

**SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD**



# **Catholic Biblical Federation**

## **TOWARDS THE SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD (21.1.2024)**

*20 January 2024 - Online Conference*

## **Romans 8:14-30**

### **When the Bible teaches us to pray**

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This paragraph from the letter to the Romans offers us several elements to nourish our learning to pray: we do not know how to pray properly, but the Spirit comes to the rescue of our weakness (Romans 8:26); the Spirit testifies that we are children of God (Romans 8:14); through the Spirit we can cry Abba, Father (Romans 8:14). Father (Rom 8:14). In the whole of the letter to the Romans, this eighth chapter offers a description of what the Gospel produces, the power of God for those who believe (Rom 1:16).

This is why, at the beginning of this chapter, Paul presents the Spirit who unites the baptised with the risen Christ, making them sharers in that same resurrection (Rom 8:11). But how can we recognise this Spirit at work? This is the beginning of the passage I propose for our reading.

#### **The Spirit and filial experience**

You did not receive a spirit to enslave you and make you afraid, but a Spirit who gives you the gift of being sons and by whom we cry out: Abba, Father (Rom 8:14)<sup>15</sup>.

So the first experience of the Spirit is that of being adjusted to our filial place under the Father's gaze and fraternal with one another. This adjustment justifies our existence, legitimises it. Like children under the gaze of their Father, our human life unfolds without reason, for no other reason than the Father's happiness in seeing us live.

This is the experience of grace, of chance, of the favour granted by baptism. This filial life contrasts with that of the slave who is summoned to do a chore, whereas children come when they want to ask the Father for what they need. For Paul, life in the Spirit is essentially freedom, but that is another matter (cf. 2 Cor 3:17: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Traduction TOB 2010. <https://lire.la-bible.net>.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Cahiers Évangile n°202: *Se convertir à l'Esprit*.

## **Liturgical experience**

So that this does not remain theoretical, Paul invites his reader to remember his liturgical experience in which he calls God Abba, Father. Here we have the evidence that the Christian community took up in its liturgy this very special expression that Jesus used to address his Father. Indeed, the Aramaic word Abba would be misunderstood by Paul's reader if it were not used liturgically. It is the Spirit who teaches us to pray by uniting us to the prayer of Jesus. Once again, the work of the Spirit is essentially union with Christ.

The liturgy is a school of prayer because the Spirit teaches us the way in which we can merge with the Son's movement towards the Father. This is true of the sacramental liturgy, but also of the liturgy of the hours. The place of the Word of God, as called for by the Second Vatican Council, is essential: it offers the baptised person the opportunity to welcome with heart and intelligence, and therefore freedom, this power of the Spirit that draws us on (as opposed to idols, cf. 1 Cor 12:1-2).

## **Silent prayer**

There is another place where we can recognise the work of the Spirit in the lives of the baptised: silent prayer. This is what Paul indicates in the next verse: This Spirit himself testifies to our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16). Our spirit, the spirit of man, is a constitutive part of ourselves, the part through which we are able to welcome the Spirit of God; the spirit of man is that point of resemblance between God and human beings which allows a common experience. A point of translation is necessary here: the Spirit testifies to our spirit can also be understood as the Spirit testifies with our spirit. Indeed, even if our spirit sometimes deceives us about ourselves, causing us to forget the filial vocation that constitutes us, the fact remains that it aspires to this filial posture, from which it never totally loses hope. Paul goes on to say: we groan inwardly, waiting for adoption, for deliverance for our body (Rom 8:23).

So it is in the silence shared with the Spirit that the Spirit gradually raises our hope to the height of what the Father has prepared for each of us. So we have a first definition of prayer: letting the Spirit speak within us to bring to our hearts the conviction that we, who are already sharing in these sufferings, are being made to share in Christ's inheritance and glory.

## **Prayer as a vocation**

Prayer is the necessary space for realising the inheritance, in the double sense of the expression. In fact, to realise the inheritance means first of all to become aware of what it is, to conceive of what we are promised. But in French, it also means beginning to benefit from it. Prayer enables us to experience the Spirit's deposit, the first gift that will not be withdrawn.

The experience of the Spirit in liturgical or personal prayer enables us to fulfil our fraternal and filial vocation. To realise means to conceive and already live. For Paul, vocation is not a choice of life, but the ability to transform the present moment in order to respond to God's call, to make every circumstance a good opportunity to love God and our brothers and sisters.

## **The Spirit comes to the rescue of our weakness**

We'll come back to verses 18 to 22 later. In Romans 8:26, Paul affirms that the Spirit comes to our aid to help us in the weakness of our prayer. In fact, we realise that we do not know how to pray properly. In chapter one, Paul has already defined, in contrast to the pagans, what prayer is: giving glory and thanks to the Creator.

The Spirit is given to effect such prayer in the midst of the groaning of the world; to pray, then, is simply to offer our presence to God for a few moments (cf. Charles de Foucault). Through this offering of ourselves, the Spirit uses us as an entry point to irrigate the world with his peace, this world that groans with the pains of childbirth. The work of the Spirit in the prayer of the baptised is therefore thanksgiving for a future, a transformation of the world whose end we cannot yet see. It is in thanksgiving that the believer opens himself to transforming grace for himself and for the world.

Vv. 18-22 are a rereading of Gn 3 to show that the sufferings of this world are those of childbirth, that is, promised to an advent, that of a filial humanity.

## **Prayer as the rereading of a life**

In this humble presence before God, a profound change takes place in our being. This humble presence can be supported by whatever suits us: adoration, silent prayer, lectio, the rosary, etc. But it also offers us the opportunity to become aware that all the events of our lives contribute to a presence in truth. So there is a spiritual history for each of us: predestined, called, justified, glorified.



Sunday 21 January 2024

<https://c-b-f.me/DPD2024-EN>

