

Christmas Day

I have been studying Vietnamese off and on for two years now. I'm still not very good at it, though our members encourage me to keep going. At the rate I'm learning, it will take me 60 years to learn Vietnamese. It is a difficult language for me because it is tonal. One word can be pronounced different ways and have different meanings. If you don't say it right, the results can be embarrassing. I've been told that when some American priests say, "Lift up your hearts" in Vietnamese, it sounds like, "Lift up your lobsters."

One of the first lessons was how to say the words for "you" and "me". In Spanish there are two different forms of the word "you" - formal (*usted*) and informal (*tú*). The plural of both is the same (*ustedes*) unless you live in Spain, and then you use the plural form *vosotros*. If you think that is confusing, try it in Vietnamese. You have to change the words for "you" and "me" depending on whom you are addressing. Parents, grandparents, the elderly, coworkers, friends, younger siblings, children - each group has its own set of pronouns. Even the word "me" changes depending on whom you are addressing.

As difficult as that is, I get an easy way out because in Vietnamese my title at the parish is the same as it is in English and in Spanish, "Father" or *Padre*. All our Vietnamese members, the young and the old, call me *Cha*. So I am supposed to call them "child" (*con*), no matter their age. When I greet them, you'll hear me say, "Father greets child" or "*Cha chào con*." And when they greet me, they each say, "Child greets Father," or "*Con chào cha*." So while other students of Vietnamese have to learn dozens of pronouns, I can get away with just one, as long as I don't talk to anyone outside this building.

I am "father" by analogy. I have no biological children. I have great respect for all those who hold the title "father" by raising their own children. Among Christians, we call God "Father", which has a more mystical meaning. God created everything, which makes him our Creator. But Jesus taught his followers to call God something more than "Creator". He wants us to call God "Our Father." God is not only the Creator who put things in motion, but the Father who forever cares about his children.

Even so, Jesus has a unique position as God's Son. We are God's adopted children. Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus' parents are Mary his mother and God the Father.

The Old Testament occasionally refers to angels as "sons of God," as today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews shows. But it says that Jesus Christ is greater than angels, and only he can properly be called God's Son. Hebrews calls Jesus "the very imprint of [God's] being." As we say in the creed, he is consubstantial with the Father. He and the Father are the same God.

Christmas reveals the Son of God, but it also reveals God the Father. As we remember the miraculous birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we take comfort in this mystery. God created the world, and God sent his own Son into the world so that we might learn who our Creator is - not some disinterested divinity, but a God who loves us constantly, amid all our trials, successes and failures. God showed this on the first Christmas Day. He loves us so much that we can call him Father.