

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus teach us to pray, and the prayer he gives us is probably the single best-known prayer and the best-known verses from scripture that exist, "The Lord's Prayer" or as we usually call it, the "Our Father"

Pope Benedict points out that it is often the first scripture we learn as small children, because it is both a scripture verse and a prayer.

Benedict said this is possible because Jesus didn't teach us complicated and secret mysterious phrases to repeat when we talk to God, like the pagans of his time did, no, he taught us to pray using very simple language that even children can understand. And the meaning is clear to us from the very beginning.

Although I did hear about a Sunday School teacher who asked her class a question, "What is God's name?" And a little girl put up her hand and said, "I know, I know, it's Harold"

The shocked teacher said, "Where did you hear that?"

And the little girl said, "It's in the prayer, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name'"

This is a prayer that has been said continuously for 2000 years since we learned it from Jesus. And today we can say with confidence, that it is a prayer that is being said at every minute of every single day somewhere in the world.

Think about it, there are more than a billion and a half Christians in the world in all 24 time zones, there are daily masses and services being said at different times in hundreds of thousands of churches across the globe.

Every time the Mass is said, the rosary is said, every time the Divine Mercy Chaplet is said, during every sacrament, baptism, wedding, confirmation and funeral, in the breviary or the liturgy of the hours said by every ordained person and member of a religious order many times during the day and almost every time someone goes to confession to receive the sacrament of reconciliation, it is part of the penance assigned by the priest.

We all say it at other times, in thanksgiving, when we ask God for something, even when we say goodnight to God before we go to bed.

What an awesome thought, a continuous prayer reaching up to heaven at every single minute and every time we pray it, we become part of that amazing family of God that is the worldwide Christian church.

And we are part of God's family because of this prayer, you see Pope Francis tells us that the secret word in this prayer of Jesus is "Father!" This word is the key that he gives us so that we too can have the same relationship with God that Jesus did. We can speak to him like a member of our own family as Jesus did.

And if we all have the same Father, then we are all brothers and sisters, and suddenly there are no strangers, no foreigners, no others, but we are all in the same family.

Pope Francis points out that there are three requests in this prayer that express the basic needs of humanity, since one cannot live without our daily bread, we cannot live without forgiveness for we are all sinners, and we won't make it in our struggle against temptation without God's help.

The bread that Jesus teaches us to ask for is the food that is necessary, like the bread of pilgrims who do not carry more than they need for that day, they don't save and accumulate, they don't weigh themselves down, they trust that there will be whatever is needed tomorrow when tomorrow comes.

We ask for forgiveness because we cannot form a relationship with God or anyone else if we are burdened with guilt. You'll notice the text of Luke's version of the Lord's prayer says "for we ourselves forgive everyone!"

Jesus assumes that we understand that if we follow him, then we forgive others and don't hold on to grudges or demand accounting of every debt.

Francis says our last request, our last supplication, expresses Jesus' awareness of the human condition, that we are always exposed to the snares of evil and corruption. We know what temptation is and where our hope comes from to overcome it.

This prayer also includes three essential elements of prayer. The first is faith, because we wouldn't call on God, or call him our Father, if we did not believe he was there.

The second element of prayer is humility, which we show by acknowledging that God is Holy and that we submit to his will.

The third element of prayer is communication, two-way communication, we make our requests of God because we believe he hears us and we know he will communicate with us when our prayers are answered.

Jesus adds two parables to his teaching in today's gospel. He has given us the perfect prayer and then he shows through the story of the unhelpful neighbour that we must ask boldly and persistently when we pray. He then shows us through the story of the human father and child that if we can treat requests fairly for the children we love, then we can assume he will treat our requests fairly and answer them with love.

But he also tells us that the greatest gift he can give us is not simply responding to our needs but rather the greatest gift he can give us is the Holy Spirit. Surely, Pope Francis tells us, if we ask for the Holy Spirit first, all these other things will be taken care of.

I find it interesting that when the church re-did the translations for all the liturgies with a new missal, a new creed, a new Gloria, there was no new “Our Father”. When everything else was being polished up, the Lord’s prayer was left alone.

The church recognizes how so many of us have prayed this prayer for longer than we can remember anything else and it has become a foundation stone in the relationship we have with God, we are tied to it emotionally in a deep way that simply can’t be shaken and although the scholars may feel there is a slightly better way to express this prayer intellectually, there can be no better way to touch our hearts than with the prayer we know and love.

Where does the church place the “Lord’s Prayer” in our Eucharist? Not at the beginning, or among the readings, but it is placed right before we receive Holy Communion. What better way can there be to help prepare us to receive Christ’s true body with our brothers and sisters than to recognize together in prayer that we all have the same Father and that by receiving Jesus in the Eucharist we have all become brothers and sisters in true communion.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach us how to pray and what a complete and powerful answer we received. Let us remember every time we say this special prayer, with all the Christians in the world, that Jesus is our brother, and we are, each one of us, a child of God.