might all the better know, love, and trust you as our Heavenly Father, that we might live in your peace and the glorious freedom of the children of God. We ask all this in the name of Jesus through the intercession of Mary, our mother, Saint Joseph, our guardian angels, and patron saints. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

Inviting Him to Father Me

When I was in my second to last year during seminary, I was coming near both my professional final vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, as well as my diaconate ordination. And I remember praying something like this, Lord God, I'm about to take these two important steps in my vocation that need the maturity and strength of a man. And yet so much of the time, I still feel like this scared little boy inside. I need you, and I invite you to please father me into the man that I need to be. See, up to that point, I had doubted God's willingness to guide me. And I was believing that I had to figure everything out on my own. And I had the sense of God telling me, "You must not think of me like that. You need to trust me as your perfect loving Father."

And so I was inviting Him, I was entrusting myself to Him and inviting Him to Father me. And to my great delight, God answered my prayer wonderfully. That coming year, I felt so Fathered by God, more so than I ever had before. I felt like He was present to me; He was guiding me. He put certain books in my path that helped me recognize my strengths as a man.

I came across videos and talks of great Catholic role models like Jason Evert, Chris Stefanick, Matt Fradd, and I was able to meet several just really solid, good, holy Catholic family men who were married and had children and were just great examples of masculine virtue. God fathered me so well that year that when I was coming close to my priestly ordination and one of my brother seminarians asked me, "What's on your mind? What are

you thinking about as you're so close to becoming a priest?" And my answer was being a father. Being a father, especially to the fatherless or those who might feel fatherless, to help them see and know the love of God, the Father. Jesus Christ came not just to save us from sin and hell. A huge part of His mission was to reveal to us what God, our Heavenly Father, is truly like.

A Distorted View Of God

In this fallen world, it is so easy to develop a distorted view of God. One common mistake we make is thinking that God loves us conditionally, as we fallen human beings tend to do. As we're growing up, we learn it very well. In our experience with our parents, coaches, teachers, friends, when I do things they like, then they love me more. Then they want me around. Then they celebrate me. They're happy to have me. When I do things they don't like, then they don't want me around. They're not proud to have me. They withdraw their love, and they might even try to hurt me. We learn this is just the way love works. You earn it, and you can lose it. And we, many of us tend to love ourselves that way. And we think that's how God loves us.

We find this expressed in the parable of the prodigal son that we reflected on before. The younger son, he thought that he had lost his father's love because of his grave sin. We can think this too. When we sin, we think, oh, God doesn't want me around. He's mad at me. I become unlovable in his sight. Or there's the attitude of the older son. He thought that he had earned his father's love. All these years I've served you, and not once have I disobeyed your command.

There's the sense there. You should love me more than him. Or you should love me and not him. And we can fall into this too. As we might get a handle on keeping the commandments, practicing some virtue or prayer life, good works, we might think, oh, well, God loves me so much more now, right, that I'm doing all this? And we might tend to look down on others who aren't doing so well. I remember falling into this, especially as I was in formation and thinking, ah, well, now that I'm giving my life to God as a religious and as a priest, he loves me so much more now, right? He's so much more pleased with me.

The Prodigal Father

And I had the sense in prayer one day of God taking me back, like, rewinding my life back to when I was a baby, back to my birth. And as this was happening, I was thinking like, no, I was revolting inside, like, no, that's going to erase all the good things I've done that made me lovable. And what God helped me realize in that prayer was that His love for me when I was a baby, that it had not changed. It wasn't going up each time I did something good. It wasn't going down each time I sinned. At that moment and at this moment, God loves me exactly the same, just as much as He did when I was a baby. And I was in tears realizing that for so long as a Catholic, I had been trying to earn God's love, trying to prove that I was lovable. And what a heavy burden that is if we've been carrying that. It's very freeing to know that God's love truly is unchanging, truly unconditional in the sense that He loves us as much as He can, as much as we are willing to receive, no matter what. And so our life becomes continual Thanksgiving. We abide in His love, we walk in His love, and we do our best to love Him back and not let anything separate us from that love.

The prodigal father, that's how I like to refer to the father of the prodigal son. We said that the word prodigal means to squander, or so to speak, waste. The younger son squandered his inheritance. The father squandered his love on his sons. He loved them both as much as he could, as much as they were willing to receive, no matter what, whether we think they deserve it or not. This is the way God loves you. The way He loves us, the way He calls us to love others. Even to that point of saying, love your enemies. Pray for them, right? Because He has placed them before us to love in that merciful way.

Some other misconceptions we might have about God as Father, a lot of them can come from our experience with our parents, especially our earthly father. If we had one that is passive and checked out emotionally, he's distant, doesn't guide us through life, then we might project that on God, that God is distant, that He's aloof. He doesn't really care, He's not concerned about me. If we had parents that were aggressive or very quick to anger, quick to punish, then we might think that God is like this angry police officer who's just so ready to punish us and throw us in jail. How many Christians grew up hearing, "You do that, God's going to get mad at you. God's going to punish you. God's going to send you to hell." And perhaps never hearing that God loves you so much, He doesn't want you to harm yourself.

We might have had parents that were abusive or maybe someone else abused us and the demons feed us lies in that moment and we project on God that He's cruel, He doesn't care about me. He's not concerned to protect me from harm. There might be permissive parents. They just let the children do whatever they want and they just give them whatever. And we might have this sense of God that He's a pushover, right? That He just wants me to have a good time, just be happy no matter what it is. Oh, the sins or what I do, oh, they're really no big deal to God. This can happen if we grew up without being taught right from wrong.

Then there's parents that are perfectionists, and we can project that on God and think that He's just excessively demanding, I'll never be good enough in His sight, He's never satisfied. All of this, it makes sense. These are natural projections because our parents are the first glimpse that we get of what God might be like. This is why it is so important to know Jesus well so that we can correct those misconceptions of God.

Jesus answers that plea of Saint Philip, "Show us the Father." He says, "Have I been with you so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father." How can you say show us the Father? Do you not believe that the Father is in me and I in Him?" And so we look to Jesus, everything about His life reveals something about the Father. For a long time I thought, well, I know Jesus, but I feel distant from the Father. When in truth, Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father, the perfect reflection of the Father. The way Jesus is, that's exactly how the Father is. The only difference is that the Father generates the Son and that.

The Divine Mercy Image

So how do we know our Father? Well, we can look at the Divine Mercy image. I love Vinny Flynn's book on "7 Secrets of Divine Mercy." He really builds on that idea that Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father. One of those secrets he tells is that, it's not just an image or

picture of Jesus. And we can look at that and think, well, I don't see anyone else there. But when we remember, oh yes, he's the perfect revelation of the Father, then what we see of Jesus there, we can conclude about the Father. Look at the right hand, and you see that it's extended in blessing. It's not cupped back, ready to slap us. It's not in a fist ready to hit us or punish us. It's not holding a pencil or pen ready to write down all our sins. Blessing.

And so we can believe that God, our Heavenly Father, is always blessing, which is a life giving action, the catechism tells us. God's always blessing us even at times through the cross. The left hand of Jesus was instructed for the painter to make it so that the two fingers, the thumb and the forefinger, are drawing open His garment. Some images depict this better than others. This one here, you can see it. He's opening it up. And that's God the Father inviting us into His heart, right? Jesus' sacred heart that was pierced open for us.

We can believe that God the Heavenly Father is inviting us into His heart, that He desires incredible intimacy with us. The left foot is slightly forward. This reveals that God the Father takes the initiative in His relationship with us, and He is waiting for our response, for our response in faith and love. The face, and Jesus said that "My gaze from this image is like my gaze from the Cross."

You can imagine Jesus on the Cross so full of love looking down at His beloved apostle, His beloved disciple, and the women that were there around Him. God the Father, He is looking on us with such great love. Jesus said that the whole frontal presentation should impart peace. Like the peace that He wished when He instituted the sacrament of confession. He appeared in the upper room and said, "Peace be with you." And so we can look at that image and believe that God the Father, how does He see us? He looks at us with so much compassion, understanding, love, tenderness.

The rays coming forth, we can believe God the Father is ready to pour Himself out to us. And He just wishes us that peace that surpasses all understanding, that peace of Jesus and being the beloved Son. How can we continue this kind of meditation? Other aspects of Jesus' life? Well, one thing, he taught us to call God Aba. That's the Aramaic word for Father. And it carries with it both a sense of respect as well as endearment, a sweetness, like my dear father, Aba. And so we reflect on Jesus, His incarnation, the Son of God becoming man. Well, this reveals of the Father that He, too, is, He's reaching out to us. He's ready to stoop down to us, so to speak. Jesus healed those who came to Him. We can believe that God the Father is so concerned for our healing, for our wholeness. He wants to make us whole. Then there's the being moved with mercy.

So many times in the gospel we hear that Jesus was moved with mercy or compassion at the side of the crowds, like sheep without a shepherd. The father of the prodigal son was moved with mercy when he saw him. And it expresses this gut-wrenching pain. Like when you see someone in such great suffering and it hurts to see that, and you want to reach out and help them.

We can believe God the Father, He is moved by our pain, and He wants to do something about it. Reflecting on the tears of our Lord. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He wept over the city Jerusalem. We can believe that my Aba is moved to tears over me. He loves me so much. Jesus on the Cross, ready to die for us. We can believe God the Father, my Aba, He

would die for me. He sees me as worth dying for. Jesus in the Eucharist, Jesus giving Himself to us through the Last Supper, through the Mass, that my Heavenly Father, my Aba desires such great communion with me that He can't wait for that perfect everlasting communion in heaven. He's ready to give us a foretaste of it even now through the Mass, through Holy Communion. When we think about adoration, Jesus remaining with us in the Eucharist. He's there in the tabernacle and we can have Him in the monstrance for adoration. We can believe that my Aba so delights to be near me, to be close to me.

An Offering of Infinite Love

All these beautiful things we can conclude about God the Father as we reflect on Jesus. And one thing that just took my understanding of God's love to a whole new level was realizing Jesus Christ did not have to suffer and die on the Cross to redeem us. I'll say that again.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not have to suffer and die on the Cross to redeem us. That might sound surprising to some of you. That might sound incorrect or just downright wrong because there's a very common misunderstanding among Christians that for our redemption to happen, that someone had to suffer. Someone had to die. And Jesus Christ, He steps in and He does it. But in truth, what was needed for our redemption, for our salvation, what was needed to make up for our sins against an infinitely good God, what was needed was an act or an offering of infinite value, an offering of infinite love, infinite merit to make up for those sins against an infinite God.

Well, Jesus, as God incarnate, any one of His actions as the God man was an act of infinite value. And God the Father in union with His Son from all eternity could have chosen any one of His actions to redeem us. Saint Thomas Aquinas writes in his beautiful Eucharistic hymn, "Blood that but one drop of has the power to win all the world forgiveness of its sin." Yes, one drop would have been enough. But even one drop of blood, strictly speaking, is not absolutely necessary.

So the distinction between what's absolutely necessary, like God would have to do it this way, versus what He has willed from all eternity. Jesus does say, "Was it not necessary that the son of man suffer these things?" Well, it's necessary in that this was their choice from all eternity, and they're not going to change their mind. But it wasn't absolutely necessary that it be that way. So it could have been a giggle as a baby in the crib. It could have been a kiss of Mary and Joseph as His mother and father. It could have been His work in the carpenter shop. Any one of His acts could have done it.

When I realized this, I'm like, well, then, why would He suffer and die on the Cross? Why would they choose that? And the resounding answer from God the Father and God the Son is, "Because we love you that much. Because we truly see you as so worth dying for." It's one thing if we think that He had to suffer and die, that it couldn't have been any other way. And Jesus, yeah, He's such a great guy that he's like, "Okay, I'll do it for you." But that scenario leaves some room for the idea that perhaps his attitude was, "You know, guys, I'd really prefer not to have to suffer so much. I'd really prefer not to have my skin ripped off and nails driven through my hands and feet, but because you all messed it up, and I do love you, okay, I guess I'll do it." But no, that was not His attitude at all. When we realized He didn't have to do it that way, but they chose it that way from all eternity, we realized He wanted to die for

us. That He wouldn't have it any other way. He wouldn't dream of redeeming us any other way because He wants us to see it. He wants us to show, "Yes, I truly love you this much." And perhaps even the sense that, "I would do this again." He would do it again. He makes it present to us in the Mass. It's made present, that eternal sacrifice.

It's like he's saying, "Don't you ever forget how much I love you, and I could still die for you." We should just melt realizing this, that, how could you do that? Because He's God. Because He's God. Because He really is perfect. He really is so good.

A Reflection

So let us believe. Let us have this beautiful image of God the Father revealed by God the Son. How can we purify our view of God besides already the considerations we've said? Well, we can ask God in prayer to reveal the lies that we've believed about Him. You can close your eyes, imagine God the Father before you looking just like Jesus, right? And ask, "Father, what lies have I come to believe about you or about myself or about our relationship?"

I invite you, you can pause the video at this moment and ask God that question. And some lies might be that, yeah, that you had to earn His love or that He doesn't care about you or He's not concerned. For me, the lie was that I have to figure everything out on my own. That God's not going to guide me or I can't hear His voice. And when the lies, we realize them, then we say in the name of Jesus, I renounce the lie that I have to do it all myself. I renounce the lie that I'm unlovable in God's sight. I renounce the lie that He doesn't care. Whatever it is, renounce that. And then we put in the truth. We declare the truth.

We ask, "Heavenly Father, what truths do you want to give me in exchange for those lies?" I invite you to pause the video and ask God that. "What truths do you want to give me in exchange for those lies?" And then we declare those truths. In the name of Jesus, I believe and declare the truth that God's love is truly unchanging. That I don't have to earn it. That He is always inviting me into his heart. I declare the truth that God makes all things work for the good of those who love Him, that He is concerned, that He does will my healing, my wholeness. And how can we see ourselves the way that God sees us? Well, we can ask Him that question too.

Heavenly Father, how do you see me right now? How do you want to love me right now? These are questions we can use over and over at different prayer times. The answer might change. At a given time, God knows what we need to hear most. There's so many things revealed through the life of Jesus and in the scriptures, different things that are true about our relationship with Him. Well, He knows what we need to hear when we need to hear it. For a lot of people when they ask, "How do you see me now?"

A lot of times it's going to be something about being His beloved son or daughter, being His beloved child. When I first asked God that question in prayer, almost immediately I had this image come to mind of a photo of when I was a baby in my baptismal outfit. I was in a white tuxedo. And I had this sense of hearing God say, "My baby." How do you see me right now? "My baby. My precious little one." And I had this sense of kind of seeing God, God the Father holding me in His arms as a baby and just rocking me and singing to me and smiling down at me. And that this was all so healing and it's so beautiful for me.

A Beloved Child of God

I hope that you have a similar encounter with God when you take these questions to prayer. A penance that I like to give people, one of my favorite ones to give, especially if there's been perhaps temptations to suicide or self-harm or any type of self-loathing, I say to take a rosary, and for every beat on that rosary, to proclaim that truth, I am a beloved son of God. I am a beloved son of God. I am a beloved daughter of God. I am a beloved daughter of God. Just over and over to drill it into mind and heart, to drive out all those lies that have been there. To get to the point where we feel it in our very bones and every tissue, every cell of our body. I am the beloved, His beloved child.

So this is my prayer for you. I pray that you'll be able to recognize God as your loving Father, your merciful Father, your perfect heavenly Father. And that you will see yourself as His beloved child and be able to love all those around you with that same love with which God has loved us in Jesus Christ. It's been my joy to share this reflection with you. I'm praying for you. Please pray for me. And I hope you'll join us and join me for another reflection on this Pray More Healing Retreat.