

## ***Message in the Lord's Prayer tells us how to pray***

by Mary Sharon Moore

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I was nearing the end of a two-day Lenten retreat for clergy when, midway through my final talk, the bishop raised his hand. "May I ask a question?"

My heart stopped. Had I unknowingly spoken some heresy? My knees grew weak. "Can you speak to us of prayer?" he asked.

Speak to us of prayer. As I looked around the group, I imagined the burning desire in the hearts of Jesus' disciples when they asked him: "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus taught them what we now call "the Lord's Prayer," words of Christian faith and yearning that have spanned the ages. The context of this teaching in Luke's Gospel still inspires me. Luke writes that Jesus "was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray . . .'" (Luke 11:1-2).

We have watched you, his disciples seem to say; we have heard you talking with your Father. Now, teach us.

Jesus replies, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name." In effect, Jesus insists that the intimate relationship he shares with his Father is for his disciples as well: Put your heart with the heart of your heavenly Father. When your heart is there, these are the words that will follow.

The prayer that Jesus gives his disciples is not prayer for the faint of heart, but real prayer that

heals, unites, transforms. I imagine that as Jesus returns from prayer to teach his disciples, his heart and countenance still glow from that loving communion in the fiery heart of his Father.

When I put my heart with the fiery, loving heart of God, I trust that the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer are indeed fulfilled: My dwelling in God hallows God's name; God's reign more fully unfolds in the circumstances of my life; God's will is more perfectly done; I receive the sufficiency that I need; my heart expands to receive forgiveness and therefore forgives; I am shielded by God's providence from the snares of temptation; and I am delivered by God's infinite mercy from evil.

Real prayer, St. Paul insists in his letter to the Romans (8:26-27), is never our own. We supply the heart, and the Holy Spirit provides the "sighs too deep for words." Paul points to that intimate indwelling of the soul with God, the fulfillment, really, of Jesus' prayer in John 17: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (v. 21). And God, "who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit," writes Paul, because the Spirit intercedes "according to the will of God."

Imagine, I suggested to those retreatants, being silent and allowing Jesus' prayer to be prayed through you. In the Christian experience, the truest prayer practices flow from the heart's intimate dwelling in the heart of God. When that indwelling is not in place, our prayer is just tiresome words.

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