



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 13 January 1999 God gradually reveals his fatherhood

1. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Conf. 1, 1). This famous statement which introduces the Confessions of St Augustine vividly expresses the irrepressible need that prompts man to seek the face of God. The various religious traditions testify to this experience. "Throughout history even to the present day there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life. At times there is present even a recognition of a supreme being, or still more of a Father" (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

In fact, many prayers of the world's religious literature express the conviction that the Supreme Being can be perceived and called upon as a father, who is reached through experience of the affectionate care received from one's earthly father. It is precisely this relationship which in certain currents of contemporary atheism has given rise to the suspicion that the very idea of God is a projection of the father figure. This suspicion, in fact, is groundless.

It is true however that, on the basis of his experience, man is sometimes tempted to imagine the divinity with anthropomorphic features that too closely reflect the human world. The search for God thus continues "gropingly", as Paul says in his discourse to the Athenians (cf. Acts 17:27). It is therefore necessary to bear in mind this chiaroscuro aspect of religious experience by recognizing that only the full revelation in which God manifests himself can dispel these shadows and ambiguities and make the light shine brightly.

2. After the example of Paul who, precisely in his discourse to the Athenians, cites a verse about man's divine origins by the poet Aratus (cf. Acts 17:28), the Church looks with respect on attempts to discern the face of God made by the different religions, distinguishing in their beliefs what is acceptable from what is incompatible with Christian Revelation.

In this sense, the perception of God as universal Father of the world and of mankind must be

considered a positive religious insight. However, the idea of a divinity ruled by his own wilfulness and caprice is unacceptable. Among the ancient Greeks, for example, the Good as a supreme and divine being was also called father, but the god Zeus displayed his fatherhood in anger and malice as much as in kindness. In the *Odyssey* we read: "Father Zeus, you are the most deadly of gods: you take no pity on men after begetting them and abandoning them to misfortune and oppressive sorrows" (XX, 201-203).

However the need for a God who is above capricious wilfulness was also found among the ancient Greeks, as evidenced for example by the poet Cleanthes' "Hymn to Zeus". The idea of a divine father, prepared to make the generous gift of life and providing for its necessities, but who at the same time is severe and punishing, and not always for an obvious reason, is linked in ancient societies to the institution of patriarchy and transfers the way it is most commonly conceived to the religious level.

3. In Israel the recognition of God's fatherhood is gradual and is continually endangered by the temptation to idolatry which the prophets vigorously denounce: "They say to a tree, "You are my father", and to a stone, "You gave me birth"" (Jer 2:27). In fact, for biblical religious experience the perception of God as Father is linked less to his creative work than to his saving interventions in history by which he establishes a special covenant relationship with Israel. God often laments that this fatherly love has not received a suitable response: "The Lord has spoken: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me"" (Is 1:2).

To Israel, God's fatherhood seems more solid than human fatherhood: "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up" (Ps 27:10). The psalmist, who had this painful experience of abandonment and found in God a father more caring than his earthly parent, shows us how he reached this goal: "Of you my heart speaks, you my glance seeks; your presence, O Lord, I seek" (Ps 27:8). To seek the face of God is a necessary journey, to be taken with sincerity of heart and constant commitment. Only the hearts of the righteous can rejoice in seeking the face of the Lord (cf. Ps 105:3f.) and so it is on them that the fatherly face of God can shine (cf. Ps 119:135; cf. also 31:17; 67:2; 80:4, 8, 20). By observing the divine law one also fully enjoys the protection of the God of the covenant. The blessing with which God rewards his people through the priestly mediation of Aaron insists precisely on this luminous revealing of God's face: "The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Nm 6:25f.).

4. From the time Jesus came into the world, the search for the face of God the Father has taken on an even more significant aspect. Jesus based his teaching on his own experience as Son and confirmed the conception of God as Father already outlined in the Old Testament; in fact, he constantly stressed it, lived it in an intimate and ineffable way, and offered it as a plan of life for anyone wishing to be saved.

Above all, Jesus stands in an absolutely unique relationship to the divine fatherhood, revealing himself as "son" and offering himself as the one way to reach the Father. To Philip, who asked "show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied" (Jn 14:8), he replies that knowing him means knowing the Father, because the Father works through him (cf. Jn 14:8- 11). Therefore those who want to meet the Father must believe in the Son: through him God does not merely assure us of his providential fatherly care, but communicates his own life, making us "sons in the Son". This is what the Apostle John emphasizes with a deep sense of gratitude: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 Jn 3:1).

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To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I warmly welcome to this audience the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Great Britain, Denmark, the Philippines, Japan and the United States of America. Upon you and your families, I cordially invoke the blessings of Almighty God.