

The Our Father: A Reflection (Mt 6:9-13)

Introduction

St. Luke informed us that Jesus taught this beautiful prayer at the request of an unnamed disciple (Lk 11:1). It is the divine model that teaches us how to pray. The Lord's Prayer is the most commented on passage in the Bible extending back to apostolic times. The Our Father, along with the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Sacraments formed a basis of Christian catechesis from patristic times. In the early Church catechumens were instructed in the life of prayer by studying the Lord's Prayer. It also figures prominently in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Its commentary on the Our Father, together with the general discussion about prayer may be the most beautiful sections in the *Catechism*.

"Our Father"

To be able to call God *our Father* and not just Father, but *Abba*, which is even more tender, intimate, respectful and affectionate, is a reality of such staggering dimensions that man could never have conceived of it apart from divine revelation. Yet God's boundless love is so great that in the *covenant*, that unique family bond formed through, with and in Jesus, we are elevated to share in the very nature of God (2 Pet 1:4) and become His adopted children. "See what love the Father has given us," writes the Apostle John, "that we should be called children of God; **and so we are**" (1 Jn 3:1).

St. Mark quotes Jesus addressing the Father by the name *Abba* during his agony in Gethsemane where he expresses his complete trust in the Father's providence. Our relationship with the Father should also overflow with confidence and complete surrender.

God is not just Father or even *my* Father, he is "our" Father. Although the word "our" is not in St. Luke's account (Lk 11:2), it is certainly implied. The universality of God's fatherhood is an important theme in Matthew's Gospel. It highlights God's covenantal family. Because God is "our" Father our relationship with others must cut through all races, sexes, cultures, classes, parties, or any other distinctions. The other, no matter how despicable or downtrodden, irregardless of their offenses and brokenness, is always my brother or sister because they are also God's children.

The Father's great love sent Jesus to bind our wounds and unite us into one family. This is one reason that so much of Catholic worship is communal worship. It celebrates God's love as the family of God.

"Who Art In Heaven"

Heaven is the possession of God, because God is everything worth possessing. When we possess God and nothing else, we have everything. On the other hand, if we possess every conceivable earthly good and do not have God, we have nothing. "What will it profit a man," Jesus asked, "to gain the whole world and to suffer the loss of his soul" (Mt 16:26)?

We dwell on earth, but heaven is our true destiny. Nothing else matters in comparison. This is a vital lesson to teach our children. We are pilgrims, homeless wayfarers. Earth is but a temporary place of exile. Our true home is heaven. This reminder helps us keep that goal in focus, so we will not become sidetracked by those things which are perishable, illusionary and temporary. It's a reminder that our journey on earth is very short – a moment. Heaven is for eternity, forever.

Jesus cautioned us: "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Mt 7: 13-14).

"Hallowed Be Thy Name"

The Father is holiness. His holiness is not dependent on the acknowledgment of creatures. When He reveals himself to us as Father, we discover the great mystery of His being. He is Father, the self-donating Begetter of the Word and the intimate source of all life. As His infinite holiness took root in the Son, we pray that His self-giving life will grow in us and flow out from us.

In this petition we ask that His most holy name be sanctified and honored everywhere. May we always honor His name in our thoughts and in our actions. Without His help we are utterly helpless to do so.

When the Father's children are faithful, His name is honored. When they are unfaithful they bring dishonor on God's name. Thus God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel: "But when they [God's chosen people] came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that men said of them, 'There are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.' But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel caused to be profaned among the nations to which they came" (Ezek 36:20-20). What was true of the Hebrew people then is even truer of Christians today. So we pray, "Father, sanctify your name by making it holy in us."

It is the Father's holy name that seals the sacraments and makes living the divine life possible. It is these seven oaths (*sacramentum* is the Latin word for oath) that Jesus swore in God's name, which guarantees we can now do the impossible, namely, remain faithful. It is in God's intimate Family name that we were reborn into His family; for we were baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We are sealed with God's name for all eternity.

So we pray: "Never let us violate your name by sin." When we sin we drag your name, which you indelibly imprinted on our soul, through the muck of evil and death.

"Thy Kingdom Come"

We have a distorted understanding of kingship. We view it only in a governmental sense. A king is viewed only as a ruler or perhaps the ceremonial head of state. In democratic countries

like the United States we have almost no appreciation of the biblical concept of kingship. This may be why some modern translators render the Greek word *basileia* as *reign* of God rather than *kingdom* of God. God's fatherhood is the basis for His kingship, because in God His fatherhood and His kingship are one.

God is not only our Father, but also our King. In His kingship we discover the full meaning of human fatherhood: self-sacrifice, authority, life, compassion, justice, mercy and love. This is the biblical meaning of fatherhood.

This petition also acknowledges that the Father's loving rule does not reign in all hearts. This yearning for the completion of the Father's kingdom looks at our present reality and to our future destiny. We pray that the Father's kingdom expand into all hearts. But how is that to come about? The answer is discovered in the next sentence.

"Thy Will Be Done On Earth As It Is In Heaven"

Submission to the Father's will defines what it means to live faithfully in His kingdom. This is how we, His children and His subjects, must live. Obedience to His will is the only way we can show our love. Thus Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). It is only in the full submission to the Father's will that we are truly free and at peace.

God's will is the central force in the universe, the radiant power that sustains all existence. Humans become truly alive and achieve their destiny only when their free submission to His will is complete "on earth as it is in heaven." By the miracle of God's love we became God's family. When He speaks it is always for our good. We must obey. Always! Everywhere!

Father, help us to obey. Teach us to love like St. Paul who wrote: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil 3:8).

"Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread"

St. Jerome captured the profound spiritual meaning of this passage when he translated "daily" bread as the "*supersubstantial*" bread. The Eucharist is the true daily bread that sustains our spiritual life. "This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6: 50-51). We ask the Father to give us this bread.

The Greek word that is translated as "daily," *epiousion*, offers another possibility. It could also be rendered as "tomorrow." The word "tomorrow" symbolically refers to the *great tomorrow*, when God's Kingdom will be restored. In the New Testament this experience of the Kingdom of God is described as the *heavenly banquet* (Mt 26:29; Lk 12:37; 14:15; 22:30; Rev 19:7-9).

When these two images, *daily* and *tomorrow*, converge they underscore the supersubstantial bread of the Eucharist, "the bread from heaven" (Jn 6:32-32). This *daily* bread sustains our

supernatural life, is the source of all grace, and in the great *tomorrow* it is cause of our resurrection in Christ. Liturgically this awesome reality is evidenced in the ancient practice at Mass of reciting or singing the Lord's Prayer before Holy Communion. The Our Father is a reminder that we are about to receive the Bread of the great tomorrow when our union with the Heavenly Bridegroom will be eternally celebrated in the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

This petition also asks the Father to teach us to be content with today's necessities. We ask for nothing more. In asking only for what we need today to sustain life here below, we embrace the evangelical virtue of poverty. We can detach our hearts from material things because we are fed with the supersubstantial bread, the Eucharist. It is enough!

This detachment from possessions and our focus on the Eucharist also becomes the wellspring for our concern for the needs of others and true social justice. Because we don't live for earthly things, we can escape the traps of our materialistic, consumer society which always desires more and the new. A life focused on the Eucharist leads to a deep life of prayer, detachment from things and a desire to provide for the needs of others. The Eucharist also transforms us into great lovers.

For those who have plenty, it is a reminder to be satisfied and thankful with the necessities of today, and to share with others. For those who have very little, it is a trusting prayer in God's providence.

“And Forgive Us Our Trespasses As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us”

The message here is very clear. We will be forgiven as we forgive others. Thus, we had better forgive as we are forgiven.

God gives us everything out of His loving mercy: life, the material world, and redemption. On the other hand, our collective and individual histories are a record of Love rejected, which is the essence of sin. When we sin we always choose the creature over the creator.

Nevertheless, the Father extends His merciful forgiveness. When our repentance is complete so is His forgiveness. However, God demands that we act like Him by forgiving those who have offended us. He knows that forgiveness liberates the wounded heart and removes the poison that endangers it. In that process we experience the depth of God's love and mercy. When we forgive we also reveal the Father's heart to others.

The Father gave us His unconditional love in the person of Jesus Christ, even when we were His enemies. Amazingly, at the very moment when all the infidelities, neglect, hatred and ingratitude of mankind nailed Jesus to the cross, he loves and he forgives. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13).

Forgiveness is very hard, especially when we feel deeply hurt and betrayed. Yet, it is essential that we forgive from our hearts because forgiveness is woven into the very fabric of our relationship with our heavenly Father. What does the Father do when we refuse to forgive and

withhold our love? He revokes His forgiveness of our debt and casts us into prison (Mt 19:23-35).

Throughout the Bible God teaches His children to forgive. To swear a covenant oath in the Bible means literally to “seven” oneself. In order to remind His people of this special relationship God designed the number seven into the very calendar of his chosen people. God created the world in seven days. Every seven days is the Sabbath, a day of prayer and rest set aside to reflect on God’s goodness. It was also a reminder of the eternal Sabbath. After seven times seven days, the feast of Pentecost was celebrated on the fiftieth day. In the seventh month the feast of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and the feast of trumpets was celebrated. It lasted seven days. Every seventh year was the Sabbath year when debts were forgiven. Every seven times seven years was the great year of Jubilee, when all land reverted back to the original family owner regardless of the outstanding debts and leases. The Father does not want families disinherited on earth or in eternity.

These lessons of forgiveness continued in the New Testament. Jesus said to Peter in response to how many times he should forgive: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22), meaning always. Finally, Jesus exemplified what he taught. On the cross he prayed, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

“And Lead Us Not Into Temptation”

The word *temptation* literally means *tribulation*. Tribulation has a special meaning in the Bible. It refers to God’s covenantal curses incurred for unrepented sinful behavior. Jesus’ ringing denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in the form of seven prophetic woes (Mt 23:13-36), and his terrible prophecies against the temple (Mt 24 & 25) are frightening examples of tribulation.

The punishment of pride is temptation, because pride brings the temptations that lead us into sin. Indeed, temptation follows pride with the inevitability that night follows day. Why is that? Pride leads us to focus on ourselves as the center of the universe. Because of pride we no longer view the Father’s law as the only valid prescription of wholeness, well being, and happiness. When we proudly undergo temptation the inevitable consequence is sin. Sin is always the natural consequence of relying on us and forsaking God’s prescription for happiness.

So we ask our Father, “lead us not into temptation.” In other words we ask the Father to make us humble relying on His strength and protection. We ask Him to keep us from becoming overconfident, complacent, self-seeking and boastful. When we are humble in this life the Father can exalt us in eternity. We ask the Father, “Deliver us from sin, the only evil.”

Temptations also test us, but their purpose is to lead us into sin. The danger of temptations lie in their deceptiveness, which makes evil appear beguilingly alluring. Therefore we ask for the grace to unmask the lie in temptations so we can see its evil. This petition acknowledges our helplessness in the face of temptation. This entreaty recalls Jesus’ words, “apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Lastly, this petition looks to the final trial of our faith at the end of our earthly life. This idea is wonderfully captured in the Hail Mary, “Pray for us sinners *now* and at the *hour of our death*,” which asks for Mary’s intercession at the two most important moments of our life.

“But Deliver Us From Evil”

One of the greatest punishments for sin is the pleasure attached to the sin. Its allurements reinforces the blindness of our pride and the stubbornness of our will to refuse to admit our sinfulness. The pleasure associated with sin reinforces that evil. There is a terrible danger here, a habit of sin that we will not abandon. Once we become addicted to the power of sinful pleasure into whose arms are we most likely to fall? Satan, the evil one!

The distance is short between temptation and the dominance by the evil one. So Jesus taught us to pray, “deliver us from evil,” that is, the evil one. The primary thrust of this request asks the Father to rescue us from the devil’s clutches. This petition also asks that we be delivered from the deceptiveness of Satan’s sons who distort religion under the guise they are the angels of light. We are living amid the evil fruit of this dissent from truth.

It’s important to consider that the just Father allows His children to possess what they choose. He respects the free will he gave us. God never uses force. God respects our terrible power of self determination. He punishes us the most when he allows the evil we choose. Ultimately, that leads to the greatest of all punishments the complete loss of God, Himself, who is the total, infinite and perfect good. Our actions seal our fate: good or evil.

While our Father never uses force, He is not a passive bystander waiting on the sidelines to see which destiny we choose. He is always the loving Father nudging His wayward children with his loving support and direction. When, for example, we get caught drunk on the job and are fired, or are arrested for shoplifting, or have an affair exposed, or get caught cheating or lying, or get divorced for unfaithfulness, selfishness and neglect – these are signs of God’s undeserved mercy. He’s trying to get our attention to the far greater danger that lies in eternity. When our evil is exposed, God is not abandoning us to sin with its pleasures. If we were not caught we would fall deeper into the arms of Satan until, like the scribes and Pharisees, we had sealed ourselves off from God’s mercy and forgiveness.

The Christian life is a persistent battle of spiritual warfare that will continue to the last moment of each life and to the very last moment of time. The greatest danger in this deadly conflict is that we rely on ourselves. From his own experience St. Peter gave us this solemn warning. “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith” (1 Pet 5:8-9).

In his Letter to the Ephesians 6:10-18 St. Paul described the spiritual armor the Father gives us to survive this conflict. St. Paul also reminded us: “We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness” (Eph 6:12). In his priestly prayer during his

farewell discourse Jesus asked his Father: “I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one” (Jn 17:15).

“Amen.”

We end our prayers with the word amen. It is a transliteration of a solemn Hebrew word describing something firm, true, or reliable. At the conclusion of Christian prayer it expresses our complete trust and surrender to God’s will. It is our *fiat*.

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