

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jun 20th 2013

St. Ignatius encourages us to use our imaginations – to put ourselves into the scene, to see it from the inside. In this case, I invite you to imagine yourselves not on the mountain with Jesus as he tells his disciples “this is how you are to pray” (in other words, “what you are to ask God for”). Rather, fast-forward three centuries to a North African church at the Easter Vigil. A catechumen has just emerged from the baptismal pool and says aloud, for the first time: “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .”

Nowhere in the ancient Middle East did anyone address God (or their gods) as “Father” – not even the Jews in the Old Testament. While the Hebrews regarded God as the Father of their nation, nowhere is there a prayer addressed to Him personally as Father.

Many of us have gotten into the habit of thinking of Baptism as our entrance rite – which it is – almost like joining the Democratic party, or a college fraternity, or a sports club – which it is not. The newly baptized person has undergone an incredible, irreversible transformation. As St. Paul says, he/she has “died with Christ” (Rom 6:5–8; Col 2:20). Is that just a figure of speech? No! Something – everything – has really changed. The newly baptized now lives by the Spirit of Jesus – can now address God as Father. He/She has been born into a new family, a family whose father is God and whose other members are now his/her brothers and sisters. That’s why it’s our Father not my Father.

What happens in baptism is what’s behind Jesus’ statement, “Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father . . .” (Matt 23:9). Jesus was not so much telling us to disown our parents (which, after all, the fourth commandment tells us to honor). His point was that the new family had, of course, only one Father – God. I now have a kinship relationship with the persons next to me in the pew. They’re my brothers and sisters in this new family – as important to me as my blood brothers and sisters.

What an incredible privilege! If we could only listen and be awestruck by the too familiar words of the Lord’s Prayer as we speak them day after day. It seems too much to get our heads around!

What a life! Are we so familiar with the Lord’s Prayer that we hear it only as a kind of mantra, paying no attention to its words? – words that tell us who we are and what we really need?

What a gift! “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .”

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