

CHAPTER 3

Praying "Our Father" and Formation in Love

Roberta C. Bondi

My dear friend,

I was so glad to receive your letter, though I am sorry that the occasion of your letter is the anguish you feel at the dispute going on in your congregation over the use of the Lord's Prayer. As you describe the difficulties, one group of people object to praying it because they believe that both in its use of "father language" for God and in its language of kingdom and kingship it is supporting the rightness of patriarchal forms of dominance and authority. Being aware of the way all of us are shaped unconsciously by the language we use, they are concerned about the long-term psychological and social effects of what seem to them to be the necessarily oppressive images carried in the words of this prayer.

The second group in your church is outraged by the first group's objections. We all have to pray this prayer, they say, whether we want to or not because Jesus commands us to pray it. God does not care how we feel about it. Our job as Christians is "to be obedient" and faithful to the tradition, not to get entangled in soul-searching and the sort of psychological concerns that they believe are destroying the church and the rest of modern society with it.

I'm sorry you are so confused and exhausted by the acrimony of the whole debate that you can hardly bear it, and I'm also sorry that

you can't just walk away from all this as though none of it matters. Since you don't find that to be an option, you asked me in your letter, first, how I would reply theologically and from the tradition to the objections of the warring groups in your church. Then, almost as an aside, you requested that I tell you in a paragraph or two how I personally understand the opening phrase of this prayer that is causing so much trouble in your church.

My friend, as you know, the troubles in your congregation are hardly specific to you alone; these vital issues concerning the nature of God, power, and community are being debated in all sorts of places. I am glad to try to think through your questions as best I can therefore, because they are important for all of us. The Lord's Prayer has been infinitely significant in the lives of Christians like us over the centuries, and I could hardly bear to see us give it up. In the period of the early church, the Lord's Prayer was considered to be so precious that nobody was even allowed to learn it until the very end of the three-year training period before they were baptized. For Cyprian's North African community of the third century it was the prayer that prepared them, both individually and collectively, for martyrdom. Even after the period of martyrdom was over, the Lord's Prayer continued to serve to train Christians for love in their distinctive manner of life.

But let me stop lecturing on the importance of the prayer in the early church and turn to your questions. Before I begin, however, I need to say something about the manner in which I find I must answer your first question. You have asked me how I would respond "theologically and from the tradition" to the questions that have come up in your congregation. The very way you have worded your request suggests to me that you believe that the best way to solve your congregation's problems is to come up with the kind of "real theological answer" that you and I learned to produce in seminary; one, that is, which is rational and objective, and certainly free of the emotion and particularity that characterize the debate in your church.

I agree that your congregation—and we too—certainly need theological reflection on these issues. I disagree, however, with your assumption that all serious theological thinking, all real theology, must have this abstract character. In fact, having spent the last thirty years studying and teaching the practice-oriented theological tradition of early monasticism, having thought frequently during those same years about the implications of the way in which John Wesley

reflected theologically, and having enjoyed the more recent benefits of feminist theology, I have come to believe that the kind of theological thinking we need to reclaim now is reflection that in the most practical and concrete way furthers the goal of the Christian life. As Jesus declares it in the gospel, and as John Wesley also describes it, this goal is "nothing higher and nothing lower than this: the pure love of God and [humankind]—the loving God with all our heart and soul and our neighbor as ourselves."¹

As I have learned so well from the fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-century traditions of the desert Fathers and Mothers, from John Wesley, and from my feminist sisters, theology that furthers the communal and personal Christian work, that produces love, can never be primarily abstract. It is not abstraction after all that moves the heart, that draws us to become in God what we are called to be, or gives us the tools that help us fulfill our calling. It is rather the kind of theological reflection that is a form of prayer, one in which, in the presence of God, we bring the whole of who we are and what we have actually experienced—emotionally, bodily, rationally—into truthful conversation with Scripture and the tradition. There is no more serious, no more real, and paradoxically no more traditional theology than this. But let me get on with answering your questions, and I hope you will be able to see what I mean.

To begin with, the women and men who are objecting to the use of the Lord's Prayer are clearly right when they point out that both the language and content of the prayer are making political statements about power, authority, and social order that are intended to shape social relationships as well as our relationship with God at a very deep level. If we look at the rest of what Jesus says in the Gospels, it seems clear that this is just what Jesus intended.

They are also undeniably correct in their claims that the church over the centuries has used male (and particularly father) language for God, coupled with language about God's ruling authority, to dominate and oppress women (and men and children, too) in the name of God. Those who object to such oppression are doing exactly what they ought to be doing in bringing their own insight and personal experience of it up against what they believe the prayer is teaching, and challenging the prayer itself.

I differ with these folks, however, at the point where they give up on the prayer and refuse to fight for it. For reasons I don't fully understand they are willing to accept a status quo reading of Jesus

rather than trusting that, because God intends our life and not our death, Jesus could not possibly have intended to make the political statement they think Jesus is making. As a result, they neither allow this prayer to challenge what is most oppressive in the church and larger culture, nor do they make use of it to begin to heal all the oppressed and suffering parts of themselves as individuals.

Of course they are right that the prayer uses kingdom language to talk about God's governance of the world, but it seems to me to be of enormous significance that, in his very use of it, Jesus subverts every ordinary notion of kings and kingship we might have. This subversive practice is not limited to the idea of rulership and rulers. Did I ever warn you never to invite Jesus to come to your church to speak on family values? The teenagers will love him, but the parents will be desperate. Whatever else we can say about Jesus, one thing was certain: Both in his understanding of the way God governs the world and in his vision of the way human beings are to relate to each other in God's presence, Jesus was radical in a way the most radical of us can never hope to be.

Jesus never told women, or men either, much less poor or oppressed people, to knuckle under and accept the status quo as God's powerful "will" for them, nor does Jesus describe God as an ordinary benevolently just ruler. On the contrary, he teaches that the folk that will have the highest place in a society of God's ordering are not the rich and successful, or even the good and the religious—they are the poor, the widows and orphans, the not-so-religious, and those who are social outcasts because of the unsavoriness of their jobs. Telling his listeners in the Gospels to abandon the idea that the world as they know it has a cosmic rightness to it, he challenges them (us) to take the risks necessary to live in this oppression-free, upside-down world right now.

As I read it, Jesus' teaching about God's fatherhood is just as subversive. I challenge anybody to find a place where Jesus uses God's fatherhood to shore up human male authority, including the authority of our own fathers. Indeed he teaches the very opposite. "Call no one father save God alone,"² as I read it, says exactly the sort of things as parables like the workers in the vineyard, the good Samaritan, and even the Beatitudes: What we hold as most sacred and inviolable often has nothing to do with God's desired order. Knowing of God's extravagant generosity, do we actually think that God likes the idea that no one should get paid more than they strict-

ly earned? Are we truly convinced, metaphorically speaking, that God regards Samaritans as unclean; that is, that God supports us in our racial, class, gender, religious, and national prejudices? In the same way, do we really believe that the God who sent us Jesus to free us from all that binds us and makes us unable to love, really desires that any of us should knuckle under and accept as "the will of God" anything that breaks our spirits, or fills us with resentment, or makes us experience ourselves as being of less worth than others, whether in the family, the churches, or our own society? Whatever God's fatherhood—and motherhood, creatorship, friendship, and servanthood in Jesus—are about, it is certainly not about this.

For an understanding of how God actually does act as father toward us, no passage in Scripture gives me quite so much help as an exchange recounted in the Gospel of John that Jesus had with Philip.³ The conversation between them actually occurs in the context of a larger speech in which Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his death. Jesus begins by telling them that he is going to his Father's house in order to get a place ready for them. The disciples don't want to buy this for a minute. They are confused and frightened, and Thomas complains at once, "But we don't even know how to get to this house!"

Philip's questions pick up where Thomas lets off. "Who are you talking about?" he asks. "Just show us this father and we will be quiet."

"Look," says Jesus in answer (paraphrased a bit), "look, dummy; after all this time do you still not know that if you've seen me, you have seen the Father already?"

As I read this passage, Jesus is telling us too that if we have seen Jesus, then we have certainly seen Jesus' own understanding of the Father in how Jesus himself is and acts with the people around him. It means something, for example, that he spends significant time with his female friends Mary and Martha, not so much being waited on as in the exercise of real and mutual friendship. As far as I can tell, Jesus is never authoritarian, disrespectful, or bullying of these women, and he never tells them, as a large portion of the rest of their own society would have, to be quiet, tend to their chores, and do what their brother Lazarus wishes of them.

Of course, my friend, none of this touches your first group of people's objections that however radical Jesus' own notion of God's fatherhood, in our modern culture—both in individual experience

and in the context of our larger structures, including church structures—father language has indeed formed us and continues to form us in oppressive ways. So what are we going to do with it? Ought we to abandon it entirely?

I think not. After all, we all have or have had fathers, and many of us are fathers or will grow up to be fathers. Why should we accept that formation in these destructive images of fatherhood is inevitable? What are we doing to ourselves and our own family relationships, not to mention to our little boys and their future partners, when we suggest that maleness itself is somehow or another normatively suspect?

I am convinced that what we need to do is to articulate every day, verbally and explicitly as well as by modeling with our behavior, the radical notion of God's fatherhood (and by implication, radical human fatherhood) that Jesus teaches. Will it do any good? Let me tell you what happened one time at our house when Benjamin was sixteen.

Our congregation was suffering at that time under—and it really felt *under*—the dangerous new leadership of a recent seminary graduate who once explained his understanding of his own role among us by using the analogy of a general in an army of privates. Richard and I were discussing the consequences of all this with anger and anguish at the family dinner table one night, as we had done frequently lately, while Benjamin sat there looking at his plate in bored, "not this again," teenaged silence.

Though our conversation went over the same old ground we'd been plowing for two months, that evening Richard had some stories of new high-handed acts which this time evidently caught and outraged even Benjamin's ear and moral sense. Benjamin began to fidget, rocking in his chair, and mashing down his peas with the back of his fork. "Mama," he blurted out at last, interrupting Richard in mid-sentence. "What's wrong with that man? Hasn't he learned that that isn't the way a minister is supposed to act? Everybody knows that God wants the minister to relate to the people in the congregation the same way the three members of the Trinity relate to each other."

Both of us looked at Benjamin with astonishment. Our son had just clearly demonstrated a sound knowledge of trinitarian theology we had no idea he possessed. By osmosis he had learned at church and at home that the members of the Trinity are, as we say, co-equal with each other, none above the others in power or authority. He

knew, too, why it was important in this context: The relationships of equality within the Trinity are to be our model both for human relationships within the body of Christ in general, and for leadership in particular.

But does this mean that I think everyone at church ought to address God as father whether they want to or not? I absolutely do not. I believe we need to give people (and ourselves) plenty of room to talk about and wrestle with father language and father issues, and to accept that many people's experiences are such that it has become impossible for them ever to relate to God as father in a way that does not harm them. I have a friend my own age who is an incest survivor; I can't imagine that he ever will be able to pray to God as father, or mother either for that matter, and I feel quite certain that this is more than fine with God. There are plenty of ways to relate to God, and many names, I should hope, that we are already using in worship in addition to the name "Father" that my friend and people like him can draw on for prayer.

Having told you how I would answer the objections of the first of the two warring groups of people in your congregation, I need to turn now to the issues of those on the other side. These are the folks who hate what they call the "psychological approach" to such questions around prayer as the ones we've been discussing, and insist instead on praying the Lord's Prayer because "God said it; I believe it; that settles it!"

My friend, we might as well concede to them from the beginning the fact that Jesus gave his followers the Lord's Prayer with the expectation that they pray it. Presumably, Jesus didn't teach his disciples the prayer just because he liked to hear himself talk. On the other hand, it is extremely important to notice that Jesus gave them this prayer not as a command—"Pray this way, or else"—but (if we can trust the Gospel of Luke) as a gift,⁴ as the answer to a request the disciples thought up themselves, namely, that he teach them how to pray.

As I just said with respect to God's fatherhood, we must notice here that while Jesus frequently describes and challenges us in what we are called to in our life in God, he is not at all in the habit either of laying down the law for those who would follow him or telling people to do what he says without thinking or questioning it. Indeed, it would be easy to argue on the contrary, that Jesus uses parables in the way he does precisely in order to get his listeners to ask questions

in order to help them to think deeply about God, their neighbors, and themselves in new ways.

Now to try to answer the second group's further objections to what they rather sneeringly call the "psychological approach" to Christianity. They use this pejorative label for the attempt to take seriously and discuss our own experience with other Christians, especially where it seems to contradict the tradition, and to wrestle with the way the norms and expectations of the larger culture shape us interiorly, thereby keeping us from being the loving people God calls us to be.

Let there be no mistake: If this is what they mean by "the psychological approach," I am in favor of it. In fact let me state again clearly that, along with many other very "traditional" Christians from the time of the early church onward, I believe that the goal and the point to the Christian life Jesus summons us to is nothing more or less than the love of God, which we are to exercise with all our hearts, strength, minds, and souls, and the love of our neighbor as ourselves. To put it in other terms, I think (and needless to say, John Wesley also thought) what Jesus is asking for from us is a total transformation into the love of God and neighbor of our entire persons, interior and exterior; public and private; social and personal; hearts, minds, strength, and souls.

But Jesus did not just command us to love in this radical way and then expect us to be able to grit our teeth and do it all at once by an exercise of massive, blind obedience that bypasses interior reflection and work. In fact, just the opposite. The workers in the vineyard, the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, and the unforgiving servant, for example, all seem to me to have been intended to help his listeners radically open their hearts to a deep examination of their internal and external family experiences, perceptions, motives, desires, and values, as well as of the religious, social, and personal expectations which govern them. In this way, Jesus pushes his listeners—and us, too—longer and harder than the most aggressive and probing modern therapist.

As for the charge that such a "psychological approach" is not traditional, I want to point out that not only did John Wesley, the founder of the church to which your objectors belong, regard it as essential. The great and wonderful ancient teachers of the early church, from the fourth through the sixth centuries on which I work, did as well.

Did I ever tell you this story from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*?⁵ Once there was a foreign anchorite who made a long and tiring trip to the Egyptian desert to look for the great Abba Poemen to listen to his wisdom and learn from him. The visitor was so happy when he finally found Poemen that as soon as the visitor went through the door of Poemen's house he began to speak, as the text says, "of the Scriptures, of spiritual and heavenly things."

Poemen, however, who was normally a friendly man, unexpectedly refused to hold up his end of the conversation or otherwise answer him. The poor bruised visitor finally left to look for the brother who had originally introduced him to Poemen to see if the brother could tell him why Poemen wouldn't talk to him.

When this brother went and asked Poemen directly why he had ignored the famous holy man from so far away, Poemen's reply was unequivocal: "He is great and speaks of heavenly things, and I am lowly and speak of earthly things. If he had spoken of the passions of the soul, I should have replied, but he speaks to me of spiritual things and I know nothing about that."

Upon receiving this report, the visitor understood his mistake. For Abba Poemen, lofty spiritual talk about the demands of God, and even about Scripture is only a distraction from the real business of the Christian life, which is the transformation and healing of whatever it is that destroys our ability to love God and neighbor with all our hearts, souls, strength, and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. These are what the ancient teachers and theologians called the passions:⁶ Exactly those deep, long-term attitudes of heart, mind, feeling, and perception—like anger, unforgiveness, ingratitude, inattentiveness, envy, judgmentalism, self-righteousness, and greed—that Jesus addresses in the Gospels.

Having learned this lesson, the visitor went back to Poemen and tried again, saying, "What should I do, Abba, for the passions of the soul master me?" This time the abba received him happily and talked to him about the actual stuff of their lives, which I imagine included such topics as the specific, long-term ways they were each combating their perfectionism, their impatience, their consumerism, their judgmentalism, their smoldering angers, and their need to have others like them.

This tradition that stresses the importance of such introspective work is one that I find entirely useful in our own times, usually more useful in fact than the kind of doctrinal discussions that simply end

in pronouncements. However much we might like to tell ourselves otherwise, there just isn't any way we can love each other or God as God really is if we can't even see God or our actual neighbors because of our various combinations of misperceptions, self-deceptions, and psychological and spiritual injuries to the image of God in us.

As for the place of this work in our common worship, it is my experience that worship not only depends upon us individually doing the interior work and seeking the healing we need to be able to hear what God asks of us and respond to it, but real worship itself forms us into who we are individually and as the people of God. This formation, whether we are aware of it or not, takes place as we are attentive to Scripture, as we hear and preach sermons, as we participate in intercessory prayers in addition to the Lord's Prayer, and as we share together in the Lord's Supper.

But, my friend, you did not only ask me to help you think about and respond to the issues of the folks in your church, you also wanted me to tell you a little about why and how I pray this part of the Lord's Prayer myself.

As for the why, I pray the whole of the prayer, first, as a basic and deliberate part of my own ongoing formation as a Christian in the ways of love. I need it; it is one of the major places I can bring for healing both my short-term convictions, feelings, confusions, prejudices, and actions, and my whole long-term autobiographical self, including personal and cultural memories of my childhood and adult experiences and expectations that have formed me and fight in me still against the patterns of love.

At the same time, in the context of this daily self-examination, I also need this prayer as a guide and corrective to my intercessory prayer. I need it to help me remember who to pray for, and I need it for something else besides. I don't know about you, but I somehow learned in my growing-up years that I must set aside my own "selfish" needs and desires in order to pray for other people. As a result, I have to keep learning over and over that there is a fundamental connection between how much actual compassion and empathy I can feel for the needs of others and my ability to accept that what I need is valid, too. What does it say that I really think about other people's needs if I consider it somehow morally superior for me to "rise above" my own needs? I must pray this prayer, therefore, for myself, not only to teach me what to pray for the people with whom I share

my life and my world, but to train me in an ever-growing vulnerability and empathy for them as well.

As for the mechanics of how I pray this prayer, it is probably obvious to you by now that when I am praying alone I don't go straight through it as we recite it in church. Instead I use it as a guide for my prayer. I begin by speaking the words of the first phrase. Then I meditate briefly, or at length if I need to, on what I believe that part of the prayer is guiding me toward. Finally, I rephrase in a short sentence or two what I am asking God for on that particular day. Needless to say, what I ask for varies considerably, depending upon what is going on in both my interior and my exterior life.

But let me stop explaining and simply show you what I mean, by going through the first words of the Lord's Prayer for you as I have sometimes prayed it in the past and as I actually pray it each day now.

I begin each morning with the phrase that as often as not is now the most important part of my prayer: "our Father in heaven." You will probably not be surprised to know that for many years the word in this phrase that I responded to the fastest was *Father*, and my response was one of pain and anger.⁷

Part of my difficulty lay, as it does for the people in your congregation, with my inability to escape the way God's fatherhood had been used to support a status quo in the church and in the culture that hurts women and had hurt me. In addition, I had grown up in the 1940s and 1950s with a loving but authoritarian, perfectionistic father who left the family when I was eleven. Like many other people, having transferred to God the Father all the pain I felt around my human father, I simply couldn't get past the father language of the prayer to reach God.

Though I was aware of all this at the time, I was hurting so much and so mistrustful of God that I simply couldn't face trying to work through these issues in my prayer. During this period I found when I prayed that it helped me, like so many other people I recommend this to, to substitute a name like "mother" or "friend" that would allow me to approach God rather than turn me away.

A long time passed after that in which through my everyday prayer I actually began to learn something firsthand about the trustworthiness of the God I couldn't address as "Father." Then several things happened that allowed me to become desperate enough as well as brave and trusting enough to do the work of prayer I needed

to do around the issue of calling God "father." I pored over Scripture for help, and, in God's presence I began to be able to understand in my own heart what I told you a few pages above about the radical implications of Jesus' words when he said to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." As I continued to bring my own past and present experience into painful, direct conversation with God through the help of this and other passages of Scripture, I found myself increasingly freed from my secret belief that the way my father had been with me as a child was somehow a normative description not just of God, but of the power men have a right to exercise over women in the world.

But remember, I said that I pray the Lord's Prayer for formation in love. Let me give you an example with respect to the whole question of God's fatherhood. Once having stopped confusing my father with God, I was able to forgive my father for his failures toward me and let my father simply be who he was—not God, but simply an ordinary human being with ordinary weaknesses. It was allowing my father to be no more than human, as much as anything else, that made it possible for me to be his fully adult child. Then, at last, I could be reconciled with him and learn to love him, enjoy him for the actual man he was, and care for him in a way appropriate to him.

These days, when those old scars around questions of male authority itch and I begin to feel internally trapped by the sexism all of us still encounter, I nearly always get help at once by praying "our Father who art in heaven," followed immediately by, "God, I know your fatherhood is not underwriting and supporting this stuff that hurts me; rather, your fatherhood calls me into life and fills me with energy. Help me repudiate the hold these things have on me."

My wounds associated with God's fatherhood are fairly well healed for the most part now, and so I don't often find myself needing to pray this way for myself, though I still must pray for other people—and the church—who are struggling with their own injuries around fallen notions of God's fatherhood.

Oddly, now the part of the phrase "our Father in heaven" that daily grips me instead is the seemingly much less difficult word, "our." "Our" is a tough word for me in prayer and I'm working hard at it.

"Oh, no," my friend, I can hear you saying to yourself, "are you losing your mind? In the light of all the difficulties around praying to

God the father, what on earth could make praying the perfectly ordinary word 'our' an issue for you?"

Well, I'll start by reminding you of what we acknowledge all the time, which is that twentieth-century Protestant Americans are almost fatally individualistic in every area of our lives, and this includes our religion. Christian or not, I am still a product of my own culture, and so I continue to fall into the trap of thinking of *my* spirituality and *my* prayer as a private matter involving nobody but me and God.

As if this were not enough to fight against as I try to learn to love, like everybody else, I also have to deal with my own temperament and the way I have been formed by the things that happened to me both as a child and as an adult which have made me who I am.

I've already mentioned that I grew up with a difficult father. One of the things that was difficult about him was that he wanted me to be "the best" at everything, and so he did what he could to make sure I thought of myself as both superior to and different from the other perfectly nice, smart children with whom I went to school. Nothing would make him madder, for example, than my request for a particular item of clothing that "everybody else" wore, or for a toy everybody else played with, unless it was my use of the slang they spoke in.

Predictably enough, his plan to make me superior and independent backfired. Being a very shy child who was excruciatingly aware of my faults, I found it impossible to think of myself as superior to anybody. At the same time, because I couldn't find a way to fit in with the other children, they really didn't like me. I suppose it was inevitable that I should have experienced myself as being not only different, but as an actual outcast from childhood society.

The Baptist religion of the Kentucky relatives I visited in the summer didn't make things easier for me. My assumption that God the Father was like my human father, coupled with what I thought of as my criminal inability to "believe God loved me and to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior," told me that I was as much an outcast in God's kingdom as I was in the world of school.

Now you can begin to see, I hope, why when I prayed the first words of the Lord's Prayer as a child, what I said was "*our* Father who art in heaven," but what I meant was "*their* Father who art in heaven," the father of the good, deserving children who belong in the society of other children or adults in a way I never found I could.

Even in my early adult years I couldn't escape this sense of isolation and abandonment. You know already how much guilt and hopelessness I suffered as a woman violating the status quo by going to graduate school and taking up teaching back in the 1960s and 1970s. It probably won't surprise you to hear that during the whole of that time I continued to experience God as I had as a child, not as "my father" who supported my socially unacceptable desires and ambitions, but rather as the father of those whom the culture considered "good."

My adult life wasn't all hard, of course, and I made some progress against my sense of being an outcast in a world I hadn't been able to live in comfortably over the years. The birth of my children, the presence of my second husband in my life, and my teaching all helped me enormously. The words of the great desert teachers I study began to give me saving help as soon as I met them. Still, even having made such progress, about fifteen years ago I realized that I wanted to move much farther out of what had become by then a mostly interior isolation from other people and God.

I began with God. At that time, under the influence of my teachers from the early church, I began a discipline of prayer that enabled me to learn firsthand, face-to-face, how different God is from the rejecting, hypercritical god I had imagined. Ultimately, it was here in my daily prayer, as I brought my own experience into conversation with the tradition of early monasticism I study and with Scripture, particularly Psalms and the Gospels, that I began to know what it meant to me personally to say that God is the God of the despised, the socially outcast, and the rejected.

This was real progress. At last I was able to pray the Lord's Prayer as my own prayer, to pray "*our* Father in heaven" and mean by these words not "*their* father," but "*my own* father." It was wonderful. For the first time in my life it did not seem to me that God was on one side of the universe attending to everybody else while I was all alone on the other. God was with me. I knew God both as the safe place I could turn when I felt alone or afraid and as the one who supported me in my desire to do the work I felt called to do. When I found myself under the pressures of living and working with another real live person or persons who had hurt me or angered me, or whose expectations I felt unable to meet, or who just plain wore me out, I could withdraw into the safe space of my prayer and pray, "*my* Father in heaven," "*give me* this day *my* daily bread," "*lead me* not into temptation."

For a while it was enough. Then the day came when I could no longer let myself forget that in this particular prayer what Jesus teaches is not how to pray "*my* Father who is in heaven," but rather "*our* Father." Neither finding a safe space nor being supported by God is the goal of the Christian life; it is love of God, but it is love of neighbor, too.

For help in learning how to pray "*our* Father" and mean it, I began to meditate frequently on what I first read in the commentary on the Lord's Prayer by the third-century North African Cyprian.⁸ At some level it doesn't matter whether I think I am praying this prayer alone or whether I consciously acknowledge my basic identity as a member of the body of Christ when I pray it. At some deep level my unity with other Christians isn't something I must make happen myself. Whether I want it or not, the fact is that whenever I speak these words, "*our* Father," "give us . . . our daily bread," by virtue of my very baptism I am praying it as part of the people of God, and in return they are praying it with me.

Of even more help to me now, however, is a way of praying the first words of the Lord's Prayer that only came to me about a year ago. Over a period of weeks I had been unsuccessfully struggling to forgive what I had experienced as a significant betrayal by a close friend whom I will call Jane Anne. I was fairly sure that she was unaware of what she had done to me, and I had no intention of trying to talk with her about it. Some days I told myself that trying to discuss it would only make my feelings toward her worse; other days I told myself that what I felt would go away if I just didn't pay any attention to it.

Neither strategy worked, nor were my prayers for help in forgiveness successful. Though I had days when my anger and hurt receded a little, for no apparent reason, on as many other days my pain and rage were as new and sharp as they had been in the beginning. One part of me, however, the smaller part in which God's grace is always calling me to truthfulness and vulnerability, knew that love is too valuable ever to be thrown away and that I still valued my friend. Still, the larger part of me—the old, wounded, isolated part—felt that the very ground had fallen away under my feet. All I wanted to do was simply follow my familiar patterns of safety by praying for myself and going away to never see her again.

I struggled on with my prayer nonetheless, and one morning, feeling really hopeless as I began to pray Jesus' prayer, I heard myself

praying the opening words in a new way. "Our Father who art in heaven," I heard myself say and then immediately after that, "my Father and the Father of Jane Anne."

My friend, I hardly know how to tell you what happened next. It was entirely undramatic, but all at once I realized that as I said the words "my Father and the Father of Jane Anne" I knew I was no longer alone in a private world in which I was blinded and isolated by my own mental anguish. Rather, I found myself in the presence of God, with Jane Anne beside me, in the bright and open space of God's mysterious love for the two of us. Immediately my grief and anger began to lift. For the first time since what I'd thought of as her original betrayal, I understood that the issue I had been wrestling with was not so much my specific need to forgive Jane Anne for what she had done as it was my old need to keep my footing on what I thought of as my hard-earned place in the universe in which everybody else lived.

By speaking the words "my Father and the Father of Jane Anne" I had prayed for her and me together. Somehow in that moment when I was given the gift of praying "*our* Father" and really meaning it, I knew I had a place already that I didn't have to fight for or defend; it was a place in the family of God to which I belonged simply because I was a human being. Set free of my blinding fear, I was set loose to begin to see and love Jane Anne with empathy and compassion.

Still, there was the shadow of the original betrayal lying between us. What was I to do? In the days that followed I continued to pray for me and Jane Anne together as I had been doing. Finally, it became clear to me that I must tell her my feelings and give her a chance to respond. The conversation wasn't easy, but it helped each of us to see in a new light what had happened, to repair what had been broken, and to grow together toward the future.

What I have learned from all this, in dealing with my long-term struggles to learn to pray "our Father" and my ongoing desire to grow in love through my prayer, has been enormously important to me. Each morning now I begin to pray the Lord's Prayer by saying the words "our Father." After that, I visualize the faces of the people I must be with that day, people with whom I am angry, or whom I would avoid because they have hurt me, or sap my energy, or exercise internal or external destructive power over me. Then I paraphrase the words "our Father" and repeat them as a prayer for me

and a prayer for the other person or persons together: "My Father and the Father of my student, Stephen"; "my Father and the Father of the church group I am on my way to speak to"; "my Father and the Father of my uncle."

Though I have to prod and push myself to pray it, if I am angry enough at someone, I know that this is a necessary way for me to pray. Mysteriously, as it once happened with my prayer for me and Jane Anne together, what nearly always comes along with the words of the prayer is an immediate, intimate awareness of being equally loved members of God's family. This awareness seems to take away my own defensiveness and self-protection and lets me be more present with the other person or persons on that day in the way they—and I too—need.

Why praying in this way should have this helpful effect, I don't know for sure. I suspect it is connected with what Dorotheos of Gaza told the brothers of his quarreling sixth-century monastery.⁹ "How can you fight this way?" he asked them. "Don't you know that you should be praying instead, 'by the prayers of my brother, save me?'"

Perhaps whenever we stand before God and pray at the same time for ourselves and for someone else from whom we feel separated, we are stepping into a place of humility that lets us admit to ourselves the way our own lives depend upon the prayers not only of strangers but even of our enemies. I don't know whether other people's lives will be saved by such an admission, but I have come to believe that mine is being saved in this way at this very moment.

No matter, perhaps, that I can't explain this mysterious process of learning to pray the word "our" better than I have. Whatever our capacity to explain, the healing of our ability to love is never something that we do ourselves; healing always finally comes as a gift of God.

At any rate, I'm sorry for your troubles, my friend, and I hope you are able to find something in this very long letter that will help you with the tough situation in your church. Don't give up; as you can see, I believe the conversation you are in is terribly important. Perhaps, if you aren't already doing it, you might try praying the Lord's Prayer for you and your congregation together in the way I have been talking about. Whether you do or not, I'll keep you in my prayers, and you keep me in yours, too.

Yours in Christ, Roberta

19. For an optimistic report on Central African developments, see Philip Gourevitch, "Letter from the Congo: Continental Shift," in *The New Yorker* (4 August 1997), 42-55.

20. Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," in *Foreign Affairs* 73.6 (November/December 1994), 31.

21. Quoted in Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 187.

22. J. Philip Wogaman, *The Great Economic Debate: An Ethical Analysis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 97.

3. Praying "Our Father" and Formation in Love (Bondi)

1. Quoted from "Thoughts on Christian Perfection," *John Wesley*, 288.

2. From Matthew 23:9. Please notice that the context in which this saying is preserved makes it very clear that what Jesus is about here is not the shoring up of the authority of God at the expense of "puny" human beings; it is the dismantling of the everyday structures of authority and respect in order to allow us to stand next to each other in a radical equality of love.

3. John 14:8.

4. Luke 11:1ff.

5. Poemen, Saying 8, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Benedicta Ward (London: Mowbray, 1981), 167.

6. For an ancient description and classification of the passions, see "The Praktikos" in Evagrius Pontikos, *The Praktikos: Centuries on Prayer*, trans. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO (Spencer, Mass.: Cistercian Publications, 1970). For a modern discussion, see "The Passions" in my *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress Press, 1987). For why I believe it is important that we recover this tradition of understanding the passions, see chapter 1 of my *In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

7. For a fuller discussion of what I consider to be the problems around the language of God's fatherhood, and the solutions to those problems, see chapter 1 of my *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

8. "Before all things the Teacher of peace and Master of unity is unwilling for prayer to be made singly and individually, teaching that he [or she] who prays is not to pray for himself [or herself] alone. For we do not say, *My Father Who art in heaven*, nor *Give me this day my bread*. . . . Prayer with us is public and common; and when we pray we do not pray for one but for the whole people, because we the whole people are one." In *St. Cyprian on the Lord's Prayer*, trans. T. Herbert Bindley (London: SPCK, 1914), 32-33.

9. *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 154.

4. *Salvation as the Work of the Trinity* (Míguez Bonino)

1. With this essay I wish to express our respect, love, and gratitude to Dow Kirkpatrick. He has been a decisive factor in the work of the Oxford Institute. But for us Latin Americans Dr. Kirkpatrick has been a friend who has accompanied and represented us, and who has worked and suffered with us—both in our own land and outside. Our participation in the Oxford Institute since very early was the result of his initiative. It was also largely due to his earnest effort that the Institute itself took up and incorporated specific Latin American concerns in the Wesleyan thematic that the Institute has developed.

2. *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

3. For some further reflection on the second course of engagement, see José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley in Latin America: A Theological and Historical Reflection," in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 169-82.

4. See also José Míguez Bonino, "Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification from a Liberationist Perspective," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 49-63; and Míguez Bonino, "Sanctification: A Latin American Rereading," in *Faith Born in the Struggle for Life*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15-25.

5. See Theodore Runyon, "Wesley and the Theologies of Liberation," in *Sanctification and Liberation*, 9-48; and Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). Unfortunately, I was not aware of the earlier article when I prepared my paper for the World Ecumenical Conference, held in Rome in 1994, on "Sanctification in the Benedictine and Methodist Traditions." See also José Míguez Bonino, "Sanctification and Liberation," *Asbury Theological Journal* 50 (1995): 141-50.

6. U. Bergmann, "nasal," *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:760-2.

7. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 45.

8. *Ibid.*, 153. The Spanish original speaks of "one single becoming" (*devenir*), which is not exactly the same.

9. *Ibid.*, 159.

10. Pope's argument is developed in different sections of his three-volume *Compendium of Christian Theology* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1880), but see particularly 2:358-90.