

"But, Father, what do we say....?"

When I arrived, as a young priest, at my first mission in Sarawak, East Malaysia, I was full of ideas about what I wanted to do – but I also discovered that I had a lot of learning to do as well. The Diocese was having a campaign of prayer for vocations to the priesthood, so I decided to organise a full day of prayer on a Sunday – starting with the first Mass, at 6am, and then "watching" or adoration before the Blessed Sacrament throughout the day, until the final prayers at evening Benediction.

The mission church and house stood in the middle of a mission boarding school, which had grown up round it, over the years, and I had got to know some students quite well, so when the day of Prayer drew near, I asked some of the older students, whether they would "watch" before the Blessed Sacrament during the day, when there would not be many people about. The ones I asked readily agreed, and so I thought I had everything sorted. The morning Mass went well and many stayed for prayer afterwards, but in the afternoon the numbers flagged a little, as I thought they would, so I went to look for my band of school helpers. I saw a small group of girls near the Church, but, as I walked towards them, they began to whisper to each other and then look enquiringly at me, so I asked them if anything was the matter. One of them said, "Father, you know that you asked us to 'watch' before the Blessed Sacrament?" I answered, "Yes, and I am glad of your help." "Well", she continued, "we were wondering: what does it mean: 'to watch'?" I smiled and said, "It means that you stay in the Church during that hour and you pray." "Oh", said the girl, with a look of relief on her face, "I understand." She then turned back to her friends and they whispered some more and then turned back to me and asked, "But, Father, what do we say?"

Such a simple question, but so deep. Sometimes we forget that what we say in prayer is just as important as the saying of it. Prayer is not just talking with God – for our words can bring us into greater friendship, but they can also drive us further apart. When we pray we need to know how to speak to God and what to speak about. The schoolgirls realised this, but I, the priest, had forgotten.

I was reminded of this recently, when an old friend of mine came to stay for a few weeks. It was so nice to have someone to pray with and to share my thoughts with. One day, just after we had just finished saying the "Our Father" together, he said, "Whenever I say the 'Our Father', these days, I realise more and more that it is not really a prayer, but an instruction manual on how to pray. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to prayer, he told them all the things they should include when they pray – but I don't think he meant that they should include them all each time they pray! However, we so often treat this 'manual' as just a prayer and so recite it, rather than dwelling on the parts and using them, at different times and occasions, to enrich our prayer to the Father." I have been thinking about my friend's words since he left to go home and I have been trying to take a phrase out of the 'Our Father' and using it to pray over. I am finding it a very rich way of bringing God into my everyday life, for every phrase of the prayer is rooted in the here and now.

There is only one place where we can find God, there is only one place where we can feel his compassionate love – and that is the "now". It has been called "the sacrament of the present moment". And as I think about the question of my young friend years ago in Sarawak, "But, Father, what do we say?", I realise that whatever I say in prayer, needs to refer to where I am "now". I am learning that when I pray the 'Our Father', rather than recite it, I am meeting my God in the here and now - which is the only place he can be found.

God bless,

Terry