

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Mt 6:12)

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.”

At first glance, this phrase seems to challenge us. Can we ask God to cancel our debts, as the Greek text suggests, in the same way that we ourselves do with people who are indebted to us?

Our capacity for forgiveness is often limited, superficial and conditioned. If God were to judge us according to this measure, we might be found guilty!

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These are important words that first of all express an awareness of needing God’s forgiveness. Jesus himself shared them with the disciples, and therefore with all those who are baptized, so that they could turn to the Father with simplicity of heart.

Everything stems from discovering that we are children in the Son — brothers and sisters and imitators of Jesus who made his life a journey of adhering constantly and totally to the loving will of the Father.

It is only after accepting God’s gift of boundless love that we can ask everything of the Father. We can even ask for the grace to become more and more similar to God, to be able to forgive with a generous heart our brothers and sisters, day after day.

Every act of forgiveness is a free and conscious choice, which needs to be continually renewed with humility. It is never a habit, but a demanding path. Jesus has us pray for it daily, just as we pray for our daily bread.

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How many times have the people with whom we live — at home, in our neighborhoods, work or school — offended us, making it difficult for us to relate positively to them? What can we do?

This is where we can ask for the grace to imitate the Father, as Focolare founder Chiara Lubich explained in a Word of Life commentary in December 2004.

“Let us get up in the morning with total ‘amnesty’ in our hearts, with that love that covers everything, that knows how to welcome the other person as he or she is, with his or her limitations, his or her difficulties, just as a mother would do with a son who makes a mistake: she always excuses him, always forgives him, never loses hope in him...”

“Let us approach everyone by 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.”

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

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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 the 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 neighbor 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 going through a profound experience of dialogue, which requires overcoming various difficulties.

“One day a pastor friend invited us to meet some families in his church, people who didn’t know us,” explain Biagio and Zina. “We had brought along something to share for lunch, but those families made us understand that that they were not exactly in favor of this meeting. Very gently Zina offered them a taste of the specialties 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 wanting to get into an argument, we asked instead what defects or differences between our Churches stop us from loving each other?”

“The group, which was accustomed to verbal disputes, was amazed and disarmed by our proposal. We began to talk about the Gospel and what unites us, and this is certainly much more than what divides us.

“When it was time to say goodbye, they didn’t want us to leave, at which point we proposed praying the Lord’s Prayer together, during which 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 their faith community. So, it has continued for years now.”

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