

## Chapter Nineteen

### Christian Prayer

#### II: The Our Father

*Purpose:* This teaching is inspired by the way the Catechism of the Catholic Church uses the Lord's Prayer as a framework for teaching on Christian prayer. Part IV of the Catechism is on prayer, and is divided into two sections, 1. Prayer in the Christian Life; 2. The Lord's Prayer "Our Father". So these notes note the relevant paragraphs in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It is to reveal Jesus as the master and as the model of our prayer (see Catechism citation below).

*Presentation:* It is always helpful to give illustrations from your personal prayer experience. Particularly helpful are illustrations concerning times of struggle or of dryness, and the blessings of perseverance. Many of those hearing the teaching are struggling with their prayer, and they easily think that the teachers are great people of prayer who never go through struggles! The references to the Catechism are especially valuable for the Catholics present. I have particularly cited the Catechism on the points that the Catholics are less likely to be familiar with, and which they have not realized are part of Catholic teaching. When there are more Protestants in the audience, you can use the same teaching as the teaching in the Catechism on Prayer is drawn from the Bible, but you may want to mention the Catechism less!

#### The Life and the Teaching of Jesus

In the Gospel of Luke, which pays particular attention to the place of prayer in the life of Jesus (see Luke 3: 21; 6: 12; 9: 28)<sup>1</sup>, we are told that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11: 1). In response, Jesus taught them the "Our Father". Why did the disciples make this request? It must have been because of the obvious importance of prayer to Jesus himself and the example of his life. There is an important lesson here for us. People will want to pray and to learn how to pray when they see the importance of prayer for us and its impact in our lives.

"The traditional expression 'The Lord's Prayer' - *oratio Dominica* - means that the prayer to our Father is taught and given to us by the Lord Jesus. The prayer that comes to us from Jesus is truly unique: it is 'of the Lord.' On the one hand, in the words of this prayer the only Son gives us the words the Father gave him: **he is the master of our prayer**. On the other, as Word incarnate, he knows in his human heart the needs of his human brothers and sisters and reveals them to us: **he is the model of our prayer**." (CCC, para. 2765, my bold lettering).

*Jesus as Master:* Jesus says to the crowds and to his disciples: "you have one teacher" (Matt. 23: 8). We can learn much from Christian teachers who are men and women of prayer. But we must never forget that Jesus himself is the supreme teacher. When we forget that Jesus is THE MASTER, our prayer tends to become complicated. We can adopt methods and practices that are helpful for a time, but which can become forms of bondage obscuring the simplicity of prayer. So Jesus says, when you pray, say "Our

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<sup>1</sup> The mention of Jesus praying is not found in the parallel accounts of these episodes in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6: 9) or just “Father” (Luke 11: 2).<sup>2</sup> As sons and daughters of the Father, we do not need to heap up acclamations in order to have access to the Father (see Eph. 2: 18). Taking Jesus as our Master means that we constantly go back to Jesus to be taught. This means to pray as a Christian requires us to be deeply rooted in the Gospels.

*Jesus as Model:* As disciples we are followers of Jesus. As praying disciples, we follow Jesus in his way of praying. As Master, Jesus was not teaching us something that He was not living in his own life. The only way in which our prayer has to be different from that of Jesus is in the confession of sins and in the asking for forgiveness from the Father. The reason is obvious: we are all sinners and Jesus became like us in all things except sin (see Heb. 4: 15). Jesus is our model, because we are members of His Body, and we pray as members of His Body.

### The Petitions of the Our Father

As we go through the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, I want us to grasp the total commitment that Jesus lived and communicates to us in this prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for light to make each petition with total commitment, expressing all that the phrase means and includes.

*Our Father:* God is totally Father. The Fatherhood of God was first revealed in Jesus. He is totally Father of Jesus, and Jesus is totally Son with every part of his being. “no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him:” (Matt. 11: 27). So it is distinctive of the prayer of Jesus and of Christian prayer to call God Father. Through Jesus and our baptism into His death, we become totally sons and daughters. So when we pray “Father”, we express God’s total fatherhood freely and whole-heartedly. I am not partly a son or a daughter, or occasionally a son or a daughter. The preceding verses show that Jesus gives this revelation to “babes”, to those with the spirit of small children.

To pray to the Father we need to receive this revelation from Jesus, to know whom (as Son) is to know the Father (see John 14: 9). To do this, we need to be purified from all false images of fatherhood. Otherwise when we are told that God is Father, we project our false ideas of fatherhood on to God. Those who have not known the love of an earthly father need prayer ministry to be healed of the bad effects stemming from negative experiences of fatherhood. See CCC, para. 2779.

To call God Father is to recognize that He is the Father of the only-begotten Son from all ages, that He is the source of our total being, and of all that has ever been created. It is to recognize that God is a loving Father, who cares for each of his children. Even when he corrects and chastises us, it is out of love (see Heb. 12: 5 - 11). “The Lord’s Prayer reveals us to ourselves at the same time as it reveals the Father to us.” (CCC, para. 2783). It is first of all sheer recognition of God in worship and adoration. The “Our” “does not express possession, but an entirely new relationship with God.” (CCC, para. 2786). “If we pray the Our Father sincerely, we leave individualism behind ... The “our” ... excludes no one. If we are to say it truthfully, our divisions and oppositions have to be overcome.” (CCC, para. 2792).

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<sup>2</sup> The two versions of the Our Father in the Gospels (Matthew longer with seven petitions, Luke shorter with five) probably reflect different liturgical use of the Lord’s prayer in the local churches where Matthew and Luke compiled their gospels.

*Hallowed be Thy Name.* This phrase is not just a form of praise, a declaration of God's greatness and glory, but it is also a petition. It means "May Your Name be sanctified (in the world)." This petition expresses everything. "This petition embodies all the others." (CCC, para. 2815).

In the Old Testament, God is revealed through His Names. There are many Divine Names revealed in the Old Testament: e.g. El Shaddai or just Shaddai (Gen. 17: 1; 31: 42; 32: 29; 33: 20; 49: 25; Ex. 34: 14; 1 Sam. 15: 29); El: (Gen. 16: 23; 49: 24; and El Shaddai refs.); the Holy One of Israel (Is. 1: 4 and throughout Isaiah); the Lord of Hosts (Is. 1: 24; 6: 3; 48: 2); the Mighty One of Jacob (Ps. 132: 2; Is. 49: 26; 60: 16). But especially key passages are (1) Gen. 32: 29, where Jacob asks God His Name and God refuses to answer. This points to the absolute holiness of the Name of God. (2) Ex. 3: 13 - 15, where Moses asks God His Name and the answer is given "I AM" (Ex. 3: 14). But this is enigmatic, and may have multiple meanings, e.g. I am who I will be for you; I am who I show myself to be; I am the Only One (see Is. 43: 10 - 11). It would not be in line with Hebrew thought to interpret this word in a metaphysical and philosophical sense. So we find severe penalties against blaspheming the Name of the Lord (Ex. 20: 7; Lev. 24: 11). When God reveals that there is to be one place where the people are to worship Him, the promise is of the place where God will place His Name (Deut. 12: 5; see 2 Sam. 6: 2; 1 Kings 9: 3; Jer. 7: 10).

Israel is called to glorify the name of the Lord. "Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice." (Ps. 105: 3).

"Finally, in Jesus the name of the Holy God is revealed and given to us, in the flesh, as Saviour [see Matt. 1: 21; Luke 1: 31] revealed by what he is, by his word, and by his sacrifice" (CCC, para. 2812). In Jesus are embodied all the characteristics, attributes and qualities of God. "In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2: 9).

*Thy Kingdom Come:* The kingdom means the total rule of God over His People and over all creation through His Son Jesus. "In the Lord's Prayer, 'thy kingdom come' refers primarily to the final coming of the reign of God through Christ's return." (CCC, para. 2818). But this petition is not one among many. We are not asking for the kingdom to come, and for some other things as well! Each petition is highlighting one aspect of the whole plan of God for which each petition is asking.

In the New Testament, the kingdom of God is inseparable from the person of Jesus. In Him, the Kingdom is already present among men in human form, but it is not yet fully visible or realized. Jesus announces that "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1: 15). He preaches the Kingdom of God ("the gospel of the kingdom" in Matt. 9: 35; see also Luke 4: 43; 9: 2, 60; 10: 11). "Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the inauguration of the Messiah's kingdom" (CCC, para. 664).<sup>3</sup>

*Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven:* Again this is not one petition among many, but the same pleading for God's whole plan to be brought to completion. It brings out two dimensions of God's plan. The first is God's Will: we have to submit our wills to the will of God. We have to be like Jesus who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt. 26: 39). The second is "on earth as in heaven". God's plan is that the Kingdom of God will be established on earth, not only in heaven. The Kingdom is advanced as we on earth do the will of our heavenly Father. But the final salvation will involve the whole of creation,

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<sup>3</sup> This citation goes along with Peter's proclamation at Pentecost: „God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.“ (Acts 2: 36).

including the earth. So we have in the Scriptures the image of the new heavens and the new earth (see Is. 65: 17; 66: 22; 2 Peter 3: 13; see also Rom. 8: 19 - 21).

*Give us this day our Daily Bread:* What bread is Jesus telling us to ask for? Is it a request for our food supply? Or does it have a wider reference, a bit like in Matt. 16: 6 - 12? I have recently read an excellent book by a Catholic biblical scholar, who argues that historically the best translation of the Greek word “epiousios”, here translated as “daily”, is “supersubstantial”.<sup>4</sup> So he takes *eipi* in the sense of “above” and *ousia* as substance or nature. This translation means that Jesus is here referring to “the new manna from heaven” that is given in the Eucharist. It is another statement that Jesus is the Messiah who will rain down from heaven the new manna, the food for our eschatological journey. This interpretation deepens the meaning of “daily”, as in the desert the manna was given for each day (except the Shabbat) and had to be eaten that day. So this petition means “Give us our food for today’s journey towards the coming Kingdom”. Here we see again that the petition is not for a separate blessing, but that the Our Father is all one prayer, with the different petitions unpacking the various elements in praying for God’s Name to be sanctified, His Kingdom to come, His will to be done on earth as in heaven. For all these things to move forward, we need this daily food. See CCC, para. 2837.

*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us:* As the Catechism says: “This petition is astonishing.” (CCC, para. 2838). We are literally asking God to treat us as we treat others! Matthew’s Gospel presents the Our Father within the Sermon on the Mount (Luke’s version more likely reflects the original setting) and this petition is the only one that is repeated or developed in the Sermon: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; and if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. 6: 14 - 15). This fact indicates its importance for Jesus. Notice that while in the Our Father Matthew has “debts” and Luke “trespasses”, in these verses that follow in Matthew, Jesus is speaking of “trespasses”.

What does this mean in the overall context of the Our Father? It must mean that forgiveness is essential if God’s Name is to be sanctified, if His Kingdom is to come, and if His Will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*Lead us not into temptation:* “the Greek means both ‘do not allow us to enter into temptation’ and ‘do not let us yield to temptation’.” (CCC, para. 2846). How does this petition have a basic eschatological meaning? In the New Testament, we find statements about the final assaults of the Evil One before the Lord comes: see Matt: 24: 9 - 13; 2 Thess. 2: 7 - 8; 2 Tim. 3. “Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers.” (CCC, para. 675). This connects with the teaching about the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during which there has been an intensification in the manifestations of evil and a heightening in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> This petition is then supremely that we may be preserved from failure in this day of trial, and secondarily that we be protected from other trials that prefigure the final trial of the whole Church.

*Deliver us from Evil:* “In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God.” (CCC, para. 2851). “Satan is ‘the deceiver of the whole world.’ Through him sin and death entered the world and by his definitive defeat all creation will be ‘freed from the corruption of sin and

<sup>4</sup> Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* (New York; Doubleday, 2011), p. 95. This was the translation of St Jerome in the original Latin Vulgate.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter One.

death.’” (CCC, para. 2852). “Therefore the Spirit and the Church pray: ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’ since his coming will deliver us from the Evil One.” (CCC, para. 2853). Again the focus of this prayer is on the final deliverance, but it necessarily includes all those forms of deliverance that we need along the way to the final goal.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What is new and striking for you in this teaching?
2. Who do I need to forgive?
3. How can we make the Our Father the summit of our personal prayer?