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[Salt of the Empire: The Role of the Christian Family in Evangelization](#)

by Mike Aquilina

Original sin is all around us – it affect our lives from first breath to last

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Salt of the Empire

The Role of the Christian Family in Evangelization

by Mike Aquilina

Years ago, I came across a children's book that told the history of the early Church in small words and in large, brightly colored pictures. The first few centuries were pretty much distilled into a few pages with a simple message, which I'll summarize here:

The wicked Roman Empire prevailed for a long time, killing Christians by the thousands, till one day the pagan emperor Constantine was crossing a bridge. He looked up into the sky and saw a cross in the clouds and he heard a voice saying, "By this sign, you shall conquer." So Constantine became a believer, and from that moment on the Roman Empire was a Christian Empire. The End.

If only evangelization were that simple. If only God would always make the gospel immediately relevant by raising a huge cross in the sky and thundering a command from above. If only he would transform our culture by the miraculous conversion of its most influential leaders, starting with the emperors of politics and culture.

The truth, however, is that the Christianizing of the Roman Empire after Constantine was a messy affair – perhaps messier than it had been before, during the almost three centuries of persecution. The Eastern and Western lands went about the work of Christianizing in radically different ways; nasty disputes arose over the relationship between throne and altar; a rift appeared between East and West, which would eventually leave the Eastern peoples vulnerable to the rise of Islam and ultimately widen into a schism that tragically split the Church in two.

So much for the storybook ending of a Christian empire. Yet the truth about the early Christians is more exciting, more instructive, and even more miraculous than the storybooks convey. It is a story not so much about emperors



Constantine the Great

and armies as about families and how they changed the world.

Astonishing Growth

The truth is that, by the time Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity in 313, the empire was already heavily Christianized. By the year 300 perhaps 10 percent of the people were Christians, and by the middle of the century, Christians may well have been a majority of the citizens, 33 million Christians in an empire of 60 million people. So Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it. His edict of toleration was overdue recognition that the Church had already won the empire. We were already in the majority.

These were not 33 million “nominal” Christians – not 33 million “cafeteria Catholics” and “chaplain to the culture” Protestants. They could not be. They did not have the luxury of being lukewarm. In the decade before Constantine's edict, the Church had suffered its most ruthless and systematic persecution ever under the emperor Diocletian and his successors. The practice of the faith was, in many places, punished by torture and death. In many places, to live as a Christian meant, at the least, to accept social stigma and humiliation. What is more, the Christian way itself was characterized by demanding disciplines in the life of prayer and in the moral life.

To be a Christian was not easy in the year 300. It cost something. Whether or not you were martyred, you had to pay with your life. Christians were laying their lives on the line every time they attended the liturgy, and they continued to do so through the course of every day.

Yet the rate of conversion throughout the empire – beginning with the first Christians, long before Constantine – was most remarkable. A few years ago, an eminent sociologist, Rodney Stark of the University of Washington, set out to track church growth in the ancient world. He gathered his findings in *The Rise of Christianity*. Dr. Stark is not a Christian and had no vested interest in making Christianity look good.

What Stark found in his study of the first Christian centuries was an astonishing growth rate of 40 percent per decade. Again, Constantine gets no credit for this growth. Most of it happened in the years before he was born. In fact, even though conversions were coerced at various times after the year 380, the Church never again witnessed the kind of growth that took place when conversions were costly.



Roman women giving generously

Stark holds that most growth came from individual conversions, and not only from the poor, but also from the merchant and upper classes. He argues that most converts were women, that women benefited greatly from conversion, and that some women – though never ordained to the priesthood – were influential leaders. Using historical data and sociological methods, he argues that the Christian population grew by 40 percent a decade, from

about 1,000 Christians in the year 40 to 7,530 in 100 to a little over six million in 300 and 33 million in 350 – growing, in the hundred years between 250 and 350, from about two percent of the population to slightly over half.

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mother with her baby - from an ancient funerary stele

Misery and Fewer Girls

Stark vividly describes the misery of ordinary citizens in the cities of the pagan world. All but the rich lived in cramped, smoky tenements – one family to a small room, with no ventilation or plumbing – which frequently collapsed or burned. The cities were horribly crowded, a city like Antioch having perhaps 200 people per acre, plus livestock (modern Calcutta has only 122 people per acre). Constant immigration meant that the cities were peopled by strangers, with the resulting crime and disorder, so that the streets were not safe at night and families were not even safe in their homes.

Human waste was thrown into open ditches in the middle of the narrow streets, and the cities were smothered in flies attracted by the filth. The corpses of those who died of natural causes were sometimes left to rot in the city's open sewers. ("The stench of these cities must have been overpowering for many miles – especially in warm weather," Stark noted.) Water was hard to get and almost always foul.

Life expectancy was at most around 30 for men and perhaps much lower for women. Hygiene was minimal. Medical care was more dangerous than disease – and disease often disfigured its victims when it did not kill them. The human body was host to countless parasites, and tenements were infested by vermin. For entertainment, people thronged to the circuses to see other people mutilated and killed.

And pagan marriage offered no respite from this misery. Greco-Roman women were usually married off at age 11 or 12, to a mate not of their choosing, who was often much older (Christian girls tended to marry at about 18). Afterward, they suffered in predatory relationships rife with contraception, abortion (which often killed the mother), adultery, and unnatural sexual acts.

Infanticide was common, especially for female or defective offspring. Of the 600 families who show up in the records from ancient Delphi, only six raised more than one daughter. Though most of those 600 families were quite large, they had all routinely killed their baby girls. Stark quotes a letter from a pagan businessman writing home to his pregnant wife. After the usual endearments, he closes his letter by saying, briefly and casually, "If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy, keep it, if a girl, discard it."

If fewer girls lived to see the second day from their birth, still more died on their way to adulthood. The shortage of women, then, played further havoc on the population growth of the empire, as well as its economy and its morals.

Homosexual activity was considered normal for married men.



Roman family eating together - 2nd century AD funerary stele

Attractive Homes

That is the world in which the first Christians were born, in which they grew up and married, and in which they raised their families. You might call it a culture of death.

But Christian marriage and childrearing immediately set Christians apart. According to Stark, Christian husbands and wives genuinely tried to love one another, as their religion required. Their mutual affection and their openness to fertility led to a higher birthrate, and thus to a still higher growth rate for the early Church. They did not abort their children, nor did husbands endanger their wives' lives by doing so.

The early Christians' respect for the dignity of marriage made the faith enormously attractive to pagan women. So women made up a disproportionate number of the early converts. This in turn made Christianity enormously attractive to pagan men – who could not find many pagan women to marry, but saw young ladies attending the Christian liturgy in great numbers.

We should not dismiss these benefits of Christianity in the natural order. One thing that the rise of Christianity demonstrated is that faithfulness to the one true God is the best way to happiness, not only in heaven, but also in the world that God created. Christian faith, then as now, makes for happy homes. And, in pagan cultures, then as now, happy homes are very attractive. The evidence seems to indicate that, in the Roman Empire, Christian homes provided the Church's primary place of evangelization. And that the Church grew because in every place it lived as a family.

This is something we do not find too often in the published lives of the saints, which tend to focus primarily on extraordinary events and great miracles. Nor do we find this story told in ecclesiastical histories, which tend to focus almost exclusively on the lives of the bishops and the clergy. Yet it is the true story of the Church. As St. Augustine put it, the story of the growth of the gospel was the story of "one heart setting another on fire."

The fire of charity tended in the Christian home soon consumed city blocks and then neighborhoods. It was not the sort of ecstatic experience we see in the account of the first Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. It was, rather, quiet and gradual. Let us look at just one example of how this fire of charity burned.

Epidemics were among the great terrors of life in the ancient world. The physicians in those days knew that the diseases were communicable, but they knew nothing about bacteria or viruses, never mind antibiotics or antiseptics. Once the diseases hit your hometown, there was really no stopping them. Several major epidemics ravaged the empire during the rise of Christianity, and each of them reduced the empire's population by about one-third.

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early Byzantine cross

The Fire of Charity

Yet even in these circumstances, the Church grew. In fact, amid simultaneous persecutions and epidemics, the Church grew still more dramatically, especially in proportion to the total population of the empire. Everywhere people were dropping like flies, but the Church was growing.

How did that happen? Look at what ordinarily happened when an epidemic hit your hometown. The first people to leave were usually the doctors. They knew what was coming, and they knew they could do little to prevent it. The second-century pagan physician Galen admits that he fled, in his description of the worldwide epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The next ones to leave were the pagan priests, because they had the means and the freedom to do so.

Ordinary pagan families were encouraged to abandon their homes when family members contracted the plague. Again, they knew no other way to isolate the disease than to leave the afflicted family member behind to die, perhaps slowly.

Yet Christians were duty-bound not to abandon the sick. Jesus himself had said that, in caring for the sick, Christians were caring for him. So, even though Christians knew no more about medicine than the pagans did, they stayed with their family members, friends, and neighbors who were suffering. Consider this account of the great epidemic of the year 260, left to us by Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending their every need and ministering to them in Christ – and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. . . . Death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

We also possess pagan accounts of that epidemic, and all of them are characterized by despair. Yet the Christians were “serenely happy.” Nor was this an extraordinary event. Stark says that Syrian Antioch, considered the second city of the empire, experienced 41 natural and social catastrophes of this order during the years when Christianity was on the rise. That is an average of one cataclysmic disaster every fifteen years.

Christianity had the same effect in other ways, as Stark noted. It offered cities filled with strangers, orphans, widows, the homeless, and the poor a new family and community and a new way of life that freed them from many of the fears that tortured their pagan neighbors.

Amid all that havoc, Christian charity, which usually began in the home, brought church growth. Christians were much more likely to survive epidemics because they cared for one another. Mere comfort care cut the Christians' mortality rate by two-thirds when compared with the pagans'. What is more, the Christian families cared for their pagan neighbors as well. Thus, the pagans who received Christian care were more likely to survive and, in turn, to become Christians themselves. Thus, in times of epidemic, when populations as a whole plummeted, church growth soared.

The Spreading Flame

The pagans tended only to take care of those in their group. While pagans would only help their brothers, Christians treated all men as their brothers. And the pagans took notice. The wicked emperor Julian, who despised all Christians and led the charge to re-paganize the empire, still had to grudgingly admire their charity: "The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well. Everyone can see that our poor lack aid from us."

I cannot emphasize enough that this charitable activity was not so much the work of institutions as of families. The family was then, as it is now, the fundamental unit of the Church. Until the third century, most Christians did not have a building they could call their "church." Their Christian life was centered in their homes. Institutionalized charitable organizations were still years away in the future, to be established during more peaceful times.

In the beginning, charity was, rather, the way of Christian family life. This routine of charity did not so much constitute a new culture, replacing the old, at least externally. Outwardly, little had changed in the neighborhoods inhabited by Christians. The law, the government, the routines of daily life remained as they were – and as they would largely remain, intact, even after Constantine. But inwardly, everything had changed.



Roman couple - fresco from 1st century AD

We see the means of this transformation, even very early in Christian history. A document of the early second century, the anonymous Letter to Diognetus, describes the process in profound yet simple terms. The writer points out that Christians are not distinguished from other people by anything external: not their country or language, not their food or clothing, but by what he calls the Christians' "wonderful and striking way of life."

They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not commit infanticide. They have a common table, but not a common bed. . . . They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. . . . To sum it up: As the soul is in the body, so Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. . . . The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.

Gradually. Invisibly. But inexorably. This is the way that Christian doctrine, hope, and charity transformed the Roman Empire – one person at a time. Christianity transformed the way neighbors treated the sick, the way parents treated their children, and the way husbands and wives made love.

That is what really happened to the Roman Empire. The gospel of Jesus Christ gradually spread, from person to person, from family to family, from home to home, from neighborhood to neighborhood, then to entire provinces. Conversion took place in the smallest increments, one by one, because of homes.

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The Domestic Church

When we read about our ancestors in the faith, their deeds cry out for modern imitation. I will be so bold as to draw out six lessons the ancient Christian families can teach modern families.

1. Come to see your home as a domestic church. Modern Christians tend to think of their parish buildings as “the church.” We have to believe that our families are the church, that our homes are the church, and that the kingdom of God begins in the place we hang our hats and eat our meals. We need to imitate the early Christians in seeing our homes as places of worship and fellowship, as sources of charity, and as schools of virtue.

St. Augustine once addressed a gathering of fathers as “my dear fellow bishops.” That is the role that parents play in the domestic church.

2. Make your domestic church a haven of charity. One of the most striking descriptions of the early Church comes from Tertullian, who wrote: “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents, who say, ‘See those Christians, how they love one another.’” This love has to begin at home. It has to begin in the domestic church.

How many of those who decry the lack of reverence in their churches then go home to desecrate their domestic churches by harsh words toward their children or toward their spouses or by gossip about their neighbors or their co-workers? We will all be called to account for this. Remember the words of Tertullian. They will know we are Christians, not by the icons on our wall, or the fish symbols on our bumper stickers, or the grotto in our front yard, or by our WWJD bracelets, but by the love in our hearts, expressed in our homes.

3. Make your domestic church a place of prayer. This does not mean that your day has to be dominated by devotions, but you should have some regular, routine family disciplines of prayer. The early Christians saw this as necessary and so observed “stational hours” of prayer throughout the day – and even throughout the night. In the third century, Tertullian described Christian families in North Africa rising in the middle of every night to pray together.

Most Christians today do not rise at 3 a.m., and I am not suggesting we should. There are many ways to pray as a family, and you should seek out the ways that work best for your tribe. You can pray together at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day. You should pray together, at least, by offering grace at every meal. You can begin a weekly family Bible study. You can join in the weekday worship your parish church offers. The important thing is to do something, start somewhere. Begin with something small and manageable, and then give yourself time to grow into it.

Apostles of Charity

4. Know that, as a domestic church, you are “on mission.” Like the universal Church, you are sent by Christ to bring the gospel to the world. You are sent outward from your home. “Sent” is the root meaning of the word apostolate, and you and I and all our children are called to share in the Church’s apostolate, to be apostles to the world.

Imagine yourself as one of those invisible Christians living in the ancient cities that were rotting with epidemics. What would you do? What would you have your family do? Would you flee the city while your neighbors died? Would you board up the windows and position your shotgun? You would do as your ancestors did and go out and serve your neighbors.

Nowadays, we can cure many of the ancient plagues. But we should all ask ourselves: What epidemics are consuming the families in our neighborhoods today? What is it that’s tearing the neighbor families apart? What is it that leaves them scarred and barely able to go on in life? How about divorce? Illegitimacy? Abandonment . . . that constant sense that they are not wanted by someone they dearly love? Perhaps we need to expand our definitions of poverty and epidemic, in order to see the people our families must serve today. There are probably people on your block who are very lonely, elderly and alone, or mourning, or otherwise in need.

How might your family help? Sometimes helping is as simple as making meals, opening the door to your home, even sharing your children’s “artwork” for the neighbors’ refrigerators. It does not have to be a lavish program. But this sort of charity should be an ongoing family project. Christians sometimes go overboard in shielding their family from strangers and from nonbelievers. But as Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, Christ will sometimes come to us in these distressing disguises. We have to open wide the doors to Christ. That is part of what it means for us to be on mission.

One of the great Fathers of the Western Church, St. Jerome, said: “The eyes of all are turned upon you. Your house is set on a watchtower; your life fixes for others the limits of their self-control.” But our lives cannot set limits for others unless we open our lives and our homes to others – and unless (see lessons two and three) we live as if our house was set on a watchtower.

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The Good Samaritan by [Stephen Sawyer](#)

Luminous Grace

5. Cultivate the virtue of hope. Divine grace has unlimited power. It can transform persons; it can and has transformed cultures. As parents, as parishioners, and as neighbors, we have to believe in miracles. We have to believe that people can change. It is too easy for us to believe that many people are hopelessly lost, have been by the culture or their own lives irremediably inoculated against the gospel. But this is simply not true. Read the agnostic Rodney Stark: Miracles do happen, people do change, towns and cities and nations can convert to Christianity at the rate of 40 percent per decade.

6. Live by the teachings of the Church. We need to raise our homes up to the standards of Jesus Christ and his Church. It is a high standard, but the alternatives today are deadly. The early Christians did not convert the empire by compromising with the empire's ideas of family life. They did not compromise on divorce, contraception, abortion, infanticide, or homosexual activity.

The early Christians hated these sins, even as they passionately loved the sinners who committed these sins – the sinners who lived in their neighborhoods. We, too, need to hate these sins and keep them far from our own homes. But we need also to help other homes, other families to live according to Jesus' teachings. We need to evangelize the families who need us. If we do not, then we can count ourselves with the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who passed by the man in the ditch.

I close not with a quote from the early Christians but from a contemporary Christian, Pope John Paul II, who in *On the Laity (Christifideles Laici)* drew a lesson from the early Church as he instructed families in the ways of evangelization:

Animated in its own inner life by missionary zeal, the Church of the home is also called to be a luminous sign of the presence of Christ and of his love for those who are “far away,” for families who do not yet believe, and for those Christian families who no longer live in accordance with the faith that they once received. The Christian family is called to enlighten “by its example and its witness . . .

those who seek the truth.”

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Mike Aquilina, a Roman Catholic, has written numerous articles and several books on church history and especially patristics, including *The Fathers of the Church* (1999, 2006). He was editor of *New Covenant Magazine* from 1996 to 2002.

Mike is executive vice president of the St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology. His blog, [The Way of the Fathers](#).

He and his wife Terri live in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. They have six children.

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The early church fathers recognized the significance of the fatherhood of God and explained how the Scriptures proclaim our new nature as the adopted sons and daughters of God. Click on links to read the intro and quotes from the fathers.

[Introduction](#) by Don Schwager

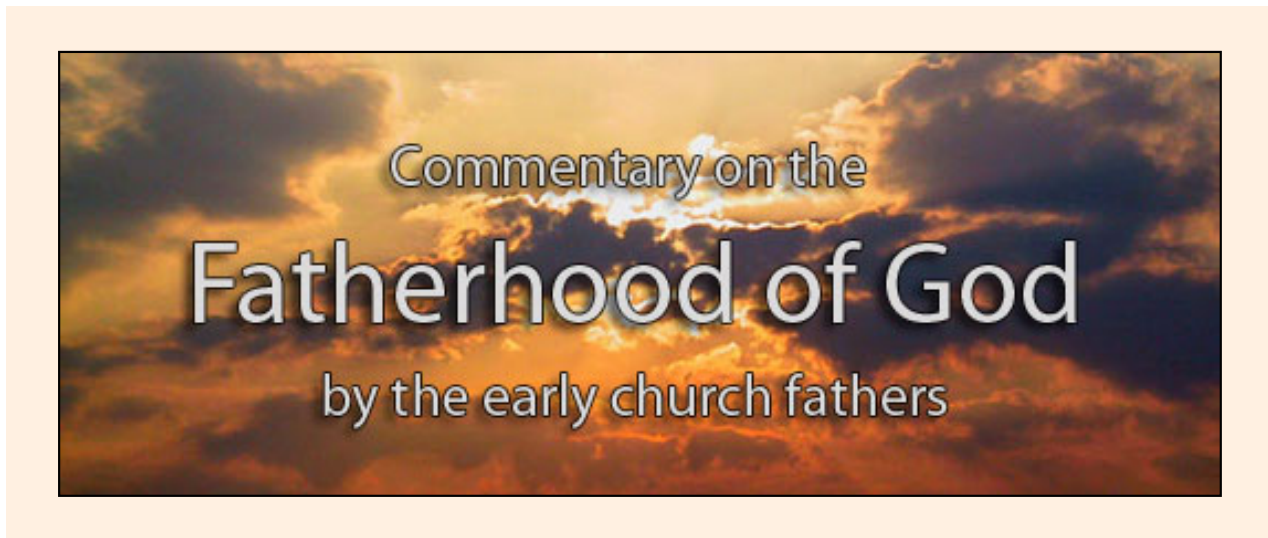
Commentary on God the Father

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- » [The Foundation Stone of the Soul](#), by Cyril of Jerusalem
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Introduction

by Don Schwager

The essential nature of God’s relationship with us is that of a father who loves, cares, protects, and governs. The Scriptures and the wisdom of the early church fathers have much to teach us about the fatherhood of God.

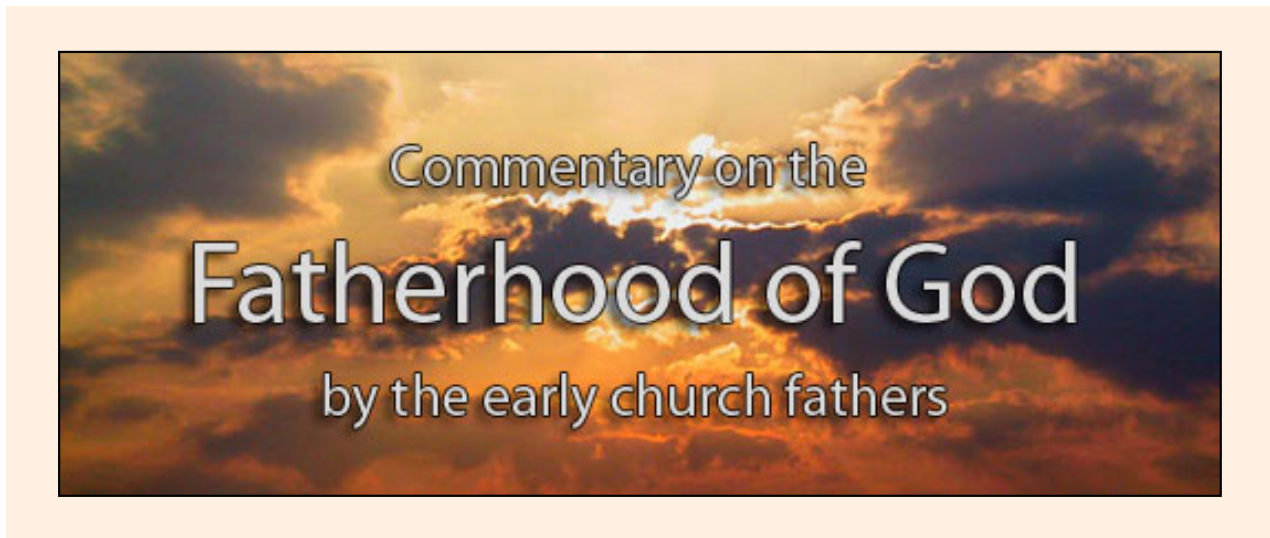
For the people of Israel the fatherhood of God was a living, experiential reality. God created Adam in his image and likeness to be his son (Genesis 1:26-27). Joined with Eve they become the father and mother of the human race (Genesis 3:20). God called Abraham to be the father of a multitude (Genesis 17:5) with descendants greater than the sands of the sea and the stars of the heavens (Genesis 22:17). The name Abraham literally means “the father is exalted.”

When God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt he revealed himself as the father of Israel – “his firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22). He was not only their one true God and master, he was their provider and protector who freed them from oppression and slavery and gave them their daily food in the wilderness. Despite their repeated failings and unfaithfulness, God continued to reveal to Israel his unbounded fatherly love and compassion (Psalm 103:3-5,13).

Jesus, the eternal Word of God who became a man for our sake and for our salvation, revealed the full nature of the Father to his disciples. John, in the prologue to his Gospel, writes: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). To be in the bosom of someone signified for the Jewish people the deepest and most intimate of relationships. Jesus, who is united with his Father in complete and uninterrupted intimacy, makes it possible for us to join in that same union of love and intimacy. Jesus’ longest and most moving parable is the story of the prodigal son who foolishly loses his inheritance, home, and family, then comes to his senses, repents and returns to the bosom of his father. Jesus taught his disciples to pray boldly and confidently to the Father in heaven (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4).

In Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul the Apostle tells us that all fatherhood, whether spiritual or natural, takes its name and origin from the Father in heaven.

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I believe in God the Father

From a sermon on the Creed by Augustine of Hippo, 5th century

I believe in God the Father. Notice how quickly it's said, and how much it's worth. He's God, and he's Father; God in power, Father in goodness. How lucky we are, to have discovered that our God is our Father! So let us believe in him and promise ourselves everything from his kindness and mercy, because he is almighty. That's why we believe in God the Father almighty.

Nobody must say, "He can't forgive me my sins."

"How can't he, being almighty?"

And I say, "But he's almighty."

And you: "I've committed such sins as I can't possibly be cleansed and delivered from."

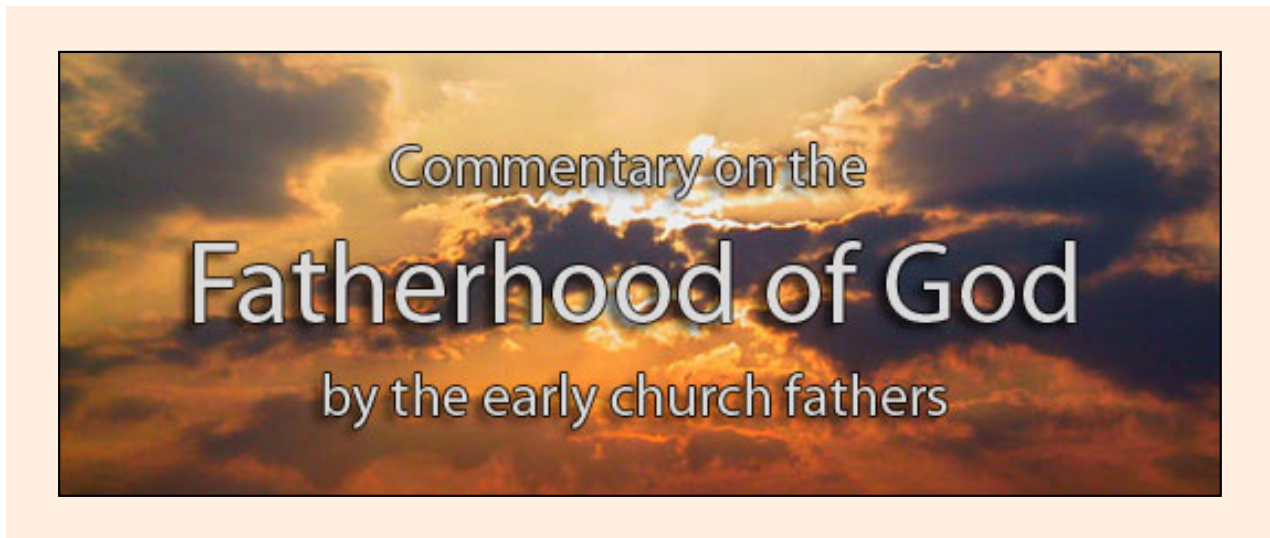
I reply, "But he's almighty."

Notice what you sing to him in the psalm: Bless the Lord, my soul, it says, and do not forget his recompenses, who shows himself gracious to all your iniquities, who heals all your weaknesses (Psalm 103:2-3). That's what we need him to be almighty for.

The whole of creation needs this, of course, in order to be created; he is almighty for making heavenly things and earthly things, almighty for making immortal things and mortal things, almighty for making spiritual things and material things, almighty for making visible things and invisible things; great in the great things, and not small in the least things; in a word, he is almighty for making whatever he has wished to make.

I mean, let me tell you how many things he can't do. He can't die, he can't sin, he can't lie, he can't be deceived

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God is Father

From a sermon by Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th century

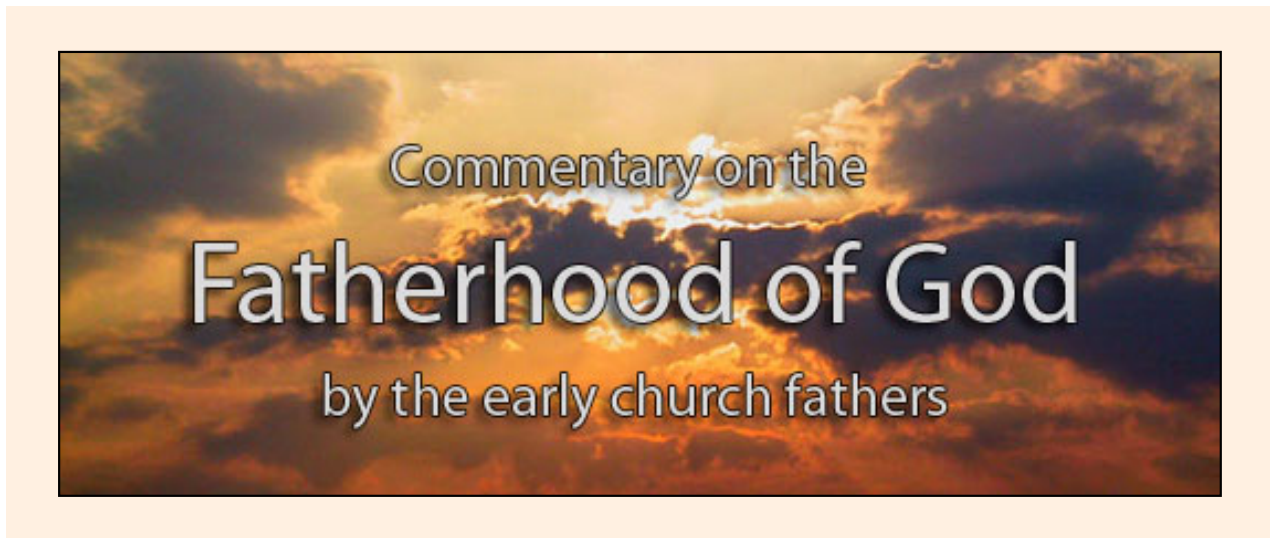
If you want to know why we call our God Father, listen to Moses: 'Is he not your Father who created you, who made you and established you?' (Deuteronomy 32:6)

Listen too to Isaiah: 'O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.' (Isaiah 64:8) Under prophetic inspiration Isaiah speaks plainly. God is our Father, not by nature, but by grace and by adoption. Paul too was a father: father of the Christians in Corinth. Not because he had begotten them according to the flesh, but because he had regenerated them according to the Spirit.

Christ when his body was fastened to the cross saw Mary, his mother according to the flesh, and John, the disciple most dear to him, and said to John: 'Behold your mother.' and to Mary: 'Behold your son.' Christ called Mary John's mother, not because she had begotten him, but because she loved him. (John 19:26-27) Joseph too was called father of Christ, not as procreator in a physical sense, but as his guardian: he was to nourish and protect him.

With greater reason God calls himself Father of human beings and wants to be called Father by us. What unspeakable generosity! He dwells in the heavens; we live on the earth. He has created the ages; we live in time. He holds the world in his hand; we are but grasshoppers on the face of the earth.

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The Foundation Stone of the Soul

From a sermon by Cyril of Jerusalem, 4th century

Let the truth of God sink into your soul to be its foundation stone. God is One, without beginning and without change. There was no one before him who caused him to be, and he will not have anyone after him. He has not had a beginning and he will not ever have an end. He is good and just.

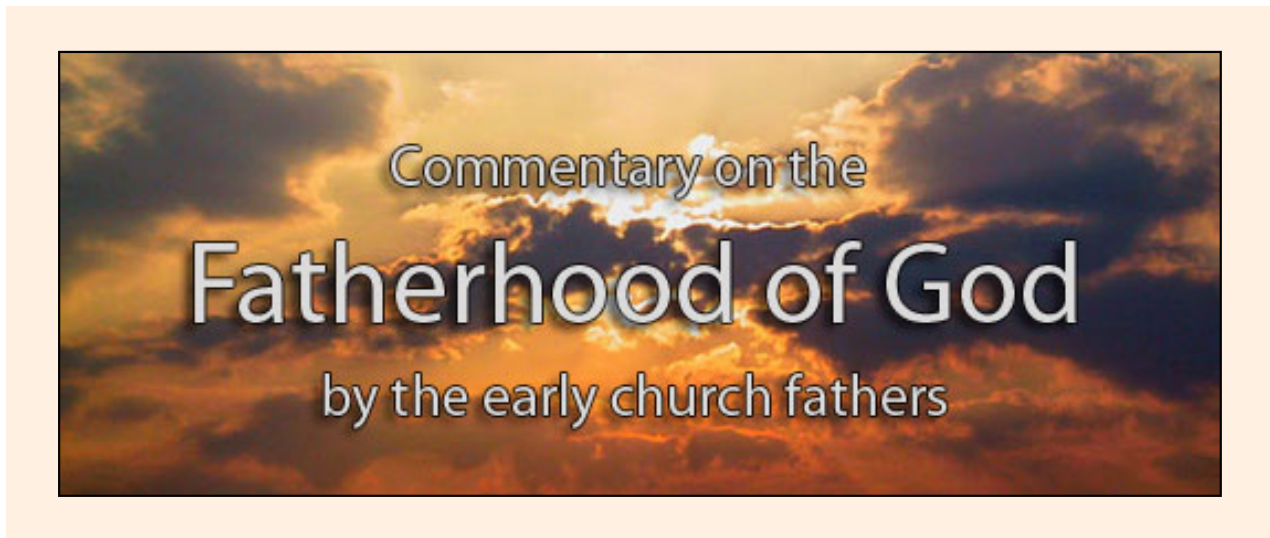
God is One and he has created souls and bodies, heaven and earth.

He is the maker of everything, yet the Father of an only Son before time began: our Lord Jesus Christ through whom he has made all things visible and invisible. God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not restricted to any one place: not even the heavens can contain him. On the contrary, the heavens are the work of his fingers and it is he who holds the universe in his hands. He is in everything and yet also beyond everything.

Do not imagine that the sun can shine more brightly than he or be as great as he. It was God who created the sun and therefore he is proportionately more magnificent and more brilliant.

He knows what will happen in the future. He is more powerful than anyone. He knows everything and does everything in accordance with his own will. He is not subject to the vicissitudes of time; he does not depend on others; he is not the victim of destiny. He is perfect in everything and possesses all the virtues in their fullness. He it is who has prepared a crown for the righteous.

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The Privilege and Responsibility of Calling God Father

From a sermon by Cyril of Alexandria, 5th century

For the Savior said, “When you pray, say, ‘Our Father.’ ” And another of the holy Evangelists adds, “who art in heaven.”...

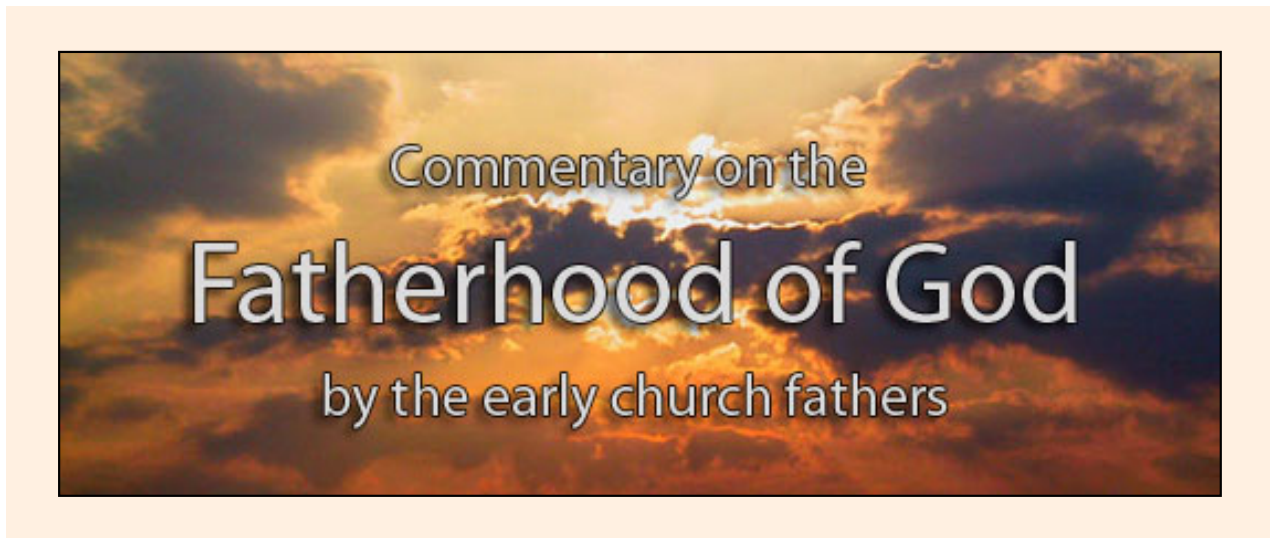
He gives his own glory to us. He raises slaves to the dignity of freedom. He crowns the human condition with such honor as surpasses the power of nature. He brings to pass what was spoken of old by the voice of the psalmist: “I said, you are gods, and all of you children of the Most High.” (Psalm 82:6) He rescues us from the measure of slavery, giving us by his grace what we did not possess by nature, and permits us to call God “Father,” as being admitted to the rank of sons. We received this, together with all our other privileges, from him. One of these privileges is the dignity of freedom, a gift peculiarly befitting those who have been called to be sons.

He commands us, therefore, to take boldness and say in our prayers, “Our Father.” We, who are children of earth and slaves and subject by the law of nature to him who created us, call him who is in heaven “Father.” Most fittingly, he enables those who pray to understand this also. Since we call God “Father” and have been counted worthy of such a distinguished honor, we must lead holy and thoroughly blameless lives. We must behave as is pleasing to our Father and not think or say anything unworthy or unfit for the freedom that has been bestowed on us....

The Savior of all very wisely grants us to call God “Father,” that we, knowing well that we are sons of God, may behave in a manner worthy of him who has honored us. He will then receive the supplications that we offer in Christ.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century

Our Father

Anyone with a bit of good sense would not make so bold as to call God by the name of Father until he had come to be like him.

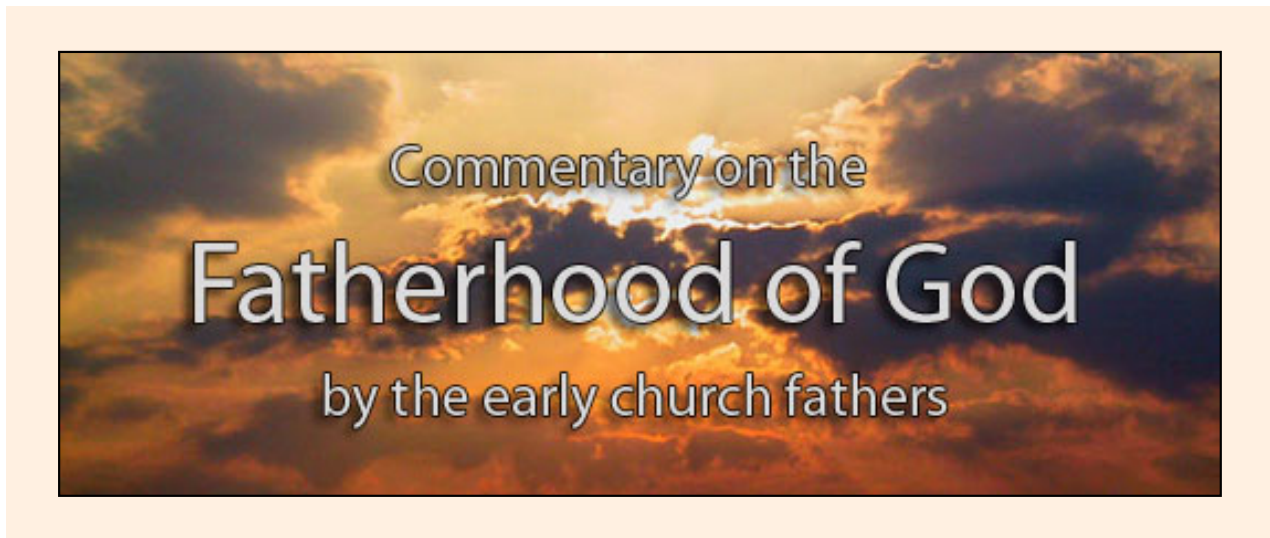
It is impossible for God who is goodness in his very being to be father to someone of evil will. It is impossible for the Holy One to be father of a depraved person. It is impossible for the Giver of life to have as a child one whose sin has subjected him to death.

So if one of us, in examining himself, discovers that his conscience is covered in mud and needs to be cleansed, he cannot allow himself such familiarity with God. First he must be purified.

Then why, in this prayer of his, does the Lord Jesus teach us to call God by the name of Father? I suppose that, in suggesting this word, he is only putting before our eyes the holiest life as the criterion of our behavior.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century

Who Art in Heaven

These words I think have a very deep meaning. They remind us of the homeland we have abandoned, of the citizenship we have lost.

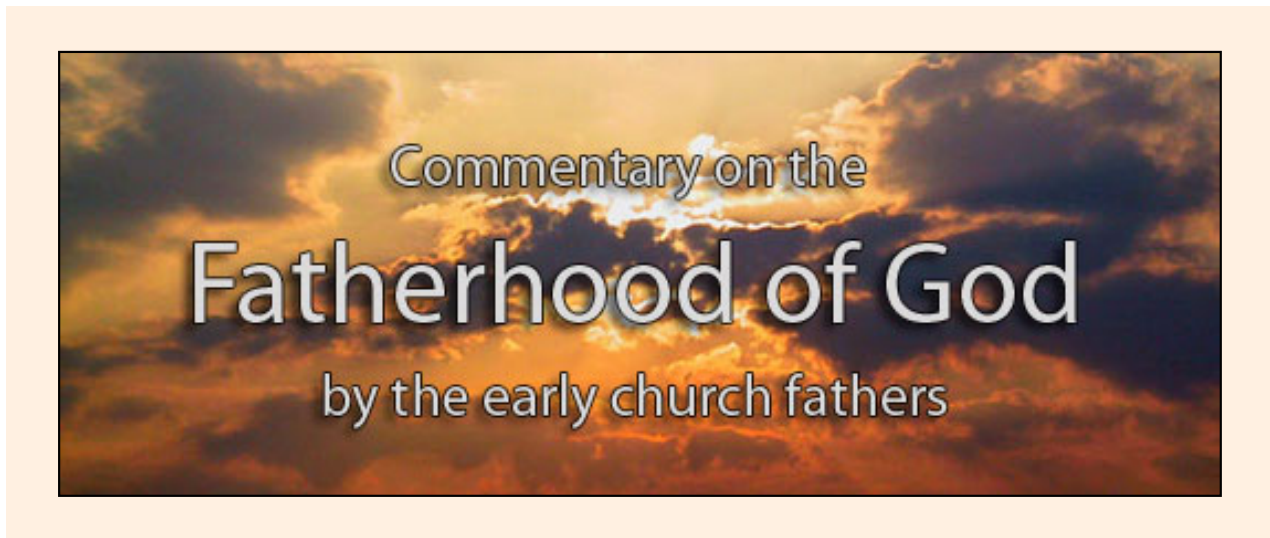
In the parable of the young man who left his father's house, went off the rails and was reduced to living with pigs, the Word of God shows us human wretchedness. That young man did not find his one-time happiness again until he had realized his moral degradation, had looked into his own heart and had pronounced the words of confession.

These words almost agree with the Lord's Prayer, because the prodigal son says: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.' (Luke 15:21) He would not confess himself to be a sinner against heaven if he were not convinced that the homeland he had left at the time of his going astray were not in actual fact heaven.

By this confession of his he makes himself worthy once again to stand in the presence of his father who runs towards him, embraces him, and kisses him.

The conclusion is this. To return to heaven there is only one route and that is to admit one's sinfulness and seek to avoid it. To make the decision to avoid it is already to be perfecting one's likeness to God.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Origen, 3rd century

Hallowed be Thy Name

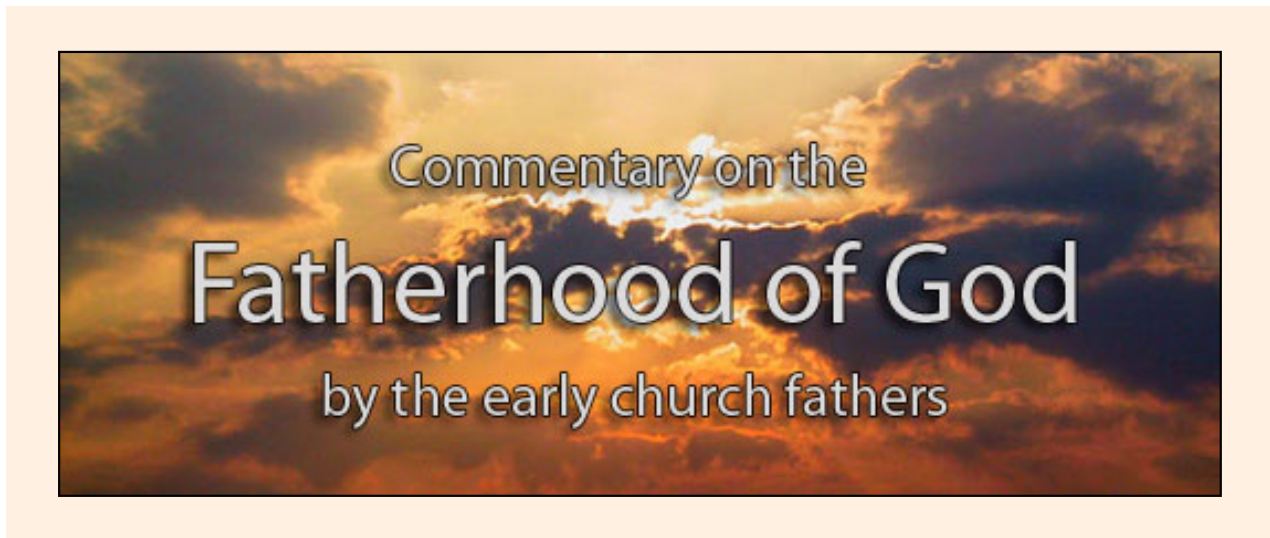
What is the meaning of the words `name' and `hallow'? 'Name' denotes the proper and exclusive nature of the being that carries it and indicates the general effect of its qualities. In human beings these qualities can change, and with them their names too. Abram came to be called Abraham, Simon became Peter, and Saul's name was changed to Paul. By contrast in the case of God who is immutable, who never changes, there is but one name, the `I am' that was given him in Exodus. (Exodus 3:14) We all endeavor to reflect on God to understand his nature, but they are few indeed that succeed in sensing his holiness.

Jesus' prayer teaches us that God is holy. It helps us to discover the holiness of the Being that creates, provides, judges, chooses and abounds in generosity, welcomes and rejects, rewards and punishes equally. This is what characterizes the quality that belongs to God, the quality that the Scriptures call by the name of God.

Therefore in the Scriptures we read: `You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,' [Exod. 20:7] and again: `May my teaching drop as the rain my speech distill as the dew, as the gentle rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb, for I will proclaim the name of the Lord.' (Deuteronomy 32:2)

Anyone who prays ought therefore to ask that the name of God may be hallowed, as is said also in the Psalms: `Let us exalt his name together.' (Psalm. 34:3) The Psalmist hopes that we may arrive, in harmony of spirit, at a true understanding of the nature of God.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Origen, 3rd century

Thy Kingdom Come

'The kingdom of God is within us,' that is, on our lips and in our hearts. (Luke 17:21) Therefore anyone who prays that the kingdom of God may not delay its coming is praying that it may be consolidated, extended, and reach its fullness within him.

Our Lord in fact dwells in all holy people who recognize God as their king and obey his spiritual laws. The Father is present in the perfect soul and Christ reigns together with the Father, according to his own actual word 'If someone loves me ... we will come to him and make our home with him.' (John 14:23)

The kingdom will not reach its fullness in each of us until wisdom and the other virtues are perfected in us. Perfection is reached at the end of a journey, so we ought to be 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.' (Philippians 3:13)

In other words, on the one hand the believer is a tireless traveler and on the other hand the kingdom of God will reach its completion in us only when the words of the Apostle are fulfilled: 'When he has subjected all things, Christ will deliver up the kingdom to the Father, that God may be all in all.' (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

Let us subdue our members to produce the fruits of the Spirit. Then the Lord will walk with us as in a spiritual paradise. He alone will reign in us, together with Christ. And we shall already possess the benefits of the new birth and of the resurrection.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Origen, 3rd century

Thy Will be Done on Earth as It is in Heaven

We who are praying are still on earth ourselves. And since we reckon that all the inhabitants of heaven fulfill the will of God in heaven, it comes naturally to us to ask that we too on earth should succeed in fulfilling the divine will. That will come about, logically, if we do nothing outside that will.

When we have perfectly accomplished it, although we are still remaining on earth we shall be like the heavenly beings and will bear equally with them the image of the heavenly Being. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:49)

In the end we shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. Those who come to take our place on earth will ask that they too may become like us who are then in heaven.

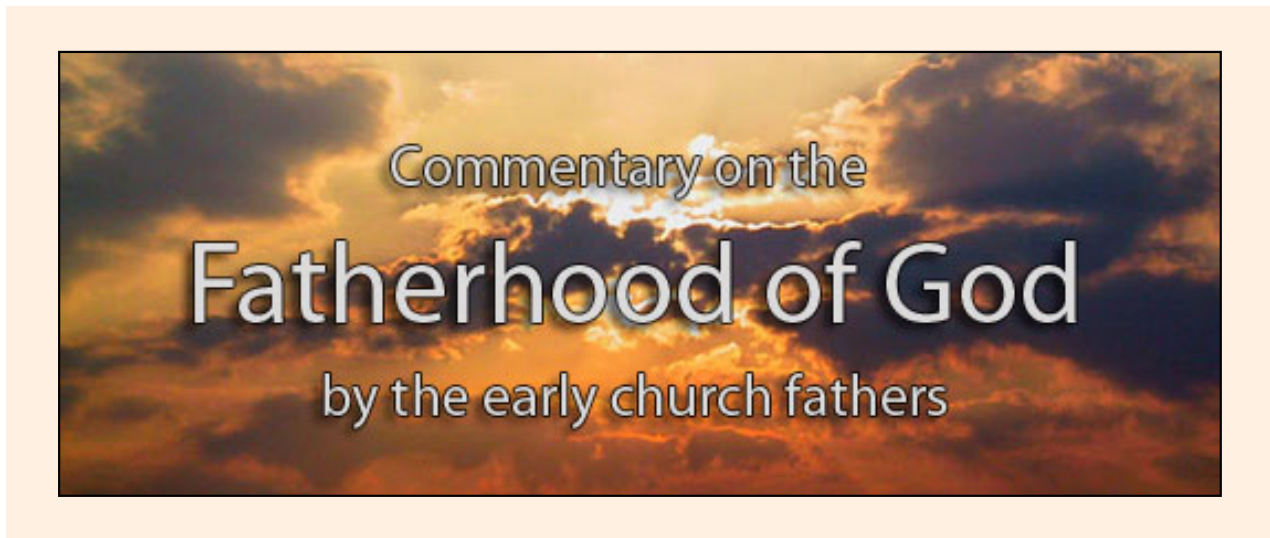
In addition it is recorded that our Lord after his resurrection said to the eleven Apostles: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' (Matthew 28:18)

Jesus claimed in short to have received authority on earth equal to that which he has in heaven. The things of heaven, at the beginning, have been illuminated by the Word. And at the end of time, thanks to the authority granted to the Son of God, the things of earth will be like those of heaven which is already perfect.

So then it is clear that Christ is calling his disciples to work faithfully with him by means of their prayers. That all earthly events may come to be transformed by the authority that Christ has received both in heaven and on earth, this ought to be our prayer.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From a sermon by Gregory of Nyssa, 4th century

Give Us this Day our Daily Bread

Bread represents life, and bread is easy to get. Moreover, nature herself gives us something to put on it to make it more tasty. The best thing to eat with bread is the peace of a good conscience. Then the bread is eaten with gusto, because it is being eaten in holiness of life.

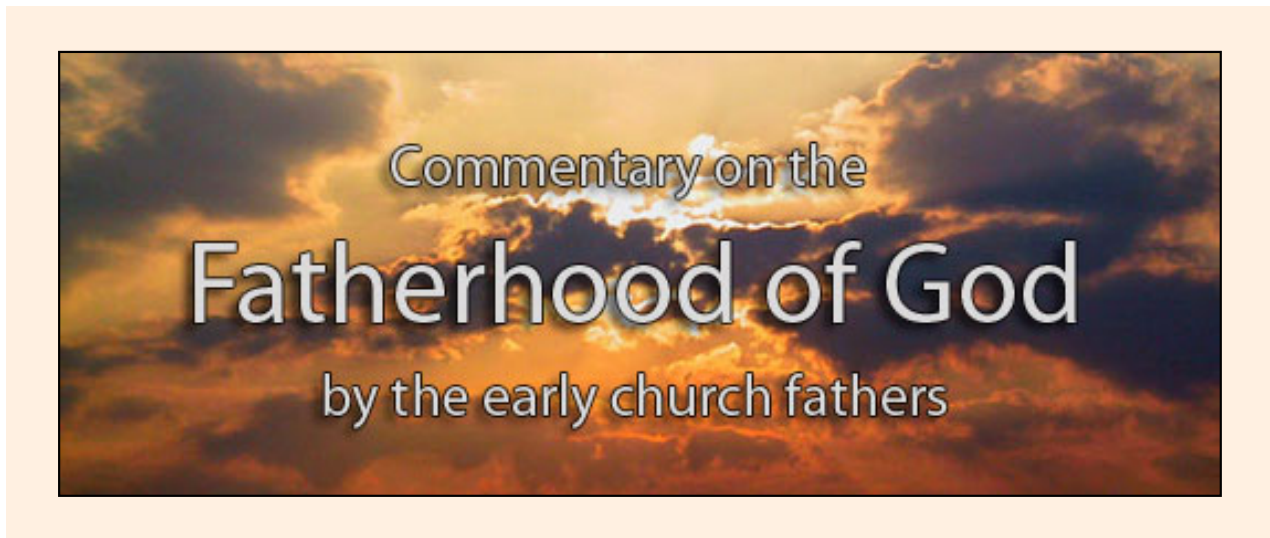
But if you want to experience the taste of bread otherwise than in symbolic description, in the physical sense in fact, you have hunger to eat it with. Therefore, first of all, don't eat too much: you would lose your appetite for a long time. And then, let your dinner be preceded by sweat. 'In the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread,' is the first commandment mentioned in the Scriptures. (Genesis 3:19)

The Lord's Prayer speaks of 'daily' bread. In saying that, let us remember that the life in which we ought to be interested is 'daily' life. We can, each of us, only call the present time our own. Why should we worry ourselves by thinking about the future?

Our Lord tells us to pray for today, and so he prevents us from tormenting ourselves about tomorrow. It is as if he were to say to us: 'He who gives you this day will also give you what you need for this day. He it is who makes the sun to rise. He it is who scatters the darkness of night and reveals to you the rays of the sun.'

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On the Lord's Prayer

From the writings of Cassian, 4th century

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

The mercy of God is beyond description. While he is offering us a model prayer he is teaching us a way of life whereby we can be pleasing in his sight.

But that is not all. In this same prayer he gives us an easy method for attracting an indulgent and merciful judgment on our lives. He gives us the possibility of ourselves mitigating the sentence hanging over us and of compelling him to pardon us. What else could he do in the face of our generosity when we ask him to forgive us as we have forgiven our neighbor?

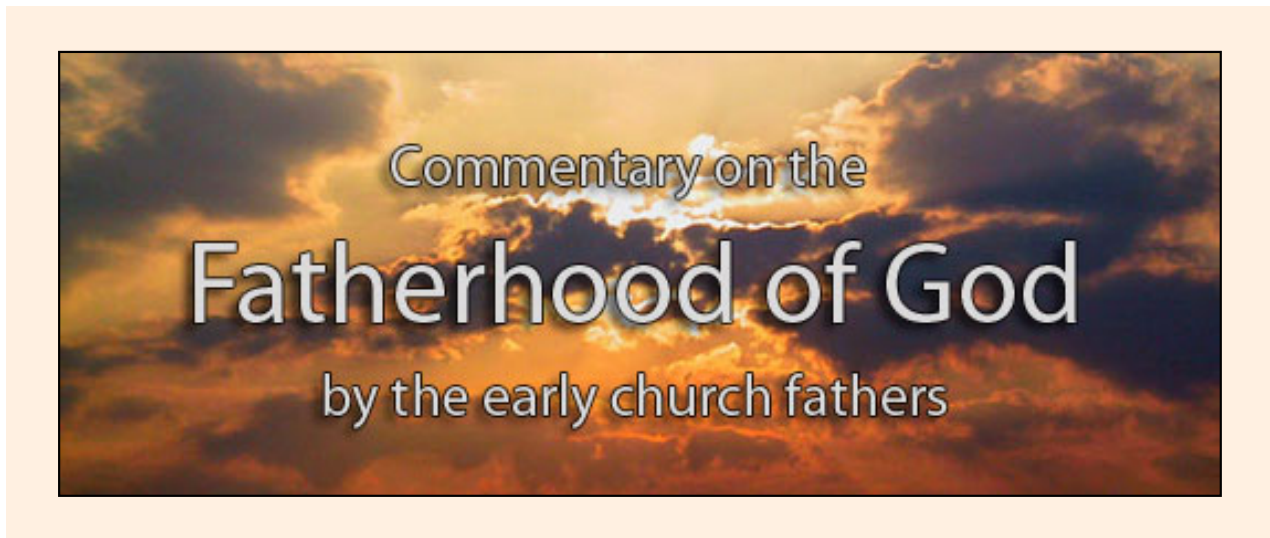
If we are faithful in this prayer, each of us will ask forgiveness for our own failings after we have forgiven the sins of those who have sinned against us. I mean those who have sinned against us, not only those who have sinned against our Master.

There is, in fact, in some of us a very bad habit. We treat our sins against God, however appalling, with gentle indulgence: but when by contrast it is a matter of sins against us ourselves, albeit very tiny ones, we exact reparation with ruthless severity.

Anyone who has not forgiven from the bottom of the heart the brother or sister who has done him wrong will not obtain from this prayer his own condemnation, rather than any mercy. It will be his own action that draws a much more severe judgment on himself, seeing that in effect by these words we are asking God to behave as we have behaved ourselves.

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On the Lord's Prayer

From the writings of Cassian, 4th century

And Lead us not into temptation

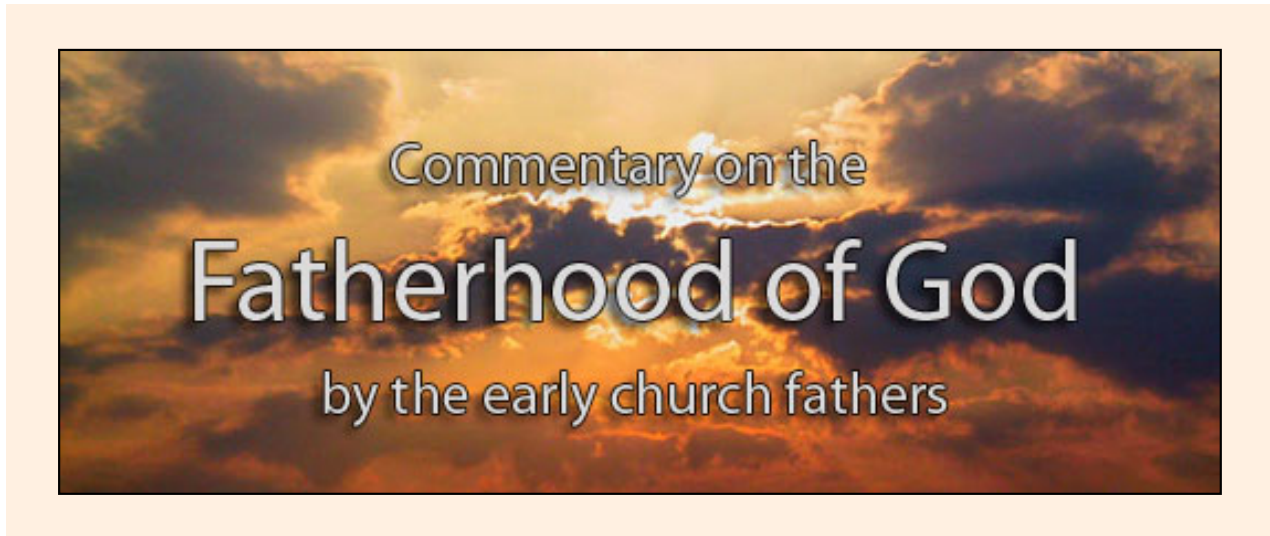
The request 'Lead us not into temptation' raises a difficult problem. If we pray God not to allow us to be tempted, what opportunity shall we have to give him proof of our steadfastness and fidelity? For it is written: 'Blessed is the one who endures temptation and overcomes it.' (cf. James.1:12)

Then what is the meaning of this phrase? It does not mean: do not allow us to come into temptation. It means: when we come into temptation, let us not be defeated by it. Job was tempted but he did not give way to the temptation. In fact, he did not accuse the divine Wisdom, he did not go down the road of blasphemy to which the Tempter wanted to attract him.

Abraham was tempted, and Joseph was tempted. But neither one nor the other yielded to the temptation, because neither of them said 'yes' to the Tempter. So praying the Lord's Prayer is like saying: 'Together with the temptation, give us also the strength to overcome it.' (1 Corinthians 10:13)

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On the Lord's Prayer

by **Cyprian of Carthage, 3rd century**

But Deliver Us from Evil

The Lord's Prayer has an ending which neatly summarizes the different requests. We say actually at the end: 'But deliver us from evil,' understanding by such an expression everything that the Enemy can devise against us in this world.

One certain conviction we have: that God is a powerful support since he grants his help to anyone who asks for it.

Consequently, when we say: 'Deliver us from evil,' there is nothing else left for us to ask. Invoking the protection of God against evil means asking for everything we need.

This prayer secures us against any kind of machination of the devil and of the world. Who could be afraid of the world if he has God as his protector?

You see, brothers and sisters, how amazing the Lord's Prayer is. It is truly a compendium of all the requests we could possibly make.

Our Lord Jesus Christ who came for all people, for the wise as for the ignorant, without distinction of sex or age, reduces the precepts of salvation to the essential minimum. He wants even the simplest to be able to understand and remember them.

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Sunset - Puri, India by Tashimelampo

The Sins of the Fathers – Part II Touching the Void

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me – Exodus 20:5

by Tadhg Lynch

Upon returning to the United States from a mission trip to India I was asked to give a presentation to a small group about my journey and what I had experienced. Being a child of the digital age, when I talk to people – even just a friend at the bus stop – I have to use power-point. I decided to call my power-point, “India 2009: Touching the Void.” I thought it sounded kind of cool: vague, artsy, and meaningful.

After the presentation, a friend asked me why I had used the title from a book about mountaineers in the South American Andes. I was more than a little taken aback and mumbled something incoherent to get out of the conversation and move away. I had stolen a title. I had tried to pass off something I’d seen on a film store shelf as a memory of my own – it mattered little that I had done it unconsciously – that almost made it worse.

One of the most difficult things to do is to explain to someone in the Western world that they are a sinner. In the grand scheme of things, our problems could be a lot worse. Though jobs are tighter and harder to find in the recession, we won’t starve. Although our children may not go to the best schools in the country, they’ll get a decent education. Although we may never own the Porsche” we deserve,” we do have a car – and Toyota’s not such a bad brand anyway. When we don’t see the effects of sin in front of our eyes, it can be difficult to believe in it. We tell ourselves that the problems that arise around us are a matter of social organisation or of improper regulation, or even because of regulation. To tell someone about the gospel necessitates telling them that they are a sinner – if we have not sinned we have no need for a savior. The reason Christianity is different from all other religions is that God proposes a solution to the problem of separation from him – death in our mortal bodies so as to become alive again in Christ who is free from sin. If I don’t think I’ve sinned I have no need of Christ.

Sometimes I get a little frustrated with covenant community because, for the most part, we have easy lives. We generally belong to decent middle class families with good incomes. Our message to people is to “give your life to the Lord.” Unsurprisingly this often results in your life going rather well. We don’t seem to connect with the world around us as well as we should because we are busy “being community.” We can sometimes begin to look like we don’t have anything wrong with us, as though we don’t need a savior. The temptation to think like this misses the fact that we are sinners. The reason I need a savior is because I lose my temper or drink too much or am prideful, but it’s also simply because I’m a human being. Humanity is a sinful condition.

There is something hard-wired into the world which causes it (and me in it) not to function. Therefore I lose my temper and drink too much and I am prideful. Sin works its way into our lives in various ways, but it comes first because it is original – it’s part of our condition. If those to whom we reach out do not realise this or do not see us living in the reality of dependence upon a savior, they will never come to know Christ.

What I saw in India was original sin. People who lived on the side of the street and were thankful that they had a roof over their heads, though no indoor plumbing. Orphans living in the Happy House who had a high chance of dying from the cancer that had killed their parents. Expensive clothing stores that welcomed me – a white foreigner – and shooed away the street children our team was trying to connect with. Original sin is nobody’s fault and it is everybody’s. The reason people in the developing world are hungry is because of the choices we all make – but it is first because of original sin. The reason people in the Western world lose their house to foreclosure is again, at root, because of original sin. If the human race acknowledged its dependence of God and we fully honoured him with our lives, these things would not happen. Because we do not, they do. And they occur with such a depressing regularity wherever you go that they make the word “original” seem like a bad pun. It’s an old adage that the devil does not make bad things happen to the world, he just wrecks the good ones. This is why India made me think of original sin: there is so much good life there, and I thought I had touched it. Perhaps I had, but when I went to explain it to the first people who asked me about it I used a tired cliché. I reached into the back of my mind and came up with a phrase and an image [touching the void] that had stained me at some point in my past and I believed it was my own.

I think this is the way original sin works. We don’t remember how we got it but we know it’s ours. We don’t notice committing it but we recall the feeling. Somewhere in ages past it leaked into the world and started to change it, and no matter how we try to avoid the thought or the notion of it, it is part of us. We are all “sons of Adam” and “daughters of Eve” – there is a burden with that inheritance, a bequest in a will that is mainly debt to be serviced. There is sharp inequality in our world – an inequality which, in truth, one man cannot fix. There is a depressing “hugeness” about the presence of sin (once one accepts that it exists) which tempts us to think that we can never overcome it – never make a dent in the edifice of its being or never cross over the chasm which it has built in us and the world which God created as “good”. Once I accept the sin of my father Adam, however, there is a revision, or perhaps more truly, a reversion. The Bible says of Christ that, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth” (Col 1:15-16). Now, all human affairs hang on Christ because they were created in him in the first place and so I need no longer worry for the sin of my father – which is my sin. Although through my father Adam I am sinful, through Christ my sin has now been dealt with - he has hung it upon himself, he has “reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20). As Watchman Nee points out in *The Normal Christian Life*, “We need not work to die, we need not wait to die, we are dead. We need only recognise what the Lord has already done, and to praise him for it.” When I look at things in that light, they make more sense, or at least they are more manageable.

I don’t need to fix original sin – it has been done for me. I need only accept that I am a sinner and then I can enter into God’s grace and mercy and begin to live in it. I don’t need to fix the financial crisis or solve world hunger – those are perhaps good things to work towards but they are not the starting point. I need to realise that I am sinful, that it is part of my condition and will always be. I need to ask forgiveness to the people I have hurt, give back to Christ what I have taken as my own and accept the sacrifice he made for my sins, but that’s it. There’s nothing more to say about it. I must confess I found this wonderfully freeing during my time in India. I was able to spend time with the people there, play with the kids and talk to the old folks without worrying about the light fading from the

evening and the looming problem of bedtime – it was in someone else’s hands. The hands of good brothers and sisters in the Sword of the Spirit who are doing the same things people all around the world are doing. Preaching the same message to their friends to “give your life to the Lord,” leading busy lives taken up with the process of “being community.” The sin of our first father was a terrible thing – leading to corruption and schism in the world – but the solution to that problem is a solution to all problems. It may not allow you to fix world hunger just yet, but it might allow you to touch someone, without guile, and that will do for me as a starter.



Tadhg Lynch is a member of the [Community of Nazareth](#) in Dublin, Ireland. He currently resides with the [Servants of the Word](#) in Lansing, Michigan, USA and is a staff worker for [University Christian Outreach](#).

One of Tadhg's highlights in India was his visit with orphans.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com

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The Stilling of the Storm at Sea:

Lord of the Wind and Waves

A Scriptural reflection
by Jeanne Kun

The untroubled sleep of Jesus and his sovereign authority over wind and wave are a powerful invitation to recognize in him the one who can do all things.

—René Latourelle, SJ, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*

Both human and divine

At Jesus' initiative the apostles set out across the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore, six or seven miles distant, as the sun was setting behind the Galilean hills (Mark 4:35). Tired after a long day of preaching and teaching, Jesus slept soundly in the stern of the boat, oblivious to the rising squall. This is the sole instance recorded in the gospels of Jesus sleeping, an image that vividly illustrates his humanness, as well as the hiddenness of his divine nature, which is a dominant theme in Mark's gospel.

Experienced fishermen that they were, Jesus' disciples were badly frightened by the violence of the storm. Following their master had gotten them into this life-threatening situation, and a reproachful tone is heard in their anxious cry as they woke him: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). *Melo*, the Greek verb used in this complaint, can also be translated "Does it not matter to you?" The same verb is found in Martha's question, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (Luke 10:40). In both instances, Jesus' response was the same: to calm the turbulence of troubled hearts and the



The Storm at Sea by Rembrandt

Mark 4:35-41

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" 39 And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" 41 And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

In the Spotlight: Wisdom from the Church Fathers

He who was sleeping was awakened and cast the sea into a sleep. He reveals the wakefulness of his divinity that never

storms that raged around him.

The waves are his creatures

With a mere word of command—“Be still!” (Mark 4:39)—Jesus subdued the wind and the sea, showing his power over natural elements. Just as God brought the waters into being (Genesis 1:6-10), tamed roaring waves (Psalm 65:7), and parted the Red Sea before Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 14:21-22; Psalm 77:16, 19-20), Jesus exercised authority and showed mastery over the storm-tossed waters of the Sea of Galilee. “The waves are his creatures and behave as such by offering him the fealty of obedience,” notes Scripture commentator Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (*Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word*).

In ancient times, the wind and sea were often seen as symbols of chaos. The way Jesus rebuked the elements may also imply that there was an evil force behind the storm, for he calmed the waves with the same command that he used to silence unclean spirits (Mark 1:25; Luke 4:35). It is noteworthy that this miraculous event occurred while Jesus was crossing the lake to pagan territory—the country of the Gerasenes—where he was extending his ministry to gentiles and was soon to confront the unclean spirit “Legion” and heal the man possessed by a demon (Mark 5:1-13). In each of the synoptic gospels, the report of the stilling the storm leads into a sequence recounting Jesus’ authority and power in exorcising evil spirits, curing the ill, and raising the dead (Matthew 8:28–9:31; Mark 5:1-42; Luke 8:26-56). René Latourelle notes that “Jesus is victorious over death, sickness, sin, and the forces of nature, simply because in his very being he is God-among-us. It is not more difficult for him to control the wind and the sea than to prevail over sin and death” (*The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*).

Who Jesus really is

When the terrified disciples woke Jesus, was it only to reproach him with a cry of desperation because they thought they were doomed? Even if their cry expressed an expectant faith that he could do something to save them, their

sleeps by the wakefulness of the sea that was now sleeping. He rebuked the wind and it became still. What is this power, or what is this goodness of Jesus? See, he subjected by force that which was not his. Our Lord showed that he was the Son of the Creator by means of the wind of the sea and by the spirits and demons that he silenced.

— Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron*

We are also sailing on a voyage, not from one land to another but from earth to heaven. Let us prepare our power of reasoning as a pilot able to conduct us on high, and let us gather a crew obedient to it. Let us prepare a strong ship, the kind that the buffeting and discouragements of this life will not submerge, or the wind of false pretense raise up, but will be sleek and swift. If we prepare the ship, pilot and the crew in this way, we will sail with a favoring wind and draw to ourselves the Son of God, the true Pilot. He will not permit our ship to be overwhelmed, even if countless winds blow. He will rebuke the winds and the sea and will bring about a great calm in place of the tempest.

— John Chrysostom, *Commentary on St. John*

understanding and faith were still deficient: For they did not yet realize that their teacher was the Son of God and that therefore they were safe all along. Finally, the disciples' fear of the storm turned into awe at Jesus' tremendous deed, and they wondered, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). Jesus' display of power awakened them to the mystery of his transcendence and identity.

The question of who Jesus really is is a recurring theme in the gospels (Luke 5:21; 7:49; 8:25). It is also a question each of us must answer in the depths of our own heart, especially when we are faced with the need of a savior in the storms of life.

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior womens' leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

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The Lavish Love of the Prodigal Father

A reflection on Jesus' parable in Luke 15:11-32

by Don Schwager

How can you love someone dear to when they turn their back on you and still forgive them from the heart? The prophets remind us that God does not abandon us, even if we turn our backs on him (Micah 7:18). He calls us back to himself – over and over and over again.

Jesus' story of the father and his two sons (sometimes called the parable of the prodigal son) is the longest and most moving parable in the Gospels. What is the main point or focus of the story? Is it the contrast between an obedient and a disobedient son, or is it between the warm reception given to the wayward son by his father and the cold reception given to him by the elder son?

Jesus contrasts the father's lavish, merciful love with the eldest son's harsh reaction to it. While the errant son had wasted his father's money, the father maintained unbroken love for him. The son, while he was away, learned a lot about himself. And he realized that his father had given him love which he had not returned. He had yet to learn about the depth of his father's love for him. His deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed on the husks meant for the pigs and his reflection on all he had lost led to his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father. While he hoped for reconciliation with his father, he could not have imagined a full restoration of relationship.

The father did not need to speak words of forgiveness to his son; his actions spoke more loudly and clearly! The beautiful robe, the ring, and the festive banquet symbolize the gift of new life – pure, worthy, and joyful – which God gives to those who return to him.

The prodigal could not return to the garden of innocence, but he was welcomed and reinstated as a son. The errant son's dramatic change from grief and guilt to forgiveness



The Prodigal Son by Rembrandt

Luke 15:11-32

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; 12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. 15 So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and

and restoration express in picture-language the resurrection from the dead, a rebirth from spiritual death to new life.

The parable also contrasts mercy and its opposite – unforgiveness. The father who had been wronged, was forgiving. But the eldest son, who had not been wronged, was unforgiving. His unforgiveness turns into contempt and pride. And his resentment leads to his isolation and estrangement from the community of forgiven sinners.

In this parable Jesus gives a vivid picture of God and what God is like. God is truly kinder than we are. He does not lose hope or give up when we stray. He rejoices in finding the lost and in welcoming them home. Do you know the joy of repentance and the restoration of relationship as a son or daughter of your heavenly Father?

kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; 23 and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; 24 for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

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Pursuing Holiness in an Unholy World

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect – Romans 12:2

by Tom Caballes

This article is based on a talk given at a [Lamb of God](#) community men's retreat in Auckland, New Zealand in May 2009.

Have you ever wondered why it is not easy to be a Christian nowadays? Why is it that it is not easy to be holy? Why is it very hard to bring other people to God? Why is peer pressure so hard to resist?

One big reason is that we live in an unholy world. It is like coaching a rugby, basketball, or cricket team; you are playing against an opponent who has extra men on the field; even worse, some of your players are injured and some are working for the other team (throwing the game away)! It is the same with the daily battle for holiness: it is extremely difficult for us to win the battle because the odds are stacked against us. It is an uphill battle. "Everyone else is doing it – why can't I?" Not only is the enemy everywhere, they are also inside us – our unredeemed human nature, the flesh.

Because everything in the world, the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but of the world (1 John 2:16).

The Incredible Salmon

The life of a salmon is a very interesting. From the fresh water rivers, they go through their normal life cycle as eggs and fingerlings and eventually live in the sea. But once they reach maturity, they have an absolute resolve to go back to their spawning grounds, hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. The trip back to their spawning grounds is a seemingly impossible task, full of dangers, traps, and obstacles, as they will be swimming against the overbearing

current of the rivers. Many of the salmon die going back to their grounds – bears and birds of prey catch them and eat them. Some of them hit the rocks, logs, and other obstacles along the way and die. Sometimes they have to swim through shallow waters just to get through their journey. But they never stop or rest from swimming against the current – otherwise it would carry them away from their destination. The incredible thing is, in order for them to reach their spawning grounds, they have to jump upstream, up a waterfall and sometimes more than once in their journey. Many of their jumps fail but they persist – until they get through the waterfall, or die trying. Against all odds, many of them eventually reach their spawning grounds and a new generation of salmon eggs are laid and later hatch to become fingerlings. You can probably count yourself lucky not to be a salmon!

But you are a Christian. And guess what? The odds are stacked heavily against you if you are resolved to follow God. And there is a very strong current that is sweeping across the face earth. A current of wickedness, immorality, blatant and not so blatant sin. Acceptance and practice of ungodly values and activities pervade the world we live in.

I really don't know who is in a better place – the salmon swimming upstream to their spawning grounds or us Christians trying to live holy lives in an unholy world.

Pursue...holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). God desires us to pursue holiness at all costs, because without holiness we cannot see the Lord. Make no mistake about it – the world that we live in is an unholy world. We need to actively pursue holiness if we desire to draw closer to God, because the world will not give us holiness on a silver platter but will put all hindrances and obstacles in front of us. It is extremely difficult to win the battle, and we need to learn from the salmon: to have an absolute resolve, come what may, to reach our “spawning grounds” – heaven.

The battle for holiness rages in various areas of our lives. Our hearts, our minds, our wills – these are the battle fronts, where most of the battles are lost and won. The battle for holiness takes place in our desires, our emotions, and attitudes, our judgment and reasoning, our relationships, our speech patterns, our past and its memories, and our use of media.

Our Strategy for Winning the Battle for Holiness

In order for us to win the battle of holiness in our lives, we need a good strategy. We need to have specific battle plans to succeed. Below are some specific action plans we can implement.

1. Yield to God's power – ask the Holy Spirit for power and strength. Therefore submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).
2. Every day commit yourself to put the flesh to death. Likewise count yourselves also to be truly dead to sin, but alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lust (Romans 6:11-12).
3. Decide to be holy every day. Pray: “Today, I offer my day to you, Lord – I want to consecrate it to you, and I want to be holy, and I will be holy today. Today I will make a covenant with my own eyes before you Lord” (see Job 31:1).
4. Guard your hearts always, be aware when temptations come, where your weak points are – and flee. But you, O man of God, flee these things and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness (1 Timothy 6:11). If the salmon stops swimming, it will be carried back by the current – if you let your guard down, you will fall.
5. Be conscious of your thoughts: submit them to Christ. Do not sugar-coat or justify sin. Call sin a sin and do not make excuses for yourself. Count yourself dead to sin. [Say to yourself: “I do not do those things anymore – I am dead to those things.”] We take every thought captive so that it is obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

6. Live a life with accountability now – live in the light! Make commitments and be accountable to one another for those commitments; we can help each other – not judge, but help. You yourselves used to be in the darkness, but since you have become the Lord's people, you are in the light. So you must live like people who belong to the light, for it is the light that brings a rich harvest of every kind of goodness, righteousness, and truth. Try to learn what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the worthless things that people do, things that belong to the darkness. Instead, bring them out to the light (Ephesians 5:8-11).

One day, everything that we do in darkness will be brought to light; God will expose all our hidden thoughts and actions. It is better to be accountable here now (where we can change) rather than when God judges us. There is nothing that can be hid from God; everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes. And it is to him that we must all give an account of ourselves (Hebrews 4:13).

7. Get rid of all our grudges, resentments and lack of forgiveness and live in freedom! All these are chains that bind us in prison and prevent us from growing in holiness.

8. Fill your mind with God's word. As it says in Philippians 4:8: Finally, my brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are right, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, and whatever things are of good report; if there is any virtue and if there is any praise, think on these things.

9. Guard your eyes always – especially with the media: "I have made an agreement with my eyes. Then how can I look with lust at a virgin?" (Job 31:1)

10. Develop good holy habits – for new Christians, this will include habits of prayer, reading Scripture, and doing service. For older Christians, habits like simple living, generosity, dying to one's self, simplicity, humility, and being Christ-like in all that you do are things for you to grow in.

11. Review your day before you sleep. How did the battle for holiness go today? Were there battles lost and is there anything you need to repent of?

12. For married people, decide to be a "one-woman man" or a "one-man woman." We should not have any intimate or special relationship with anyone of the opposite sex aside from our spouse, including those in fantasies and daydreams. For all men, God desires us to treat "older women as mothers, the younger as sisters in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:2) and the same would go for women in their relationships with men. For single people, you need to offer your sexuality to God daily and decide to be chaste in all of your relationships. Unless you are in a courting relationship in preparation for marriage you should have no intimate or special relationship with anyone of the opposite sex, including those in fantasies and daydreams.

13. Avoid situations and circumstances that are not healthy for purity. "Wax melts before fire." One pitfall many Christians face daily is the area of media, especially use of the internet. While there are many good things the internet provides us, there are also many bad things available out there – where the flesh and the world can cause havoc in our lives. You need to live a life with accountability in the way you use the internet.

14. Live in the present and not in the past – do not re-live the "sins of our youth." Consider yourself dead to sin, including your past sins. *Avoid the passions of youth, and strive for righteousness, faith, love, and peace, together with those who with a pure heart call out to the Lord for help* (2 Timothy 2:22).

15. Be patient – never give up; it is a battle for a lifetime. Like the salmon, press on.

The Answer to an Unholy World – Christian Community

Living in a Christian community is a great blessing to anyone who desires to follow God. The Christian community

is an antidote, a counter-culture, the opposite of what the world offers us. If we compare ourselves to the salmon, it is a “counter-current” which makes our journey easier. Although communities and their members are imperfect, they give us an alternative and a place where we can experience love, acceptance, care, and support as we strive for holiness. We are not alone – we are side by side with other brothers and sisters who dare to “swim against the current and swim side by side” with us. They are the people who can help us to live our lives with accountability, where we can receive guidance and practical help, not judgment or condemnation.

I have been in Christian community for so long that sometimes I take it for granted. One time, I thought of what my life would be like if I decided not to follow Christ in Christian community – and I can see the results all around me. Temporal and fleeting pleasures, breaking the law, depression, gloom, life without a purpose, broken family and relationships, all sorts of addictions, and sicknesses, among many other things. A life of short-term delights but long-term misery and despair, without any sense of direction, would have summarized my life now, if I did not insist on pursuing a life of holiness in Christian community.



Tom Caballes is the National Senior Administrator and a branch leader for the [Lamb of God](#), a national community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. Tom also leads [Kairos New Zealand](#), an outreach program for high school, university, and post-university aged people.

Tom and his wife Mhel and their two daughters live in Auckland, New Zealand.

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New Girl in the Community

This is a taste of heaven on earth... the way life was meant to be lived

by Elizabeth Grace Saunders

Twelve months ago, I heard about community. Six months ago, I visited it. One week ago, I immersed myself in it at the Sword of the Spirit North American Region Summer Conference in Hillsdale, Michigan, from June 18-21.

I'm super new to this way of life (I had to ask one of the community members to define the different level of commitments over dinner in the Hillsdale conference center cafeteria) but I'm exploring community with gusto and found the conference enlightening.

I'm a 26-year-old entrepreneur who has been following God on an amazing adventure over the last year. In July 2008, I was participating in a 40-day Christian leadership-training program in the northern woods of Minnesota with an organization called Tentmakers. There I met four men from the [Servants of the Word](#), Nico Angleys, Brian Laba, Stu Ferguson, and Mike Kramer who were also participating in the Tentmakers program.

I quickly discovered that these guys were "urban monks" from an ecumenical missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord and they were also involved in an ecumenical Christian community, called [Word of Life](#), in Ann Arbor, Michigan, composed of married couples, families, and single people. They invited me to visit the community in Ann Arbor.

I took them up on their offer with an overnight trip in December. Then I felt God calling me to learn more by living in Ann Arbor for January and February and participating in the Word of Life community. I had a lovely time with Dan and Stephanie Smith and their four children. And after a period of discernment, I decided to move to Ann Arbor to stay with the Word of Life community.

Since my arrival on June 1 of this year, I've truly been welcomed by the community—several guys helped me unload my moving truck (which I had driven 16 hours all by myself!) and my three amazing housemates, Esther Benson, Elizabeth Crabtree, and Hannah Gornik invited me to outings almost every night for the first couple of weeks.

But the summer conference truly took my understanding of community to a whole new level.

Covenant Commitment

“This is the way life was meant to be lived,” was a phrase that Steve Clark, one of the founders of this modern communities movement, shared during his sessions about the second table or list of the ten commandments, the one about loving other people. And Dan Keating, a lecturer in theology at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit and one of the key teachers at the conference, also emphasized the point that the ten commandments reflect “the way the Lord made things.”

During the conference, I began to grasp that God’s intention for covenant community is supposed to truly permeate every aspect of community life. And from my short acquaintance with the community, I can certainly testify that this observance of God’s divine order gives community a richness, blessing, and security that I hadn’t previously witnessed in my twenty-odd years of following Christ.

Because the conference drew people from many communities in North America, I seized the opportunity to talk with as many people around me as possible. One of my favorite questions to ask was, “How did you join community?” One response that I heard again and again was... “Some years ago someone invited me to a prayer meeting on a college campus where I met Christians living in community...”

What I want to say to those who have lived in community for many years, “Do you realize how precious that is?” I’ve heard a bit about the ups and downs and trials the Sword of the Spirit has encountered over the years, but the fact that people from all over the world have committed themselves to one another and to a lifestyle for even four decades is priceless. In a disposable culture, lasting relationships, let alone communities, are rare gems.

The in-depth teaching on the ten commandments showed me how important the Sword of the Spirit considers the keeping of the covenant – both with one another and also with God. Because God has so richly blessed us, we long to love him by obeying his commandments. Also we want to experience the blessing of community as he intended it by following what he tells us to do and encouraging those around us to do the same.

In this covenant commitment to God and to one another, I truly saw a little taste of heaven on earth.

Charismatic Worship

I had grown up exercising the gifts of the Spirit, but during and after college I ended up in Christian groups and churches that weren’t charismatic. For me, Word of Life and especially the prayer meetings during the conference brought me back to my spiritual roots. It was like coming home to a good and true place. At the conference, the Spirit of God was awakened in me in a new, fresh, and vibrant way. Each time we sang together, I imagined we were the choruses of saints surrounding the Lord’s throne and I just felt like the cares of everyday life seemed completely insignificant in comparison.

Over the past few years, I’ve gone to churches where some people were super engaged in worshiping God and living out his call for their lives and others weren’t. I’m sure that this is true in any body of faith, but I’ll admit that it has sometimes been discouraging when not many people are singing during worship time or seem to be indifferent to what they are learning.

But at the summer conference, the prayer times were electric! I couldn’t see a single person not singing out to God and praising him with their whole heart. It was amazing to hear the voices from the chairs ring much louder than those onstage and to feel swept away in a chorus to our God. As we were singing, I felt like I experienced truly being part of the one body of Christ in the unity of the Spirit.

It was also encouraging to hear people share words from the Lord and to review past prophecies to the communities during the final session at the conference. The presentation was entitled “Darkness in the Abundant Life” given by Paul Dinolfo, President of the Sword of the Spirit’s North American Region. It was encouraging and strengthening to be reminded that God is living and active and bringing his will to pass.

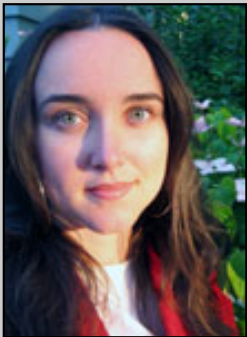
Ecumenical Calling

As a Protestant, I knew I was in the minority at the conference but was a bit thrown off when I found out on Sunday morning when we split for church services that we Protestants were about 10 percent of the 260-person conference. This is quite a new experience for me, but as my Protestant pastoral leader and I like to say, “They need us or they wouldn’t be ecumenical!”

Although this dynamic takes a bit of adjustment, I am learning about the richness of tradition and about intentional living from my Catholic brothers and sisters. And I’m told that we Protestants add our own special flavor to the group. I found it especially helpful to share our viewpoints on applying the lessons from the talks during our discussion group times. It helped me to better understand the perspective of my Catholic brothers and sisters who may come at situations from a different angle.

But more importantly than these philosophical musings, I loved seeing ecumenical community lived out. Both on a personal and global level in my walk as a Christian, I had already seen the devastating effects of a lack of unity. But on Saturday night during our prayer meeting I stood next to a lovely Scottish Catholic woman and sang in chorus with her and all the saints, “Be thou my vision...”

And I thought, *This is a taste of heaven on earth...this is the one body in Christ... this is the way life was meant to be lived.*



Elizabeth Grace Saunders is a part of the [Word of Life Community](#) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She works as a freelance writer and a time coach and speaker empowering women in business to achieve work/life brilliance through [Schedule Makeovers](#).

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Deliver Us From Evil

Some practical tips on praying with youth

by **Michael Shaughnessy**

The end of the Lord's prayer might be better translated from the Greek as “deliver us from the evil one.” At least some of the temptations we encounter come not from the world or the flesh but from the devil. Parents and youth workers personally experience the slings and arrows, the lies and temptations, of the evil one. The same is true for our youth.

They too are under attack from the evil one, but when was the last time they received prayer to be delivered from his work? There are at least four good reasons to believe your children are under spiritual attack from the evil one: because the Lord said so, because they are Christians, because they are human and because the evil one is, well, evil. We can help youth be delivered from evil by praying with them.

Praying with youth

When praying with your children or the youth in your youth group, it is helpful to keep a few things in mind. Some temptations, possibly most, are attacks on the mind. They are lies from the Father of Lies. The three most helpful things we can do are 1) expose the lie, that is, bring it into the light, 2) rebuke the lying spirit in the name of Jesus, and 3) pray for strength for the person not to believe the lie anymore.

Some temptations are attacks on the emotions. Often discouragement, anger and fears faced by youth are magnified by the evil one. Simply identifying that this is the case can help youth deal with their emotions better, but praying with them is important to do also.

Some temptations are attacks on the will. In such cases it is important for the person to renounce the evil spirit at work on their will and reclaim their freedom in Christ. It is then possible to bind the spirit in prayer and to ask the Lord to strengthen the person's resolve not to yield again.

When youth workers and/or parents pray with youth for deliverance, two good things result. First, the devil is bound

and limited in his power over them. And second, those receiving the prayer experience a support alliance with those who pray with them. Together they have faced and defeated a common enemy.

Have you prayed with your youth lately?

[Mike Shaughnessy is an elder in [The Servants of the Word](#) and the Director of [Kairos in North America](#). Kairos is an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people.]

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Greener Grasses

by Sean O'Neill

So heed me now, though all my quondam whimpers rise
 From darkneses and little deaths You did despise,
 Or seemed to. Your tremendous volte-face preyed each year
 Upon my gullibility to bend Your ear
 And racked this ruined soul with frames of phantom guilt.
 Your accidental turning broke the barns I built
 To store unrealised the mildewed fruit I bore.
 I listened and ran bleating to Your closing door.
 But when you turned I never saw your fabled smile
 But wept upon Your thorny brow, to lose my guile
 Where rivulets of blood do still obscure Your eyes
 And gather where my hopes and weathered dreaming dies.
 But here I lie, and ever did I, catlike, do.
 For once, I now remember, where the olives grew
 With mists between the small hills and dawn on the felled
 Ancient castellations of the Marches, You held
 My eyes and opened them on glimpses of Your face.
 And have You changed? Is this now why there is no trace?
 But now I think I mind a moonlit path I walked
 Where all the trees were dancing with your voice and talked
 Between themselves and lifted their long-fingered praise.
 And You stopped me like a traveller with your gaze
 And bade me lift this old, old burden from my back.

You have not changed. But surely I must learn my lack.
Then other places where Your love drew near, precious
And strong, or weeping and long, like milestones, concious
Of me, spread along these dusts. I pine in my sleep,
Now. Now Your mercies crowd upon me from some deep
And dead forgotten cavern of my wayward heart.
I am the lost sheep. But no sooner do we start
Back on the pasture than I stray among the rocks
Or bandy words with here a wolf or there a fox.
Brand my hide with Your blood-red love, sacred shepherd.
Teach me the strong timbre of your speech that, once heard,
Will ever be obeyed; and lead me, lead me now
To grasses greener, sweeter than the heart knows how.

[Sean O'Neill is originally from Glasgow, Scotland, and currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. His poems range from the sacred to the mundane and sometimes, inadvertently, both at the same time. This poem first appeared in [First Things](#), June/July, 2004.

Photo by Don Schwager, entitled *Wayfarer*, Ardmore Island, Connemara, County Galway, Ireland.]

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By the Sea, acrylic painting by [Jamie Treadwell](#)

I Will Go With My Father A-ploughing

by Joseph Campbell (1879-1944)

I will go with my father a-ploughing
 To the green field by the sea,
 And the rooks and the crows and the seagull
 Will come flocking after me.
 I will sing to the patient horses
 With the lark in the while of the air,
 And my father will sing the plough-song
 That blesses the cleaving share.

I will go with my father a-sowing
 To the red field by the sea,
 And the rooks and the gulls and the starlings
 Will come flocking after me.
 I will sing to the striding sowers
 With the finch on the greening slow,
 And my father will sing the seed-song
 That only the wise men know.

I will go with my father a-reaping
To the brown field by the sea,
And the geese and the crows and the children
Will come flocking after me.
I will sing to the tanfaced reapers
With the wren in the heat of the sun,
And my father will sing the scythe-song
That joys for the harvest done.

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Wet Fall in Summer

by Sean O'Neill

The towns run with water, or people's dreams,
 Where there are no seasons. But in the farms,
 Where the damp, red metallic gate hinge screams,
 The shaking stalls in sheds ward off alarms.
 Farmers smile at the fly-blown days of June,
 And the rump of curdled earth that would bake
 The barley into bloom. Who thought so soon
 Of the chasubles of mud the rains make?

For with each round iota's shattered crown,
 The combed head of the earth croons lullabies
 To dupe the sleeping seeds to fetter down
 Roots where this placental carapace dies.
 And with every specter of new-mown rain
 Making nightmares for the sound-sleeping land,
 Heaven washes out again Abel's stain
 And cleans our fathers' bones, on which we stand.

So what will they do with the harvest now?
 Or the inland sea at the road's turning?
 Or the balding byres, or the sinking sow,

When the rains fall and the fields stop burning?
Good husbandry is marrying the land
And good farmers are cuckolds in the know.
The rain will fall but lightly on that hand
That will not turn the plough it would forego.

[Sean O'Neill is originally from Glasgow, Scotland, and currently lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA. His poems range from the sacred to the mundane and sometimes, inadvertently, both at the same time.]

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