

Sermon for the First Vespers of Lent

'I ascend unto My Father.'

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During this season of Lent, we have dedicated ourselves to begin to purge ourselves of the tongue of Satan, to reject the words of the devil, and to accept that gift which we have been given in our baptism, the tongue of fire, the tongue of the Holy Spirit, to accept and speak the Words of Our Lord. And there is no better way to do this than to pray rightly the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ.

According to ancient tradition, Lent is a season where all re-enter catechesis, all become catechumens, that is, students. Everyone returns to confirmation class to once again delve into the basic teachings of our most holy faith. So it is that we shall look in the Spirit into the Lord's Prayer, in hope that we might come to a more profound understanding of its unfathomable depth.

But first, we must ask, what exactly is the Lord's Prayer? Most essentially, it is the prayer of our Lord. It is the prayer that Our Lord prays. It is His, and His alone. Only He, Jesus Christ, can pray this prayer by right. We may only pray it because we who are baptized are now in Him.

We pray His prayer, because we have become one with His person, as St. Paul writes *'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who liveth in me.'*

So our Lord's prayer begins, *'Our Father, who art in heaven.'* See here first that Christ alone is the Son of the Father, and so He alone is the only person who can rightfully call God His 'Father'. And yet the prayer begins *'Our Father'*. *'Our,'* for this is the prayer that Jesus has given to us who have been united to Him, who have lost ourselves in His divine life, so that we too, through Him, might also call God *'Our Father'* even as He taught us saying *'I ascend unto my Father, and your Father. Unto my God, and your God.'*

The Father who is first and foremost the Father of the Son is now given to us, the adopted, as our Father as well.

The prayer continues: *'Who art in heaven.'* What exactly does this mean? It is easy enough to simply think of heaven as a place, some place far away, where God lives. That perhaps, is partially right, in that 'heaven' signifies something far away, infinitely far away, holy, set apart, separate from us.

It is that realm and that reality where the ineffable, the unreachable God dwells. To say God is in heaven is to say that God is not among us. He no longer walks *'in the midst of the garden in the cool of the evening.'* Rather, He is *'in the heavens'*.

Luther teaches us that no civilization has ever been so barbaric that it denied that God exists, no civilization until ours, that is. For it is undeniable.

Ignorant people, and I do not mean that as an insult, deny God's existence because they have not thought about the subject very much.

Even the most basic 'proof' of the existence of God, posited thousands of years ago, remains unanswered by even today's philosophers. That proof is simple: All things have a cause. It is impossible for there to be an infinite regress of causes, that is, it is impossible to have a chain of causes that goes back forever and ever, for an infinite series cannot be traversed, in the same way that, no matter how fast you are going on a road or in a rocket, you will never travel an infinite distance. Therefore, the chain of causes must be finite, and if that chain is finite, there must be a first cause, and, as St. Thomas Aquinas writes, 'that first cause we call God'.

Whether you understood that or not is of no consequence. We know, as a fact, that there is a God. But what is that to us, if he is indeed *'in heaven'*, that is, He is far off, distant from us, unconcerned with us, divorced from us; even hating us.

All the pagan religions of the world recognize the pain and agony of this separation, and so through sacrifices and rituals, through sacred bribes and oaths, they seek to coax this distant God down to once again dwell with men, even if for a little while.

You see, even the heathens and idolaters, even they long for Eden; even they

weep over the ashes of the garden

Our Lord's prayer recognizes this absolute holiness of God, for He would have us pray '*who art in heaven.*'

And yet, first He has us pray something before that. He does not say '*Our God*'. For even the demons might pray such, *and tremble*. No, He has us pray '*Our Father.*' For even as Christ *ascends to His Father*, being baptized into His body, we too ascend into heaven.

In His being, as in an ark, we cross through the infinite distance between the unholy world to the holy God. In His body, we cross through the *consuming fire* of God's glory to dwell in the *sapphire still sea* of the throne room of the Father.

So we can pray '*who is in heaven*', yet without fear, without confessing that God is far away from us, for in Christ, and through His glorified body, we too are in heaven. God may be far off,

but to all who have been cleansed, we are far off with Him as well, for we are of a *kingdom not of this world*.

A priest in Rome was called a *pontifex*. This word means 'a bridge maker'. For it was the desire of all pagan peoples to bridge the abyss between God and man, between the ineffable divine and the profane earth. Even the word 'religion' means 'the binding together', for all religions and superstitions of the world seek to draw God down to us, or to leave this mortal coil and go up to God.

In Christ, every heathen desire and hope is fulfilled, for in the Lord's Incarnation, God did indeed come down to us sinful men, here to dwell with us, to bind our wounded and cure our sick, and to sacrifice His own flesh for our salvation.

In His ascension, the Son of Man crosses the darkness of the chasm between us and heaven.

Jesus in giving us this prayer, gives to us the name of God, the name by which we might call upon Him, that He might not merely be 'God' but 'Our God.' And through the sacraments,

Christ brings us into Himself, brings us in Himself to God, and makes us Sons of

the Most High,

that we too might look upon the heavenly throne, brethren of Jesus, with uplifted faces, glorified and joyous, and address the Lord of all Creation, King of the Universe, not in fear, but in faith; not in dejection, but in delight; not as slaves, but as sons, and draw near to our Maker calling out in ecstasy:

'Our Father.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Galatians 4:3-7; John 20:16-18.