

March Word of Life

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Mt.6:12)

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This month's word of life is taken from the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord's Prayer. It is a prayer deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. The Jews also called and still call God 'Our Father'.

On a first reading, the words of this phrase seem to challenge us: can we ask God to cancel our debts, as the Greek text suggests, in the same way that we ourselves are able to cancel the debts owed to us by others? Our capacity for forgiveness is always limited, superficial, and conditioned.

If God were to treat us according to our measure, really we would be condemned!

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

These are important words that first of all express the awareness of our need for God's forgiveness. Jesus himself commended them to the disciples, and therefore to all baptised people, because with these words they can turn to the Father with simplicity of heart.

Everything stems from discovering ourselves to be children in the Son, brothers and sisters and imitators of Jesus who was the first one to make his life a journey of ever more total adhesion to the loving will of the Father.

It is only after we welcome the gift of God, his measureless love, that we can ask the Father for everything. We can even ask him to make us more and more like him to the point of being able to forgive our brothers and sisters with a generous heart, day after day.

Every act of forgiveness is a free and conscious choice, that needs to be constantly renewed with humility. It is never a habit, but a demanding pathway. That's why Jesus asks us to pray for it every day, just as we pray for our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

How many times have we perhaps been offended by the people with whom we live - in our families, in our neighbourhoods, at work or at school – and, as a consequence, we find it difficult to relate to them in a positive way? What can we do? This is where we can ask for the grace to imitate the Father:

‘Let us get up in the morning with a complete "amnesty" in our hearts, with that love that covers everything, that knows how to welcome the other person as he or she is, with their limitations, their difficulties, just as a mother would do with her errant son. She always excuses him, always forgives him, always hopes in him... Let us approach everyone seeing them with new eyes, as if they had never had those faults. Let us begin again each time, knowing that God not only forgives, but forgets: this is the measure he requires of us too.’ (Chiara Lubich, Word of Life Dec 2004)

Trusting in the help of prayer, we can journey forward towards this lofty goal.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

The whole of the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father, has the perspective of fraternity, it speaks of ‘us’: I ask not only for myself but also for and with others. My capacity for forgiveness is sustained by the love of others, but at the same time, my love can in some way be affected by the mistakes that my neighbour has made. Perhaps even this depends on me - maybe I have not done all I could to make the other person feel welcomed and understood...

In Palermo, Italy, some Christian communities are living a very intense experience of dialogue with one another, which has necessitated overcoming various difficulties. Biagio and Zina recount: “One day a pastor friend invited us to meet some families who did not know us from his Church. We had brought something to share for lunch but those families intimated to us that we were not welcome. Very gently Zina offered them a taste of the specialities she had cooked and, in the end, we ate together. After lunch, they began to point out the faults they saw in our Church. Not wishing to get into a verbal war, we asked: ‘but what defects or differences between our Churches can stop us loving each other?’ Accustomed to constant diatribes, they were amazed and disarmed by this response. We began to talk about the Gospel and what unites us which is certainly much more than what divides us. When it was time to say goodbye, they did not want us to leave, at which point we proposed praying the Lord's Prayer. As we prayed we felt the presence of God very strongly. They made us promise that we would visit again because they wanted us to get to know the rest of the community, and so it has been during all these years.”

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