

# LIVING THE LORD'S PRAYER

*The Way of the Disciple*



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## God as Father

*Shaping a Healthy Image of God*



*A healthy image of God reflects Jesus' experience of God as Abba. It should exude God's unconditional love for us and call forth selfless acts of sacrificial love for others.*

WE DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHEN it happened to Jesus. As a child? In adolescence? As a young adult? Sometime during his life, an insight began to blossom as a sense of his identity emerged and matured: the best way to speak about the intimate love and unconditional acceptance he experienced from the God of Israel, the transcendent Creator of the universe, was to draw on the familiar language of his own family life. He called this God by the same name he called Joseph, "Abba!"

Abba is a Jewish child's name for a father. It is used when the child is calling for a father's attention. It is also an adult's name for an elderly person who has earned reverence and respect. In both cases, the name suggests immediacy, familiarity, approachability, trust, respect and love.

Jesus was not the first to call God Father. *Father* was used in

both pagan and Jewish prayers. However, calling God Abba was so distinctive of Jesus' spirituality that the apostle Paul would repeat the Aramaic word when writing to Greek-speaking Romans and Galatians (see Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). And what made Jesus' use of it so distinctive was a "nuance of intimacy," suggesting a special understanding and closeness to the God of Israel as a loving sustainer and provider. Unfortunately, the English translation *Father* stumbles and blubbers in carrying the familial depth and emotional weight of the original Aramaic Abba.

By calling God Abba, Jesus was trusting his personal experience of God: a profound experience of divine love and undivided divine attention. Like a new parent contemplating a firstborn, the gaze of the God of Israel was riveted on Jesus and, Jesus insisted, on each one of us: "Even the hairs of your head are all counted" (Luke 12:7).

That experience of God—and Jesus' trust in it—would shape his entire personal spirituality and catapult him into ministry. Luke has an adolescent Jesus refer to the temple in Jerusalem as his "Father's house" (Luke 2:49). Many of Jesus' parables and sayings gave his followers insights into the lavish generosity and forgiveness of his Father (see, for example, Matthew 6:25-34; 21:28-32; Luke 11:5-13; 15:11-32). In fact, those attitudes of Abba became the benchmark for a disciple's life: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Jesus' openness and table fellowship with sinners and the marginalized clearly modeled this image of God: someone not distant and aloof but as close as a father to his children. Indeed, without the experience of God as Abba, it is impossible to understand why and how Jesus did the things he did.

Jesus' childlike intimacy with the God of Israel must have confounded and challenged people like the scribes and Pharisees, sometimes burdened with external obedience to the law.

Jesus turned their approach to spiritual formation inside out: the interior quality of the heart superseded fatted calves and burnt offerings. From Jesus' perspective, divine closeness and intimacy overshadowed the divine majesty and transcendence advocated by the Pharisees.

With an assurance that might have scandalized many pious Jews, Jesus invited his disciples to join him in this intimate relationship with the transcendent One who is "my Father and your Father" (John 20:17). When they asked him for a way to pray, Jesus taught his followers the hallowed prayer that some Christians to this day refer to as the "Our Father."

Later, with fear and trembling in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, Jesus might have agonized over whether or not he had deceived himself in trusting in this intimate experience of God as *Abba*. He prayed Psalm 22, which betrayed his feeling of being abandoned: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (v. 1; Mark 15:34). It also betrayed his hope of vindication: "In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them" (v. 4). In the end, Jesus moved beyond his feelings and surrendered with trust: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

The Easter proclamation is a stunning declaration that Jesus was not disappointed or delusional: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:5).

## OUR IMAGE OF GOD

In a spiritual direction session, Edward shared with me the tragedy of a couple he had known for a long time. The story is so painfully heartbreaking that it seems fabricated; unfortunately, it is not. This couple lost their sixteen-year-old son in a hunting accident. As a result, the mother became a virtual recluse. For many months, she stopped attending both church services and family gatherings.

It took more than two years for the mother to return to her previous routine. Twenty years later, while her husband was hunting, the woman sobbed as she watched firemen trying to save her burning house. That same night she also learned that her husband had died of a heart attack.

Edward told me that he just couldn't understand why this woman had been suddenly visited with a tragedy of such magnitude. He decided that he would have a dialogue with God in his spiritual journal to see if he could make sense of this tragedy.

When he returned for spiritual direction a month later, I followed up on this issue. He told me that it all made perfect sense. "God clearly did not want the woman to become a recluse again and stop going to church. So, when He decided to call her husband home, He had her house destroyed. That way she wouldn't be able to hide from the world."

I challenged Edward on his rational explanation of this devastating tragedy. I told him that didn't sound like the God whom Jesus called Abba. I added that I personally would find it extremely difficult to believe in and trust—much less love—such a cruel, unfeeling God.

That spiritual direction session reminded me once again that our image of God is one of the most, if not *the* most, important aspects of our spiritual formation. Our God-image shapes and colors everything about our personal spirituality, from why we pray to how we understand personal suffering and evil in the world. Edward's explanation speaks volumes about his image of God: cold, aloof and apparently unfriendly.

Unhealthy images of God elicit unhealthy behavior and can be the very reason some of us walk at a snail's pace and drag our feet when it comes to spiritual formation. Frankly, some God-images leave us frightened and cowering in the corner.

I once attended the wake of a woman who had such a God-

image. She died at the age of eighty-nine. Sadly, most of her life had been spent guilt-ridden over a promiscuous past, fearing death and terrified by the thought of facing God. At the wake, one of her friends commented to me, “You know, Irene would have been a different person if only she had had a different God. Unfortunately, the God she believed in carried a big stick and was hard as nails.”

To name God as Father in the Lord’s Prayer is to commit to having a healthy image of God. That is both a challenge and a grace. Such an image brings out the very best in us and helps us discover our truest identity. It coaxes us to be transparent, to lovingly open ourselves to every single moment that calls for self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness. And indeed, that’s the fingerprint of a Christian, “a little Christ,” and an excellent way to define holiness: selfless, sacrificial love for others as an expression and response to God’s love in our lives, to be as close to others as a father to his children. Again, the attitude of Abba becomes the measure and benchmark for the way of the disciple.

## **CHILDISH GODS**

For us to live up to this call to holiness, our image of God must be able to draw out our deepest goodness and help us transcend the boundaries of the ego with its self-centered concerns. What kind of God-images do that?

Certainly, childish images of God as a stern teacher waiting to rap our knuckles with a ruler or a state trooper who sets speed trap after speed trap on the interstate highway of life do not. I encounter such images time and time again. As a Roman Catholic priest, my heart sinks when I meet the excessively scrupulous person who feels the need to go to confession twice a week “so I won’t burn in hell.” As a spiritual director, I raise an eyebrow when the Methodist pastor comes to me and says, “I had the car accident

because God is punishing me for my inattentiveness to my wife and children.” Such God-images leave us self-absorbed and self-centered.

So many of these images come to us from our childhood, our parents and what we heard preached from the pulpit at critical times in our lives. Remember how some were saying in the late eighties that AIDS was God’s punishment on a sinful lifestyle? Or that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were divine judgment on a secularist country that no longer trusted in God?

The late Basil Hume, a Roman Catholic cardinal of England, once told a story about the God-image offered to him in his childhood. His mother wanted to teach him self-discipline, so she called him into the kitchen and said, “Son, I have just finished baking some delicious cookies, and I’ve put them into this cookie jar. I’m going to leave this cookie jar right here on the table. But don’t you dare sneak in here and eat any of them. Remember: God is watching you!”

For years, young Basil Hume lived in fear of the ever-watchful “God of the cookie jar.” Then one day, long after he had become a Benedictine monk and was ordained a priest, it suddenly dawned on him: if he had snuck into the kitchen and put his hand into that cookie jar and secretly eaten one of those cookies, God would have looked down from heaven and said, “Basil, they’re so good! Have another one!”

Cardinal Hume’s story emphasizes a basic fact of spiritual formation sometimes inadvertently overlooked: God is vitally interested and invested in each one of us. God is as close to us as a father to his children. So much so, Jesus says, that Abba clothes us with a splendor greater than Solomon’s and provides us with food and drink (see Luke 12:22-29). He says his Abba will respond with “good things” to those who ask (see Matthew 7:7-11). The depth of this caring interest and concern for us can be described only in

the language of the deepest human experience: “[God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Hume’s “God of the chocolate chip cookie” comes closer to Jesus’ Abba than the cold, frightening “policeman of the cookie jar” some of us imagine God to be.

### ADULT IMAGES OF GOD

We do not let go of our childhood images of God easily. They are rooted deep in our bones. If those early images are oddly distorted or downright unhealthy, our spiritual life in adulthood, if it exists at all, can be adversely affected.

Many people find themselves at the same crossroad as Hume: having to choose between “the policeman of the cookie jar” handed down to them or the “God of the chocolate chip cookie” revealed in their personal experience. This is similar to Jesus being taught about the distant, transcendent Creator of the universe, and yet having a personal experience of God as Abba, as close as a father is to his child. It is so much easier to believe in the God-image that one has been given in the home or classroom. That’s why I have come to respect people who take the great leap of faith and place their trust in the personal revelations of God in their lives. My own experience revealed to me just how much of a gamble this can be.

As a child, I worshiped the ground my father walked on. Of his three sons and two daughters, I always felt I had a special bond with him. When I was thirteen, my father committed suicide. That gunshot wound not only killed my father, it also shattered the image of God I had been given early in life. The all-powerful, ever-present God given to me by my grammar-school education not only appeared powerless before my tragedy but also seemed coldly disinterested and far away.

One day in my mid-twenties, after years of searching for a father’s love, I cried out in prayer to the God of my childhood, to

that all-powerful, ever-present God of my youth. I demanded an explanation, reasons, an answer to the “why?” that continued to gnaw away at my soul.

And the response to my prayer? Silence. Cold indifference. An unconcerned, unsympathetic presence—maybe I should say absence. My childhood God seemed preoccupied with other concerns—or maybe even dead.

But then something happened. Out of the blue I felt myself surrounded by a loving comfort and a protective care I had never before experienced. It felt as if someone was cradling me in tender arms and holding me tight. I felt divine tears of compassion flowing over my heart. Though the pain and memory of my father's death were still very much present, I knew I wasn't alone in my suffering. And indeed, I wasn't. On a Thursday afternoon in 1981, my personal God—the Abba of Albert Haase—revealed selfless, unconditional love and compassion for me.

That experience has radically changed and shaped my personal image of God. I no longer think of God as a cold, aloof Creator who has abandoned me here on earth. I no longer believe God to be an insensitive judge who nonchalantly rules all creation heartlessly. My new God-image has been carved out of my wound and based on an experience of God's love and compassion for me. My image of God is getting closer to the Abba of Jesus—a God of selfless, sacrificial love and consolation who continually surrounds me in the protective air of the divine presence. God nurtures and nourishes me in times of pain and loneliness; God offers me strength and courage when I need them. God is so close to me that my other needs are often anticipated before I myself am aware of them.

And over the past twenty-five years, as I have crisscrossed the country preaching and have lived as a missionary among the Chinese in mainland China, my God-image has been touched up, refined and reformed. Just when I think I have grasped the reality of

God, I am reminded again that my image is just that, an image.

Our images of God change over time and with experience. We outgrow them like we do our clothes and shoes. Over and over again, we learn never to become too comfortable with our images, as if to suggest that we have captured God or figured God out. God-images are like photographs. They lamely capture in one dimension the most superficial aspects of the selfless, loving ground of reality that we know as God.

### ABBA'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

It is crucial that our images of God exude the unconditional love of God that formed the cornerstone of Jesus' experience of God as Abba. Without that, our God-image is way off the mark and downright inaccurate. Or, to put it another way, if it does not convey unconditional love, our God-image is a hollow, plastic statue worthy of a yard sale.

The earliest Gospel tells us that at his baptism, Jesus had a profound experience of Abba's investment in his life, of unconditional love and of being the beloved: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

We, too, by baptismal incorporation into the life and death of Christ, share in Jesus' graced relationship to Abba. We are called and chosen as the beloved, who share in the same unconditional love Jesus experienced at his baptism. Divine adoption makes each one of us a child of God, having the freedom to address God as "Abba! Father!" (see Romans 8:15).

"But I'm a sinner! I don't deserve God's love! And how dare I call God a name steeped in such familiarity and intimacy?" Many of us say this in our own way. And it might be true. But we have already captured Abba's attention. We are indeed loved unconditionally as Abba's beloved.

This is one of the most difficult facts to absorb in spiritual for-

mation. The unconditional love of Abba is so mind-boggling, in fact, that some people try to rationalize away the “unconditional” part. They say that God loves them *as long as* they are good, *as long as* they tithe, *as long as* they obey all the commandments. They believe that divine love is conditional and that they have to live up to certain requirements to be confident of it. “God cannot love me, because I struggle with anger” or “I’ll have to change my ways before God could ever take a serious interest in me” or “How can God possibly love someone like me, who hasn’t been to church in years?”

As the apostle Paul reminded the Romans, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). That demonstrates a startling fact: God loves us not because we are good but because God is good. It is as simple as that.

The American actor John Wayne was married three times and divorced twice. He had seven children. All his wives were Roman Catholics. His children were raised in the Catholic faith. But the “Duke” himself was never baptized.

However, a week before he died on June 11, 1979, while literally on his deathbed, he apparently had a spiritual conversion. He asked to be baptized a Roman Catholic. And he was given a full Catholic funeral.

Some conservative Catholics were shocked and scandalized: “How unfair!” they said. “How could any priest in good conscience baptize such a terrible person?” Others seemed to be envious: “That was one lucky cowboy! He was able to live a sinful life and then have a priest show up forty-eight hours before he died. It’s amazing what money and fame can do.”

John Wayne’s deathbed conversion is a real-life example of God’s lavish and generous love. And that was exactly the point of the parable of the workers in the vineyard (see Matthew 20:1-16). In that parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a land-

owner who at five different times in a single day went out to hire laborers for his vineyard. When the laborers were paid, those hired at five o'clock, and who clearly had worked for only one hour, walked away with the full day's wage. Seeing this, those hired at dawn presumed they would get more money. They grumbled when they received exactly what had been agreed on as a daily wage. The landowner replied to their complaints, "Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:14-15).

Jesus' listeners would have known a version of this parable found in the rabbinical tradition. However, in that version, the workers hired last got a full day's wage *precisely because* they had worked extraordinarily hard.

Jesus' version, found only in the Gospel of Matthew, doesn't mention that crucial detail. The reason is obvious: Jesus' version is about the lavish generosity of God's unconditional love. That's why some scholars have suggested that the parable be titled "the good employer" or "the affirmative action employer."

Unlike our human love, the love of God is not fickle and conditional, based on expectations and hidden agendas. God's love is not some return for our hard work. Nor is it payment for services rendered, such as acts of charity. Rather, it is literally like the air we breathe in and exhale. God's love "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Indeed, its lavish generosity is celebrated in John Wayne's deathbed conversion and in Paul's passionate reminder to the Romans:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

We, like Jesus, are first and foremost the beloved. Awareness of such extravagant unconditional love calls forth from us selfless acts of sacrificial love for others.

### LOVE MADE FLESH

Anselm of Canterbury wrote *Cur Deus Homo?* ("Why Did God Become Man?") in the eleventh century. It had a monumental effect on Christian theology. In this work, Anselm posited a rational necessity for Christ's incarnation. He began by stating that human sin wounded God's honor. Because God is infinite, the wound to God's honor was infinite. Divine justice demanded satisfaction, yet humanity's dilemma was that, being finite, it was incapable of providing the required satisfaction for the infinite wound. Consequently, only God could pay any act of satisfaction. Yet, as a penalty for humanity, it had to be paid under the form of human flesh. Anselm then reasoned that satisfaction was possible only through the sinless God-man. Because the God-man was exempt from the punishment of sin, Christ's passion and death were voluntary. The merit of the act was therefore infinite, God's justice was thus appeased, and divine mercy was able to extend to humanity.

Anselm's theory has shaped so much of Roman Catholic and evangelical theology. The image of God embedded in such a logical argument is a God who insists on justice and satisfaction and yet, at the same time, is willing to provide the very means to have both justice and satisfaction rendered. Anselm's God seems better suited for the courtroom than for the heart of a disciple. More strikingly, God's greatest gift to the universe, the Son, is only occasioned by the sinfulness of humanity.

Two centuries after Anselm, the great Franciscan theologian of the thirteenth century, John Duns Scotus, offered a radically different understanding of Christmas that has framed Franciscan spirituality down through the ages. Scotus believed that the incarnation was not a divine after-thought, occasioned by human sin. Rather, from the very beginning of creation, when the Spirit of the living God breathed over the abyss and drew forth light, Jesus as the light of the world was already in the mind of God. “God’s Masterpiece,” as Scotus called the incarnate Person of the Son, was always intended, even before the historical creation of the universe and the reality of human sinfulness. Without Christ, creation would be incomplete. Indeed, according to Scotus, Christ is the beginning, middle and end of all creation. This is technically known as the “Doctrine of the Absolute Primacy of Christ in the Universe” and demonstrates that God-made-flesh is first and foremost a demonstration of self-effusive divine love. Because human sinfulness did in fact become a reality, the incarnation took place in the mode of a suffering, crucified and glorified Christ who overcame, as one scholar puts it, “the humanly constructed obstacles to achieving God’s first aim: the sharing of divine life and love with creation.”

The Franciscan image of God is a fountain-fullness of selfless love, of a divine love whose very nature is to move beyond and outward. Clearly, divine love comes before divine justice. That love is experienced in daily life and calls forth the same selfless, sacrificial love from the heart of every disciple. Again, the attitude and actions of the Father become the disciple’s measure and standard of living.

## SEEN WITH THE EYES OF GOD

When twenty-seven-year-old Joseph first sought me out for counseling, he was very depressed. He was drinking too much and

pushing his luck at the casino. His self-esteem had clearly hit rock bottom. We met only twice. He never showed up for his third appointment.

Then, a year later, I happened to run into Joseph in a shopping mall. I was surprised. The Joseph I had worried about and so often prayed for seemed no longer to exist. Here was a new Joseph: confident, at peace with himself and with a wonderful sparkle in his eyes. The more we talked, the more my curiosity got the best of me.

“Joseph, what’s happened to you? You seem different.” I really wanted to say “changed.”

He coaxed me with a bag of popcorn to sit down on a bench in front of a department store. And with the reverence of a newly ordained minister proclaiming the Scriptures, Joseph began telling me about Mary Jo.

“I guess she just took a shine to me at first. It really wasn’t mutual. And it certainly wasn’t love at first sight. But we talked on the phone, did some dating and, somewhere along the line, she blurted out, ‘I think I’m in love with you, Joseph.’

“To be honest, Father, that’s when I first really noticed Mary Jo. And a funny thing started happening after she said that. It was like a heavy weight was suddenly taken off my shoulders, like someone freed me from prison. I stopped fighting against life and came out of my depression. I started going back to church. Her love not only challenged me to accept myself but, as a result of it, I gradually became the person I guess I’m meant to be. I went for professional counseling and that opened up the whole new world of feelings and emotions for me. And the next thing I knew, I was in love!”

A few minutes later, with tears in his eyes, Joseph added a profound statement that initially passed me by. “When I now think about that first time Mary Jo told me she loved me, I can’t help but think that she was seeing me with the eyes of God.”

And indeed, she was. Joseph's experience of Mary Jo's love—anyone's experience of human love—is not somehow “like” the experience of God's love. It is the love of God, though always incomplete and at times even distorted. Loving hearts are the opened floodgates of God's love. Whenever a person says to us, “I love you,” we catch a glimmer of how God looks on us.

A number of years ago, while visiting the United Kingdom, I heard an Anglican priest preach a beautiful insight in her Christmas sermon. She mentioned that the story of the incarnation betrays the divine disposition toward us and reveals the divine dynamic that continues to go on in this life: Abba's unconditional, selfless love for each one of us takes on flesh and blood in our spouses, our families and our friends. That awareness gets us walking the way of the disciple with selfless, sacrificial love for others.

## THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD

The ancient Hebrews did not balk at using feminine imagery to speak of God. Their term for a woman's womb was often used to describe divine compassion. Furthermore, the prophet Isaiah compared God's selfless, sacrificial love for us to that of a mother's for the child of her womb (see Isaiah 49:15). He also stated that God comforts us as a mother comforts her child (see Isaiah 66:13).

In spite of the patriarchal society in which he was reared, Jesus had an appreciation for his ancestors' sensitivity to the feminine dimension of God. He compared the forgiveness of God to a woman who woke up late at night and swept her house in search of her lost coin (see Luke 15:8-10). Speaking of divine providence, Jesus said God feeds the birds and helps the wildflowers to grow (see Matthew 6:26, 28-30; Luke 12:22-31), two traditional tasks of women in Jewish, Greek and Roman society. He compared God's

reign over us to the yeast kneaded into dough by women (see Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20-21).

Like Isaiah and Jesus, many Christians have continued to use feminine imagery to speak of God. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria described the eternal Word of God as both a father and a mother. In the fourteenth century, the English mystic Julian of Norwich wrote at length about God's maternal love and fertile creativity, about God being our "natural Father" and our

*All the perfections of  
created things are also in  
God; and therefore  
He is at once Father and  
Mother. As Father He  
stands in solitary might  
surrounded by darkness.  
As Mother His shining is  
diffused, embracing all  
His creatures with  
merciful tenderness  
and light.*

THOMAS MERTON

"natural Mother." Pope John Paul I, in his noontime Angelus address of September 10, 1978, said, "God is our Father. Even more, God is our Mother."

In fact, neither the image of God as father nor the image of God as mother says everything there is to say about the nature of God. Each actually focuses our attention on just one divine trait and, as a result, can distort the divine nature. Like the seven blind men who each touched a different part of the elephant's body and then thought their particular description of the animal was accurate, we think our images for God describe the reality of the Divine. But they don't. In fact, when we think we have discovered the perfect image for God, we have

discovered only a carnival mask that hides more than it reveals.

The Abba of Jesus transcends all human gender characteristics, categories and distinctions. And yet, only an image of God that absorbs and incorporates what we traditionally refer to as masculine *and* feminine characteristics can approximate the God whom Jesus experienced. The Abba of Jesus is strong, yet

tender; loving and compassionate; indulgent, yet protective—the very best of the masculine and the very best of the feminine. God is selfless, sacrificial love, who incarnates that unconditional love in human flesh.

### THE CONVERSION OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Our knowledge of the young Francis of Assisi is unfortunately colored by the pen of an author writing the story of a newly canonized saint. Literary convention and medieval writing techniques play critical roles. Nevertheless, scholars are still able to get a sense of the external events of his conversion. And perhaps not surprisingly, Francis's emerging image of God was an important factor in it.

For twenty-five years, the young Francis squandered both time and money. He outdid his friends in vanity, vainglory, popularity and fine clothes. Francis focused his creative energies on making a name for himself. His proud, extravagant father must have been pleased to see his son living according to the values he was given.

A member of the rising merchant class by birth, Francis wanted the prestige of the nobility. Though his common blood would deny him the fulfillment of that desire, he could attain it superficially by becoming a knight. And so he did. However, in the battle with the rival town of Perugia, Francis was taken prisoner and spent a year in jail.

Upon his release, he returned home. He was depressed, restless and searching. The story goes that he spent an inordinate amount of time alone, struggling to find meaning in life.

An encounter with lepers, the most marginalized and feared of all the societal outcasts of his day, softened his heart and challenged the value system given to him by his father. In a dramatic scene, Francis stood before the bishop of Assisi and renounced the

clothing, possessions and inheritance given him by his father. A short, telling speech placed in the mouth of the saint speaks to the fact that he was surrendering himself to an emerging image of God:

From now on I will say freely: "Our Father who art in heaven," and not "My father, Pietro di Bernardone." Look, not only do I return his money; I give him back all my clothes. I will go to the Lord naked.

We do not know what image of God Francis possessed before his conversion. If he had one at all, it probably did not elicit any great emotional response from him. What did elicit a response, though, was his father's lesson that happiness was found in experiencing and hoarding the pleasures and treasures of the world. The young Francis had believed that.

However, at twenty-five, Francis's own experience began to betray the lie of his father's selfish values. So Francis began to renounce those values. In doing so, he began to open himself to an experience of God as the divine Almsgiver who provided for all his needs, both physical and emotional. Like Jesus' and many of our own, Francis's image of God was carved from his own personal experience.

## THE POWER OF AN IMAGE

Sunday after Sunday we go to church. And there we find as many different images of God as there are people in the congregation. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, each of us has painted an image of God on our heart. That image is framed by the experiences of our past and shaped by our present situation.

If our God-image is healthy and rooted in Jesus' teaching of an unconditionally loving God being as close to us as a father to his child, it can change and transform us. That's what happened in

the life of Francis of Assisi. A healthy God-image will call forth selfless, sacrificial love for others and thus lead us to our truest identity as little Christs.

And so, as different as our personal God-images are, nevertheless, we stand united as the beloved as we pray and live the words “Our Father . . .”

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How has my image of God changed over the years? What experiences have challenged and shaped it?
2. How does my present image of God elicit selfless, sacrificial love for others?
3. What experiences in my life have reminded me that I am the beloved of God?
4. What role do I believe God plays in my personal suffering and the tragedies witnessed in the world?
5. What experiences in my life suggest the masculine dimension of God? The feminine dimension of God? The fact that God transcends all human gender characteristics?

*Gospel Passages for Meditation and Prayer:* Matthew 6:26-34; Luke 15:8-10