

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE  
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
HOLY MASS FOR TUESDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT  
CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT EMORY UNIVERSITY  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
FEBRUARY 20, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is good to be with you in the celebration of this Eucharist. I am grateful to Dr. Hillis for his invitation to join you today. Please know of the Holy Father's spiritual closeness to all of you.

Let us reflect on what the two readings of this Mass tell us about the two sides of our dialogue with God: our words to God, and God's word to us.

In the first reading, Isaiah compares God's word to the rain and snow that fall from the sky, causing seeds to sprout and plants to grow for man's food. Like the rain, God's word achieves its purpose, which is to nourish and save humanity.

Secondly, in the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples are given a prayer that is *literally* the word of God, because they are the words of Jesus, God incarnate. By praying the Lord's prayer, and by using it as the model for all our prayer, we know that God's design will be fulfilled.

For the purpose of comparing the relative importance of God's word to our own, it is meaningful to note what Jesus says before teaching his disciples how to pray. He tells them not to babble like the pagans do, "who think that they will be heard because of their many words".<sup>1</sup> This reminds us of the prophets of Baal whom Elijah challenged on Mount Carmel. They called upon their idol all morning: shouting louder when they weren't answered, hopping around the altar, and even slashing themselves. Jesus tells the disciples not to pray like this. The mistake is to think that the power comes from our own words or actions. No, says Jesus. It is not your words that make good things happen, but God's word. To return to Isaiah's image: the seed does not sprout and grow because it sings the right song. It bears fruit because it receives the rain. So too, we do not bring about God's will because we have landed on "just the right words", as if prayer is a magic incantation or a secret password.

Does God want to hear from us? Absolutely. He is a Father who loves to hear his children's needs and desires. But as children who depend upon our Father, we must know that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Matthew 6:7.*

good things we seek are not the result of our own words. It is God's word that transforms the desires of our hearts into the fruitfulness of his Kingdom.

This is why the Lord teaches us to begin with the words "Our Father". We must approach God with the trust of children. And we say *our* Father, not only *my* Father. This implies that we acknowledge others as God's children also; they are my brothers and sisters.

After addressing God as Father, we petition him. We do so in an order that reminds us of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. There are seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer. The first three petitions, like the first three commandments, are concerned directly with what is owed to God. May his name be revered, may his Kingdom come, and may his will be done – on earth as in heaven.

After that, there are two petitions that concern ourselves and our fellow human beings. Give us each day, Lord, the sustenance that we need to work for your Kingdom. And reconcile us with one another when, inevitably, we offend one another on this shared journey.

Finally, there are two petitions that beg salvation from the enemy: first, from the enemy's work of temptation; and second, from the enemy himself.

Interestingly, the only petition to which Jesus adds commentary is the fifth one, about forgiveness. To forgive the people who sin against us is so vital that without doing so we cannot receive God's forgiveness. It is simply an extension of the first three petitions. In order to belong to a Kingdom in which God's will is the supreme law and God's name is above all other names, everyone who lives in the Kingdom must do as God does: forgive. It is God's forgiveness that has granted us access to his Kingdom in the first place. To withhold that same gift from others is to take back the thing that makes us his children, and which allows us to pray, "Our Father".

When Pope Francis opened the first General Assembly of the Synod last October, his message was about "making room for the Holy Spirit", and that to do this, it is necessary to prioritize listening over speaking.<sup>2</sup> This must always be the way of Christians as we journey together and seek new openings for the transmission of the Gospel.

During Lent, may we pray in a way that values God's word over our own words. In doing so, we will be like the earth that receives the spring rains. God's word shall not return to him void. In us and with us, it will bear fruit for his Kingdom.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Opening Address of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 4 October 2023.