



THE LORD'S PRAYER

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“Lord, teach us to pray.”
-Luke 11:1

“Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer.”

-St. Augustine of Hippo

What is the Lord's Prayer?

The prayer of Jesus commonly called the “Lord's Prayer” is probably the most commonly known sayings of Jesus. This prayer is found in two places in Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13 and in Luke 11:2-4. The accounts are very similar but not without minor differences.

The prayer is called the Lord's Prayer not because Jesus Himself used it (inasmuch as it contains a plea for the forgiveness of sins, Christ could not have prayed it for Himself) but because it was the prayer He taught to His disciples. Luke recounts that this prayer was given explicitly at the request of the disciples to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Thus, this prayer represents the instruction that Jesus wishes to give us on prayer.

In the Middle Ages, this prayer was known by the first two words in Latin, *Pater Noster*, and it was so common that even the ignorant knew it in Latin. ¹

Summation of the Scriptures

All of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ-the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. This is the Good News of Jesus: that in Him, the Law has been fulfilled and mankind has found its Redeemer. Just as the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' prayer on how we ought to live, so the Lord's Prayer is His teaching on how we are to pray.

Within this most perfect of prayers is contained everything essential to prayer and perseverance in holiness. All of the petitions and prayers of the Prophets are summed up in the seven petitions. As St. Augustine said, you will not find any prayer of the Old Testament that is not somehow summarized in the Lord's Prayer.

Furthermore, St. Thomas tells us that this prayer also gives us a matrix for understanding the priority of what we pray for. He writes:

¹ In many monastic rules, it was enjoined that the lay brothers, who knew no Latin, instead of the Divine office should say the Lord's Prayer a certain number of times (often amounting to more than a hundred) *per diem*. To count these repetitions they made use of pebbles or beads strung upon a cord, and this apparatus was commonly known as a "pater-noster", a name which it retained even when such a string of beads was used to count, not Our Fathers, but Hail Marys in reciting Our Lady's Psalter, or in other words in saying the rosary.

The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers. . . . In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them (STh II-II,83,9).

The fact that Christ gives the Lord's Prayer in the same discourse as the Sermon on the Mount shows us the profound connection of the rightness of our lives to the depth of our prayers. In fact, it is not too much to say with the Catechism that "the rightness of our life *depends upon* the rightness of our prayer" (CCC 2764). This goes along with the quote from our lesson on prayer from St. Alphonsus Ligouri: "Whoever prays is certainly saved. He who does not is certainly damned. All the blessed (except infants) have been saved by prayer. All the damned have been lost through not praying. If they had prayed they would not have been lost." Prayer and the moral life are closely intertwined. Thus, Jesus gives us this prayer.

Prayer of the Church

Many have debated what Jesus meant exactly when He tells the disciples, "Pray then like this" (Matt. 6:9). Was He commanding them literally to repeat the Lord's Prayer? Or was He merely giving an example of a good prayer and enjoining the disciples to pray to God along the lines of the Lord's Prayer but to use their own words?

The answer is somewhere between these two. In the essence of what the Lord's Prayer is about (glorifying God, asking for His will to be done, forgiving trespasses, etc.) it gives us the matrix or form for a perfect prayer, regardless of what words we might use to construct such a prayer.

Nevertheless, because this prayer comes right from the mouth of Jesus, in itself it has a certain perfection of form and content, and therefore it fitting that we recite this prayer, word for word, as Jesus gave it. It is estimated that at every second of every day, somebody somewhere on the planet is reciting the Lord's Prayer.

This prayer has a rich usage in the Church's liturgy. It has been used since the most ancient days of the Fathers in connection with the Eucharist; it is mentioned as early as 70 AD in the *Didache* and St. Jerome (c. 400) said that it was Christ Himself who taught the Apostles to say this prayer in connection with the Eucharistic Sacrifice. St. Gregory gave the Pater its present place in the Roman Mass immediately after the Canon and before the fraction, and it was of old the custom that all the congregation should make answer in the words "Sed libera nos a malo" ("deliver us from evil"). In the Greek liturgies a reader recites the Our Father aloud while the priest and the people repeat it silently. Again in the ritual of baptism the recitation of the Our Father has from the earliest times been a conspicuous feature, and in the Divine Office it recurs repeatedly besides being recited both at the beginning and the end.

The Seven Petitions

The Our Father was divided up by our Lord into seven petitions. The first three, more theological, draw us toward the glory of the Father; the last four, as ways toward Him, commend our wretchedness to His grace.

The first series of petitions carries us toward him, for His own sake: *Thy name, Thy kingdom, Thy will*. It is characteristic of love to think first of the one whom we love. In none of the three petitions do we mention ourselves. "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done. . . ." These three supplications were already answered in the saving sacrifice of Christ, but they are henceforth directed in hope toward their final fulfillment.

The second series of petitions unfolds with the same movement as certain Eucharistic *epicleses*: as an offering up of our expectations, that draws down upon itself the eyes of the Father of mercies. They go up from us and concern us from this very moment, in our present world: "give us . . . forgive us . . . lead us not . . . deliver us. . . ." The fourth and fifth petitions concern our life as such - to be fed and to be healed of sin; the last two concern our battle for the victory of life - that battle of prayer.

"Hallowed Be Thy Name"

Why do we pray for God's name to be hallowed ("made holy")? Isn't God's name already infinitely holy, as was told to Moses in the Third Commandment and to the prophet Ezekiel: "I will not allow My holy name to be profaned" (Ezk. 39:7)? The nature of the petition "hallowed be Thy name" is not to be understood in a causative sense (as if our prayers were causing God's name to become holy), but in an evaluative sense: we are declaring with awe what in fact is and petitioning God that this truth would be better understood by us and manifest to the unbelieving world.

We also ask that through our actions, God's name will be blessed among men:

We ask God to hallow his name, which by its own holiness saves and makes holy all creation It is this name that gives salvation to a lost world. But we ask that this name of God should be hallowed in us through our actions. For God's name is blessed when we live well, but is blasphemed when we live wickedly. As the Apostle says: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." We ask then that, just as the name of God is holy, so we may obtain his holiness in our souls (St. Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 71:4, c 435).

Just as the First Commandment sums up all the other commandments, and the Golden Rule sums up the Law and the Prophets, so the first petition of the Our Father sums up all of the subsequent petitions: "This petition embodies all the others. Like the six petitions that follow, it is fulfilled by the *prayer of Christ*. Prayer to our Father is our prayer, if it is prayed in the name of Jesus. In his priestly prayer, Jesus asks: "Holy Father, protect in your name those whom you have given me" (CCC 2815).

"Thy Kingdom Come"

The phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" or "Kingdom of God" appear much in the teachings of Jesus, and there are many ways to understand this enigmatic reference to the "Kingdom." The Kingdom of God lies ahead of us, but is also within us (Luke 17:21). It is brought near in the Word incarnate, it is proclaimed throughout the whole Gospel, and it has come in Christ's death and

Resurrection. The Kingdom of God has been coming since the Last Supper and, in the Eucharist, it is in our midst. The kingdom will come in glory when Christ hands it over to his Father. So, it is a Kingdom that was, that is, and that has not yet come to be. It transcends time.

In the Lord's Prayer, the petition primarily has reference to the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time. By praying for this, Christians are joining their voices with the throngs described in the Book of Revelation 6:9-11 who cry out to God to judge the earth and establish His reign of justice over it. In asking for the coming of the Kingdom, we ask for God's ultimate purposes to be established.

This petition can also refer to the desire for the establishment of a peaceful kingdom on the earth. In fact, as the Catechism says, our desire for the coming of the final Kingdom at the end of time, "far from distracting the Church from her mission in this present world, this desire commits her to it all the more strongly" (CCC 2818). However, Christians must maintain a distinction (thought not a separation) between these two aspects of the Kingdom and understand that they are not synonymous: the Kingdom of Heaven transcends any earthly organization and cannot be seen to be consonant with even the most enlightened and benevolent of worldly societies.

This petition is taken up and answered in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist.

"The Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven"

This petition is one of the most pondered of all of the petitions of the Our Father. Why do we need to pray for God's will to be done? Isn't His will always done? Is the accomplishment of God's will dependent upon our praying for it?

Like the first petition, we must understand this one as not asking for God's will to be done (as if it wasn't), but as evaluating our own lives, personally and in the Church at large, and begging God to bring our obedience to His will in line with the obedience that the angels in heaven render to Him. As St. Augustine says:

It would not be inconsistent with the truth to understand the words, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," to mean: "in the Church as in our Lord Jesus Christ himself"; or "in the Bride who has been betrothed, just as in the Bridegroom who has accomplished the will of the Father."

-St. Augustine, *De serm. Dom.* 2,6,24

By prayer we can discern "what is the will of God" and obtain the endurance to do it. Jesus teaches us that one enters the kingdom of heaven not by speaking words, but by doing "the will of my Father in heaven."

"Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread"

Give us: The trust of children who look to their Father for everything is beautiful. Jesus teaches us this petition, because it glorifies our Father by acknowledging how good He is, beyond all goodness, and recognizes Him as a loving Father who desires to give good things to His

children." Give us thus expresses the covenant. We are His and He is ours, for our sake. But this "us" also recognizes Him as the Father of all men and we pray to Him for them all, in solidarity with their needs and sufferings.

The most conspicuous difficulty in the original text of the Our Father concerns the interpretation of the words (*artos epiousios*) which in accordance with the Vulgate in St. Luke we translate "our daily bread", St. Jerome, by a strange inconsistency, changed the pre-existing word *quotidianum* (daily) into *supersubstantialem* (life-sustaining) in St. Matthew but left *quotidianum* in St. Luke. This emphasizes the reality that, as Jesus said, "Man does not live by bread alone," and the daily bread referenced in the Our Father does not solely refer to our regular, daily needs but also the supernatural Bread of the Eucharistic Body of Christ.

"Daily" (epiousios) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Taken in a temporal sense, this word is a pedagogical repetition of "this day," to confirm us in trust "without reservation." Taken in the qualitative sense, it signifies what is necessary for life, and more broadly every good thing sufficient for subsistence. Taken literally (epi-ousios: "super-essential"), it refers directly to the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ, the "medicine of immortality," without which we have no life within us. Finally in this connection, its heavenly meaning is evident: "this day" is the Day of the Lord, the day of the feast of the kingdom, anticipated in the Eucharist that is already the foretaste of the kingdom to come. For this reason it is fitting for the Eucharistic liturgy to be celebrated each day.

-CCC 2837

"And Forgive us Our Trespasses"

This petition is astonishing. If it consisted only of the first phrase, "And forgive us our trespasses," it might have been included, implicitly, in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer, since Christ's sacrifice is "that sins may be forgiven." But, according to the second phrase, our petition will not be heard unless we have first met a strict requirement. Our petition looks to the future, but our response must come first, for the two parts are joined by the single word "as."

This "as" is not unique in Jesus' teaching: "You, therefore, must be perfect, *as* your heavenly Father is perfect"; "Be merciful, even *as* your Father is merciful"; "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even *as* I have loved you, that you also love one another." It is impossible to keep the Lord's commandment by imitating the divine model from outside; there has to be a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness and the mercy and the love of our God. Only the Spirit by whom we live can make "ours" the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Then the unity of forgiveness becomes possible and we find ourselves "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave" us.

Christian prayer extends to the *forgiveness of enemies*, transfiguring the disciple by configuring him to his Master. Forgiveness is a high-point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God's compassion can receive the gift of prayer. Forgiveness also bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin. The martyrs of yesterday and today bear this witness to Jesus. Forgiveness is

the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father and of men with one another.

There is no limit or measure to this essentially divine forgiveness, whether one speaks of "sins" as in *Luke* (11:4), "debts" as in *Matthew* (6:12). We are always debtors: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." The communion of the Holy Trinity is the source and criterion of truth in every relation ship. It is lived out in prayer, above all in the Eucharist.

"And Lead Us Not into Temptation"

This petition goes to the root of the preceding one, for our sins result from our consenting to temptation; we therefore ask our Father not to "lead" us into temptation. It is difficult to translate the Greek verb used by a single English word: the Greek means both "do not allow us to enter into temptation" and "do not let us yield to temptation." "God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one" (Jas. 1:13); on the contrary, he wants to set us free from evil. We ask him not to allow us to take the way that leads to sin. We are engaged in the battle "between flesh and spirit"; this petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength.

The Holy Spirit makes us *discern* between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted and *consenting* to temptation. Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a "delight to the eyes" and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death.

"Lead us not into temptation" implies a *decision of the heart*: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. . . . No one can serve two masters." "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). In this assent to the Holy Spirit the Father gives us strength. "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Such a battle and such a victory become possible only through prayer. It is by his prayer that Jesus vanquishes the tempter, both at the outset of his public mission and in the ultimate struggle of his agony. In this petition to our heavenly Father, Christ unites us to his battle and his agony. He urges us to *vigilance* of the heart in communion with his own. Vigilance is "custody of the heart," and Jesus prayed for us to the Father: "Keep them in your name." The Holy Spirit constantly seeks to awaken us to keep watch. Finally, this petition takes on all its dramatic meaning in relation to the last temptation of our earthly battle; it asks for *final perseverance*. "Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake."

"But Deliver Us From Evil"

The last petition to our Father touches each of us personally, but it is always "we" who pray, in communion with the whole Church, for the deliverance of the whole human family. In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a *person*, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil (*dia-bolos*) is the one who "throws himself across" God's plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ. Through him sin and death entered the world and by

his definitive defeat all creation will be "freed from the corruption of sin and death." Now "we know that anyone born of God does not sin, but he who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19).

Victory over the "prince of this world" was won once for all at the Hour when Jesus freely gave himself up to death to give us his life. This is the judgment of this world, and the prince of this world is "cast out." "He pursued the woman" but had no hold on her: the new Eve, "full of grace" of the Holy Spirit, is preserved from sin and the corruption of death (the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Most Holy Mother of God, Mary, ever virgin). "Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring." Therefore the Spirit and the Church pray: "Come, Lord Jesus," since his coming will deliver us from the Evil One (see Rev. 12, 21).

When we ask to be delivered from the Evil One, we pray as well to be freed from all evils, present, past, and future, of which he is the author or instigator. In this final petition, the Church brings before the Father all the distress of the world. Along with deliverance from the evils that overwhelm humanity, she implores the precious gift of peace and the grace of perseverance in expectation of Christ's return. By praying in this way, she anticipates in humility of faith the gathering together of everyone and everything in him who has "the keys of Death and Hades," who "is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

For Further Reading: Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4; Revelation 6:9-11, 12; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II,83,9; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 2803-2854