

36 JESUS TAUGHT US TO PRAY

THE LORD'S PRAYER: OUR FATHER
—CCC, NOS. 2759-2865

“THIS IS HOW YOU ARE TO PRAY” (MT 6:9)



Jesus prayed always. St. Luke, for example, tells us in his Gospel: “After . . . Jesus . . . had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened” (Lk 3:21).

Jesus prayed before his choice of the Twelve Apostles and before he asked the Apostles who they thought he was. He prayed regularly in the synagogue and Temple. He prayed before the prediction of his Passion and during the Transfiguration. “While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white” (Lk 9:29).

Jesus prayed at the Last Supper, in Gethsemane, and on the Cross.

He prayed for long periods of time, sometimes for a whole night. “He went up on the mountain by himself to pray” (Mt 14:23). The Gospels rarely describe what his prayer was like, simply noting that he prayed often. One thing is clear, the Apostles were so moved by the constancy and depth of his prayer that they asked him to help them to pray: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1).

Jesus responded with what is now known as the Lord’s Prayer. In St. Matthew’s Gospel, he precedes his gift of this prayer with teachings about how *not* to pray. In St. Luke’s Gospel, he adds advice about the need to pray with confidence that our prayer will be answered. The Gospel of Matthew introduces the Lord’s Prayer with these words:

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others might see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their

reward. But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

This is how you are to pray:

Our Father in heaven, / hallowed be your name, / your kingdom come, / your will be done, / on earth as in heaven. / Give us today our daily bread; / and forgive us our debts, / as we forgive our debtors; / and do not subject us to the final test, / but deliver us from the evil one. (Mt 6:5-13)

The Gospel of Luke also offers counsel about prayer:

And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him. (Lk 11:9-13)

It is clear, therefore, that Jesus framed his gift of the Lord's Prayer with guidance to help us pray more effectively.

St. Luke records another of Christ's instructions on prayer in the parable of the self-important Pharisee and a humble tax collector:

Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income." But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who

exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Lk 18:10-14)

Jesus gave us not only the gift of the Lord's Prayer, but also the context in which it should be understood and prayed. With this in mind, we offer the following reflection on this, the greatest of prayers.



THE CENTRAL PRAYER OF SCRIPTURE

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.

—CCC, no. 2763, citing St. Thomas Aquinas,
Summa Theologiae, II-II, 83, 9

The Our Father is called the “Lord’s Prayer” because Jesus, our Lord and model of prayer, is its author. There are two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospels. St. Luke’s account of the event contains five petitions. St. Matthew’s lists seven. The Church’s liturgy follows Matthew’s version.

St. Augustine wrote seven commentaries on the Our Father. So moved was he by its depth that he wrote, “Run through all the words of holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think you will find anything in them that is not contained in the Lord’s Prayer” (*Letter*, 130, 12, 22). The Our Father is an integral part of sacramental liturgies (Baptism, Confirmation, and the Anointing of the Sick) and of the Eucharist itself. At Mass, it comes after the Eucharistic Prayer, summing up the intercessions of that prayer and preparing us for Holy Communion when we receive Jesus Christ, who is the Bread of Life. It is at the heart of every individual and communal prayer (cf. CCC, no. 2776).

We Address the Father

Before we make our own this first exclamation of the Lord's Prayer, we must humbly cleanse our hearts of certain false images drawn "from this world." Humility makes us recognize that "no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son." . . . The purification of our hearts has to do with paternal or maternal images, stemming from our personal and cultural history, and influencing our relationship with God. God our Father transcends the categories of the created world. . . . To pray to the Father is to enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us.

—CCC, no. 2779, citing Mt 11:27

Our Father

We call God "Father" only because Jesus, the Son of God made man, revealed him as such. Because of our union with Jesus through Baptism, we are given the grace of an adopted, filial relationship with the Father. This begets in us a new self-understanding due to this extraordinary intimacy with the Father and the Son. A term that our Lord uses for Father is "*Abba!*" This implies that Jesus is saying that a relationship with God should be like that of a child, very close, personal, and dependent.

While we recognize that there is no gender in God, we will be inclined to draw upon our experiences with our earthly fathers when thinking of this title for God. The image of a human father is generally a positive one, and this helps us to draw near to God as Father. Yet, sadly, there are cases of fathers who have fallen short of the responsibilities of fatherhood.

An understanding of God as Father is already evident in the Old Testament, where God describes himself as being in a special relationship of providential care for the people of Israel and in particular for their king. Jesus' revelation of God as his Father flows from a profound awareness not only of that same providential care but also of an inde-

scribable intimacy (cf., e.g., Jn 14). “As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Gal 4:6).

When we say “Our,” we recognize that we are a people bound together by the New Covenant that God has made with us through his Son in the Holy Spirit. While we are indeed individual persons, we are also persons in communion with each other because we have been baptized into communion with the Holy Trinity. The Our Father is a prayer of the Church, hence we pray with the Church when we recite these words, together calling God our Father.

Who Art in Heaven

“Who art in heaven” does not refer to a place but to God’s majesty and his presence in the hearts of the just. Heaven, the Father’s house, is the true homeland toward which we are heading and to which, already, we belong.

—CCC, no. 2802

Heaven is the culmination of our relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit begun in Baptism.

The Seven Petitions

In the Our Father, the object of the first three petitions is the glory of the Father: the sanctification of his name, the coming of the kingdom, and the fulfillment of his will. The four others present our wants to him: they ask that our lives be nourished, healed of sin, and made victorious in the struggle of good over evil.

—CCC, no. 2857

Hallowed Be Thy Name

Hallowed means “to be made holy.” We do not make God’s name holy; God is the source of his own holiness that is his perfection and glory.

But we give witness to his holiness by doing his will, being people of prayer, and establishing the earthly conditions by which his holiness is manifested.

God gradually revealed his name. First of all he revealed it to Moses, through whom he tells us that he is “I AM,” a person who chooses to be close to us yet remains mysterious. As salvation history unfolded, the people of Israel developed other names they used to refer to God, such as Lord, Shepherd of Israel, and King.

But God’s definitive revelation of who he is was through Jesus Christ, who taught us that God is his Father and he is the Son. Through Christ’s salvation and the Sacrament of Baptism, we become adopted children of God by grace. Hence we can legitimately call God “Father.”

Thy Kingdom Come

In this petition, we pray that the Kingdom promised us by God will come—the Kingdom already present in Christ’s Passion, death, and Resurrection. In Matthew’s Gospel, there is an extensive revelation of the many aspects of what Christ’s Kingdom means in moral and spiritual terms as well as its relationship to the Church. It is a Kingdom of love, justice, and mercy, where sins are forgiven, the sick are made whole, enemies are reconciled, captives are freed, and the needs of the poor are met.

It is all these things and more, for ultimately the Kingdom is Jesus Christ and all he means for us. The Kingdom is already here because of the redemption of Jesus Christ. But in another sense, it is “not yet” here, since Christ’s final transformation of individuals, society, and culture has yet to happen in its fullness. This is why we need to pray this petition every day and work for its coming.

Thy Will Be Done on Earth as It Is in Heaven

In the third petition, we ask our Father to unite our will to that of Jesus so as to fulfill the plan of salvation in the world. We need God’s help and protection to make this possible (cf. CCC, no. 2860).

Jesus gave us an example of this when he was in Gethsemane on the eve of his Passion and death. He first asked that the cup of suffering might pass from him but also prayed, “Not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).

What is God’s will? In creating us, God established a plan for how to live in a fully human and spiritual manner. Jesus came to us to show us exactly what that means. The Lord Jesus asks us to be his disciples and shape our lives by faith. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that “the disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ . . . to understand the truth received from him, faithfully to proclaim it and vigorously to defend it” (*Declaration on Religious Liberty [Dignitatis Humanae]*, no. 14).

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

“‘Our daily bread’ refers to the earthly nourishment necessary to everyone for subsistence, and also to the Bread of Life: the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (CCC, no. 2861). We draw our life from the Eucharist each time we receive Holy Communion.

Just before he left this earth, the Lord Jesus promised to be with us every day. In a remarkable manner, Jesus is present to us in the Divine Sacrament, because he is himself the Bread of Life available to us. The Church’s contemplation always centers itself on the Lord in this Sacrament, which contains the whole treasure of the Church, Jesus Christ.

At the same time, we ask for our material needs. While we seek what we need for our own maintenance and development, we must never forget the poor of the world, who so often lack daily bread. We are called to have solidarity with them and work for their physical and spiritual welfare. We pray for our “daily” bread, implying that we pray for what we need for today and will pray again each day for the needs of that day.

Forgive Us Our Trespasses as We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

The fifth petition begs God's mercy for our offences, mercy which can penetrate our hearts only if we have learned to forgive our enemies, with the example and help of Christ.

—CCC, no. 2862

The best way to obtain mercy is to be merciful. As Jesus taught us, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7). Failure to forgive others is a major human problem. Holding grudges is common. Failure to forgive routinely tears apart families, neighborhoods, and even nations. Jesus stressed mercy and forgiveness in numerous ways such as when he asked the Father to forgive those who crucified him (cf. Lk 23:34). We pray to God that we may be able to forgive as much as we are forgiven.

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

God wants to set us free from evil; he tempts no one (cf. CCC, no. 2846).

When we say “lead us not into temptation” we are asking God not to allow us to take the path that leads to sin. This petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength; it requests the grace of vigilance and final perseverance. (CCC, no. 2863)

We know that preventive medicine is desirable so that curative medicine may not be needed. Preventing the possibility of sin is preferable to sinning with its negative impact on our lives. Traditionally we have been taught to avoid the occasions of sin, that is, persons or situations that may lead us to sin. Virtue grows stronger with its practice.

In this petition, we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit to keep us alert to the dangers of sin and give us the grace to resist temptation. A meditation on how Christ resisted temptation in the desert is a fruitful and inspiring example of how we should conduct ourselves in the face

of temptation (cf. Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4: 1-12). “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” (CCC, no. 2849).

But Deliver Us from Evil

In the last petition, “but deliver us from evil,” Christians pray to God with the Church to show forth the victory, already won by Christ, over the “ruler of this world,” Satan, the angel personally opposed to God and to his plan of salvation.

—CCC, no. 2864

As always throughout this prayer, we are reminded that we pray with the Church. We do not pray alone but in union with the community of believers around the world—all of us bound by our union with Jesus in the Spirit and with an adoptive filial relationship to the Father.

The *Catechism* emphasizes that we ask God to deliver us from the Evil One—Satan, the devil (cf. Jn 17:15). The evil we confront is not just an abstract idea, but an evil, fallen angel who wants to prevent our salvation. We entrust ourselves to God so that the devil may not lead us into sin.

“One who entrusts himself to God does not dread the devil. ‘If God is for us, who is against us?’” (CCC, no. 2852, citing St. Ambrose, *On the Sacraments*, 5, 4, 30; cf. Rom 8:31). We ask God to deliver us from all evils—past, present, and future—of which Satan is the author or instigator.

Doxology

There is a final doxology which was added by the early Church: “For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever” (cf. *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles [Didache]* 8, 2; *Apostolic Constitutions*, 7, 24). It is recited by Latin Catholics after the prayer which follows the recitation of the Our Father during Mass. These words of praise echo the first three petitions, and we use them as words of adoration in union with the liturgy of heaven.

FROM THE CATECHISM

1. How is the Lord's Prayer related to the Gospel?

The Lord's Prayer is truly the summary of the whole Gospel. (CCC, no. 2774, citing Tertullian, *De Orat.* 1: PL 1, 1251-1255)

[It is] the quintessential prayer of the Church. (CCC, no. 2776)

2. What is contained in the first three petitions of the Our Father?

The first series of petitions carries us toward [God], for his own sake: *thy* name, *thy* kingdom, *thy* will! (CCC, no. 2804)

3. What is the focus of the last four petitions of the Our Father?

The four others present our wants to him: they ask that our lives be nourished, healed of sin, and made victorious in the struggle of good over evil. (CCC, no. 2857)

Amen

We conclude with the “Amen,” which means, “So be it.” We joyfully ratify the words that Jesus has taught us (cf. CCC, no. 2856).

PRAY IN ORDER TO BELIEVE, BELIEVE IN ORDER TO PRAY

A closer look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will reveal its method of weaving prayer into presentations of doctrine. Though certain sections have been designated as dealing specifically with prayer, such as Part Two on the liturgy and this Part Four on prayer, there is a contemplative spirit to the whole presentation. Identifying certain parts with prayer does not imply some kind of false separation between doctrine and prayer.

The *Catechism* reminds us that the Lord Jesus asks us to believe in order to pray and to pray in order to believe. There is a complementarity in which knowing and loving God support each other. Belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit should be essentially and immediately connected to a prayerful and loving communion with the Trinity.

Belief in Catholic doctrine draws us to prayer and to a divine reassurance about the validity of these revealed truths of God to which we have responded in faith. We give ourselves to prayer to deepen our personal relationship with God in a loving communion. Experiencing God in prayer shows us the vitality of the truthfulness of doctrine and puts energy into our spiritual and moral witness.

Just as the understanding of doctrine requires study and effort, so also does the practice of prayer. “Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort” (CCC, no. 2725). Since prayer is a loving relationship with God, it places demands upon us. No love exists without sacrifice.

In our busy culture, time has become one of our most precious possessions. Of all the things we can give to the ones we love, among the best is our time. Often something else must be sacrificed to make this possible.

When it comes to prayer, we must choose regular times for prayer each day. We need to step aside from the rush of daily life and compose our souls before God, as Jesus did when he spent time with his Father.

How do we know when we really begin to pray? The different kinds of prayer have already been noted: liturgical and private; vocal, meditative, and contemplative prayer. Underneath all these forms should be our hearts actively opening to God.

Where does prayer come from? . . . In naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart (more than a thousand times). According to Scripture, it is the *heart* that prays. If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain. (CCC, no. 2562)

In the biblical or Semitic mind, the heart is beyond the grasp of reason and deeper than our psychic drives. It is the very center of our selves, the mysterious place where we make our fundamental decisions. It is the

ground of encounter with God. Unlike the busy-ness of mental life, the heart is a zone of silence.

The heart is the environment where our most serious dedication takes place. As the setting for meeting God, whether at liturgy or in meditation, the heart is the place for enjoying our covenant with him. It can be an awesome moment, as the author of the Book of Revelation tells us: “I fell down at his feet as one dead” (Rev 1:17).

Understanding the heart as the source of prayer should also help us realize how it affects our commitment to Christian teaching. If we treat doctrine simply as an academic study, we will have a tendency to miss its connection with our union with God. Jesus said, “I am the truth” (Jn 14:6). He also said, “Whoever loves me will keep my word” (Jn 14:23). Jesus never divorced his teaching from his person. The two went together.

Likewise, doctrine and prayer go together. The heart is the shrine of the Word and of Love. The heart links these gifts into one satisfying unity.

This focus on our efforts need not distract us from the humble realization that the prayer of the heart is prompted by the Holy Spirit. It is he who presides over our study of doctrine and our life of prayer. We will always find ourselves weaving between dependence on God and reliance on ourselves. But ultimately we will find ourselves echoing the saints who so often say, “All is grace.”

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the link between belief and prayer? How do the teachings of Christ and his Church enrich our prayer?
2. How do we develop our dependence and reliance upon God in a world that promotes self-reliance?
3. What is the importance of the heart in prayer? How might one balance the intellectual and the intuitive approaches to God in prayer? How could you help others be open to the prayer of the heart?

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- “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” (CCC, no. 2763, citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 83, 9).
- The Church includes the Our Father in her liturgies. The communal praying of the Lord’s Prayer at Mass gathers up the intercessions that accompany the consecration of the bread and wine into Christ’s Body and Blood and prepares the worshipers for Holy Communion.
- The divine mystery is beyond our understanding and imagining. We call God “Father” only because Jesus, the Son of God made man, revealed him as such.
- Because of our union with Jesus through Baptism, we are given the grace of an adopted, filial relationship with the Father. This begets in us a new self-understanding based on this extraordinary intimacy with the Father and the Son.
- Prayer to the Father inclines us to be like him and to acquire a humble and trusting heart (cf. CCC, no. 2800).
- ‘Who art in heaven’ does not refer to a place but to God’s majesty and his presence in the hearts of the just. Heaven, the Father’s house, is the true homeland toward which we are heading and to which, already, we belong” (CCC, no. 2802).
- “In the Our Father, the object of the first three petitions is the glory of the Father: the sanctification of his name, the coming of the kingdom and the fulfillment of his will. The four others present our wants to him: they ask that our lives be nourished, healed of sin, and made victorious in the struggle of good over evil” (CCC, no. 2857).
- *Hallowed* means “to be made holy.” We do not make God’s name holy; God is the source of his own holiness that is his perfection and glory. We hallow God’s name by showing honor, respect, and adoration to God (cf. CCC, no. 2807). We give witness to God’s holiness by doing his will, being people of prayer, and establishing the earthly conditions by which God’s holiness is manifested.

- “Thy kingdom come” turns our attention to the final coming of Jesus and the ultimate fulfillment of his Kingdom. This was the prayerful cry of the early Christians who had a vivid sense of Christ’s final coming—Maranatha! “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).
- “In the third petition, we ask our Father to unite our will to that of his Son, so as to fulfill his plan of salvation in the life of the world” (CCC, no. 2860).
- “‘Our daily bread’ refers to the earthly nourishment necessary to everyone for subsistence, and also to the Bread of Life: the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (CCC, no. 2861).
- “The fifth petition begs God’s mercy for our offences, mercy which can penetrate our hearts only if we have learned to forgive our enemies, with the example and help of Christ” (CCC, no. 2862).
- “When we say ‘lead us not into temptation,’ we are asking God not to allow us to take the path that leads to sin. This petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength; it requests the grace of vigilance and final perseverance” (CCC, no. 2863).
- “In the last petition, ‘but deliver us from evil,’ Christians pray to God with the Church to show forth the victory, already won by Christ, over the ‘ruler of this world,’ Satan, the angel personally opposed to God and to his plan of salvation” (CCC, no. 2864).
- We conclude with the “Amen,” which means, “So be it.” We joyfully ratify the words that Jesus has taught us (cf. CCC, no. 2856).

MEDITATION

The proper ordering of our external activities can only be achieved once we have re-established conscious contact with the center of all these activities and concerns. This center is the aim of our meditation. In St. Teresa’s words, “God is the center of the soul.” When our access to this center is opened up, the Kingdom of God is established in our hearts. That kingdom is nothing less than the present power and all-pervasive life of God Himself permeating all creation. In the words of John Cassian: “He who is the author of eternity would have men ask of him nothing that is uncertain, petty or temporal.”

This is not because he does not want us to enjoy the good things of life, but because we can fully enjoy them only when we have received His gift of Himself who is goodness itself. The proof of his generosity is also what St. Paul calls “The ground of our hope.” It is the love of God flooding our inmost hearts through the Holy Spirit he has given us (cf. Rom 5:5).

This is not an experience reserved for the selected few. It is a gift available to all men and women. To receive it we must return to the center of our being, where we find the infusion of God’s love through the Spirit of Jesus.

— John Main, OSB, *Word into Silence*
(Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 66-67

PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. Amen.

—cf. Mt 7:9-13



Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength
honor and glory and blessing. . . .
To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever.

—Rev 5:12-13