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Father

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gram. "I think of somebody I can crawl up into like a little child and be hugged."

The year of preparation

In this year of God the Father — the third of three years of final preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 — Pope John Paul II is focusing on the loving image of God the Father.

"The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the 'prodigal son,' we discover anew each day," the pope declared in "As the Third Millennium Draws Near." In that 1994 apostolic letter, he outlined the years of preparation for the jubilee.

During this year, the pope continued, the emphasis should be on not only this "journey to God," but on "the theological virtue of charity ... it has in God its source and its goal."

Thus among the goals the pope outlined in the document for this year — and for the jubilee — are care for the poor and the outcast, reduction or forgiveness of international debt, respect for women's rights and the promotion of family and marriage.

For the pope, this year, and the two preceding, are intricately linked.

"The thematic structure of this three-year period," he wrote, "centered on Christ, the Son of God made man, must necessarily be theological and therefore Trinitarian."

"The Jubilee year is a commemoration of the birth of Christ," Father Colacino observed. "I think turning our attention to God the Father is a way to remind us of the transcendent origins of Jesus."

"Father is a way of speaking of the first person in the Trinity from whom the other two persons proceed," he continued. "It is a way of speaking of the person in the Trinity who is unbegotten."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes that in using the term "Father," the church means "that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children." (239)

The relationship between the Father and the Son also sets up a relationship for all human beings, observed Kelly Bowring, administrative assistant for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for the Third Millennium and the Jubilee Year 2000.

"We are children of the Father who re-



ceive his love and then we reflect his love back to him and to others," Bowring said.

Transcending gender

In his audiences this year, the pope has not only elaborated on the loving aspects of God the Father. He also has pointed to the fact that while we use the term "Father," God transcends gender and contains both masculine and feminine attributes.

At his Jan. 20, 1999, general audience, for example, he cautioned that "such a divine fatherhood, which at the same time is so 'human' in its forms of expressions, includes all the features which are usually attributed to a mother's love."

Father Colacino pointed out that the pope began voicing these ideas long before this year: He explored them in his 1988 apostolic letter, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women."

Speaking of the notion of divine fatherhood, the pope in that document cited "the mystery of the eternal, 'generating.'"

"In itself," the pope wrote, "this 'generating' has neither 'masculine' nor 'feminine' qualities. It is by nature totally divine. It is spiritual in the most perfect way, since 'God is spirit' (Jn. 4:24) and possesses no property typical of the body, neither 'feminine' nor 'masculine.' Thus even 'fatherhood' in God is completely divine and free of the 'masculine' bodily characteristics proper to human fatherhood."

"I don't think it's been given the attention it deserves," Father Colacino said of the 1988 letter. "To speak of God in other than exclusive masculine imagery, in an official document, is new."

Father Colacino cautioned that whether using masculine or feminine descriptions of God, "All our language about God is metaphorical. It's analogy. God is 'like' ..."

Nevertheless, one has to be careful about using such language — especially relying excessively on masculine terms such as "Father," observed the Rev. Devadasan Premnath, assistant professor of Old Testament

at St. Bernard's Institute.

"I think one has to be not only sensitive, but also careful about the type of images we present," so as not to imply God is just male, he acknowledged.

Bowring pointed out that the pope, too, "has spoken of the need for sensitivity when it comes to our discussion of the identity of the first person of the Holy Trinity."

Indeed, in his letter on women, the pope pointed out that because God is divine, analogies attempting to describe God with manlike qualities naturally fall short. He noted that "in different passages of Sacred Scripture (especially in the Old Testament) we find comparisons that attribute to God 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities. We find in these passages an indirect confirmation of the truth that both man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God."

Thus, for example, in Isaiah 49:14-15, and 66:13, in Psalm 131:2-3, God is compared to a mother, the pope observed.

But while God is neither male nor female, Bowring observed, "We call the first person of the Trinity Father — in part because of Jesus' example."

"God the Father is his name revealed by Jesus," he observed. "We have a revelation from the son of the identity of the first person of the most holy Trinity."

This was particularly revealed when Jesus taught his Apostles how to pray, Swiecki acknowledged. "From a personal point of view, I always look back to what Jesus said when the Apostles asked Jesus how to pray, he began, 'Our Father,'" she said.

"We received the prayer from Jesus — and we pray the very same words Jesus prayed to his father," Bowring noted. "We are now children of the Father."

Thus while the church has to be sensitive to the feelings of individuals who would take exception to excessive use of masculine words and images, it cannot simply abandon them.

"The church cannot make up its own revelation," he said.

Old Testament roots

The source of the Christian notions of God as a "father" is traceable back to the Old Testament.

Rev. Premnath explained that although the term "God the Father" is not used as often in the Old Testament as in the New, it nevertheless does appear, as do terms referring to God as a kinsman, and brother, and a mother.

"God is considered a blood relative of the clan," he said.

One of the ways this relationship is expressed is through people's names, Rev. Premnath observed. Thus, for example,

Eliab and Abijah both mean "God is my Father" and Ammishaddai means "my brother (God) is my help."

The direct mention of God as Father decreased during the period of the monarchy, Rev. Premnath continued.

"In light of some of the surrounding understandings of the king as a son of the deity ... I think there is a resistance to using that kind of language," he said.

These ideas were not completely abandoned, however. There was an understanding that the followers of the Jewish faith — Hebrew and non-Hebrew — were adopted children of God.

"While the Hebrews understood themselves to be the people of God, the people of God was certainly broader than the people of Israel," he remarked. "Anybody is a child of God."

Thus when Jesus referred to God as Father, his audience would have been familiar with such language. Nevertheless, Rev. Premnath acknowledged, the use of the word "abba" would have startled them.

"The conception that underlies that's not new, but the use of that expression would be seen as revolutionary," he said.

We are family

In the end, talk of God the Father — and the Trinity — forces us to focus on our own relationships, observers noted.

"In contemporary use, when we talk about God as Father, the father, the mother aspects must be taken together. The point is that these are relational terms," Rev. Premnath observed.

The language helps to create a sense of intimacy in terms of the relationship between God and people, he explained. It also helps to draw attention to values such as love, kindness and mercy embodied in God.

"At that point when you begin to talk about God in these terms, these are not just human values, but they are part of the divine reality," he said.

"To speak of God as father and mother is also to acknowledge the importance of familial relationships in shaping and creating communities and individuals," he said. "You don't just talk about God as Father, but as a good father. If God is a loving parent, they you have to be a loving parent."

Ultimately, consideration of God the Father can help us to recognize our part in the divine family, the pope observed in his Jan. 13 audience.

"For those who want to encounter the Father it is necessary to believe in the Son; through him God does not limit himself to assuring paternal assistance, but gives us a share in his very life, making us sons and daughters in the Son," the pope declared.

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