

OUR FATHER

The Prayer Jesus Taught Us

by Gloria Hutchinson

Fresh from Bible school, a child asked her mother, “Why did the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years?” Said her mother, “Because even in those days men refused to stop and ask for directions.” Fortunately the Israelites had gained ground by the time Jesus gathered his company of Galilean disciples!

Luke’s Gospel provides the proof. When the disciples were unsure about how to express their new and more intimate relationship with God, they appointed one of their number to ask for directions. He approached Jesus at prayer and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Jesus responded, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name...’” (11:1, 2).

The prayer Jesus gave his friends was as good as a map into the Kingdom of God. It contained everything they needed to know and to be as his followers. “You may look through all the prayers in the Scriptures,” St. Augustine said, “but you will not find anything that is not contained in the Lord’s Prayer.” Recognizing the Our Father as the Lord’s gift to his faith community, the Church has always prayed it daily. No celebration of Baptism, Confirmation or Eucharist, no offering of the Liturgy of the Hours is complete without this universal prayer.

We know the words so well we could recite them in our sleep. Therein lies the danger that we may pray them like sleepwalkers making their nightly rounds. My personal wake-up call came recently when I agreed to give a reflection on the Our Father to a religious-education gathering. As the old saw has it, the best way to learn something is to teach it.



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How to approach ‘Our Father’

Since my own sense of direction is at least as fallible as the ancient Israelites’, I stopped to ask directions from St. Teresa of Avila, recognized as a Doctor of the Church. She suggested asking three questions before we even open our mouths to pray: 1) *To whom is this prayer being made?* 2) *Who is making it?* 3) *What is its object?* I focused Teresa’s light on the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer, and moved slowly into territory I would no longer take for granted.

Who is this first Person of the Trinity whom Jesus calls “Father”? Only the Son knows the answer: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). But when we pray to the Father we “enter into his mystery as he is and as the Son has revealed him to us” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2779). This much we do know: The Father is more than our paternal image of him. Human language and images, after all, are inadequate to express the reality of God. The *Catechism* reminds us that God “is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the difference between the sexes” (#370). Therefore saints and other faithful children of God have used many different ideas and images to try to express their experience of the living God.

I harbor a kinship with those saints who intuited from Scripture and life experience that the God who is our father is also our mother. The same can be said about God the Son. In the fifth century, St. John Chrysostom gave a homily showing how Christ identifies himself as mother. Seven centuries later St. Anselm composed a prayer in which he says to Christ, “If you had not been in labor, you could not have borne death; and if you had not died, you would not have brought forth” (*Oratio* 65). Anselm repeats, “So you, Lord God, are a great mother.” The Middle Ages provided fertile soil for a blossoming awareness of God’s maternal qualities. (Witness the writings of St. Francis of Assisi, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich.)

A contemporary Scripture scholar at the Gregorian University in Rome affirms that when we pray the Our Father we must move beyond any confining sexual distinctions. Jean Galot, S.J., writes, “We must say that God is both father and mother. He joins within himself all the qualities of fatherhood and motherhood, and in particular, the strength of paternal love and the tenderness of maternal love.”

It seems right to say that we are making our prayer to our maternal Father. In Scripture we see both feminine and masculine language to point to God’s inexpressible nature. On the one hand is a passage like Isaiah 49:15: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child in her womb?”

(Other examples are Dt 32:18, Nm 11:12, Is 46:3-4.) Fatherly descriptions are plentiful. In the New Testament we see Jesus lovingly address the Father as “Daddy,” yet also compare his own divine love to that of a mother hen who broods over her chicks (Mt 23:37). The main point is: We are approaching a God who loves and cares for us.



The ‘our’ is all

Who is praying “Our Father...”? The *Catechism* makes the reassuring point that the word *our* “excludes no one.” If we are sincere in using that communal pronoun, “our divisions and oppositions have to be overcome” (#2792). We cannot pray “our” without including every single person for whom Christ died. The Our Father erases all boundaries between us and them, between past and present.

I read a true story somewhere about a first-grader who came home from school one day looking glum. When her mother asked what was wrong, the child said, “I’m sad.” Pressed to explain why she was sad, she replied, “Abraham Lincoln got killed.” (I recalled that I once had a crying jag over the beheading of John the

Baptist. It was as though I’d just read about it in the morning paper and wished that I could have been there to console him before the ax fell.)

That’s the *our* of the Our Father. It calls us into the family circle, saints crossing elbows with sinners, rich with poor, criminal with law-abiding, powerful with victimized, beloved with despised, living with dead. There are no outcasts from the *our*.

And what is the object of our prayer? We desire to give glory to the Father and to express our needs to him. Our object is to enter into communion with the Father and the Son through the Spirit praying in us.

Praise before petitions

I am reminded of the aging parents who had a habit of relying on their son-in-law to serve as their unpaid jack-of-all-trades. Whenever their daughter and her husband arrived from a distant state, the son-in-law would hardly have time to sit down before Mom or Dad said, “By the way, Bill, the upstairs sink is plugged. Can you fix it?” or “The car hasn’t started in a week. Will you see what’s wrong with it?” After driving 400 miles, Bill was expected to head right for the tool kit and go to work. “They could at least offer me a cold beer and tell me what a good job I did on the kitchen cupboards last time before hitting me up for another chore,” he told his wife.

✦ Hallowed be thy name.

The Lord’s Prayer respects the priority of praise over petitions in our own behalf. “It is characteristic of love to think first of the one whom we love” (*Catechism*, #2804). Therefore, the first three affirmations of the Our Father bear the aroma of selflessness. As daughters and sons of God, we say, before all else: We love you, we hallow your name, we desire your Kingdom and the fulfillment of your will.

There are many ways of glorifying God’s name. We do so whenever we speak it with awe or adoration, with faith or desire, with honor or respect. Every act of authentic prayer or worship hallows the name. Yet there is more, as St. Peter Chrysologus points out: “For God’s name is blessed when we live well, but it

is blasphemed when we live wickedly” (*Catechism*, #281).

✦ **Thy kingdom come.**

We recognize that the Kingdom has come in Christ himself and will come in glory when Jesus appears at the endtime. Sometimes, in the midst of a Eucharist celebration, we actually sense that the Kingdom is, as Jesus said, right at hand. It is there in the homilist’s story that makes us say, “Yes, that’s how it is.”

It is there in the parent who divides his attention between the hymnal and the escape plots of his toddlers. It is there in the widowed elderly who break through their shells to clasp hands at the sign of peace. It is there when the presider invokes the power of the Holy Spirit, asking that our gifts of bread and wine become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is there when we join hands and voices, praying “Our Father...” and when we emerge from the womb of the Mass to “love and serve the Lord.”

What we pray for we must be willing to work for insofar as we are able. The Kingdom parables of Jesus show that the disciples must exert effort. The sower must harvest both weeds and wheat; the mustard seed requires a sower. The yeast cannot leaven the loaf unless the woman kneads it. The treasure in the field and the pearl of great price must be sought and purchased at considerable sacrifice. The net cannot cast itself, nor the haul be separated without the fisherman.

✦ **Thy will be done.**

This beautiful petition unites us with Jesus, who says, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me” (John 4:34), and with Mary who responds to God’s call with “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). To desire and to do God’s will is our highest purpose. As C.S. Lewis observed, what we are really praying here is, “Enable us to do your will. Your will be done by me today.”

Bread and forgiveness

Having praised our Father, assuring him that we share his dreams for us, we move closer in confidence. I picture a child on her mother’s lap (Psalm 131:2) or the beloved disciple leaning on the chest of

Jesus (John 13:25). Just as there are four eucharistic actions by which we identify Jesus (he took, blessed, broke, gave), there are four Lord’s Prayer petitions by which we identify ourselves. We are the ones who pray in God’s ear: “Give us...Forgive us...Lead us not...Deliver us.”

During Mass, the Our Father comes between the preparation rite (he took



and blessed) and the Communion rite (he broke and gave). It is as though the prayer gathers up all our intentions and lifts them up to our nurturing Father before opening the door to the banquet-table of Communion.

✦ **Give us this day our daily bread.**

The One who taught us to pray these words assures us that if we ask, we will receive. He essentially says, “Look, if your son came up to you and asked for a loaf of bread, would you give him a loaf-shaped stone and send him packing? So if you, who have yet to reach the state of perfection, know how to give the bread that is needed, imagine how much more your heavenly Father will give to those who ask with confidence” (see Matthew 7:7-11).

What is the bread we seek? It is the

Bread of Life itself in Eucharist. It is food on the table and hospitality to a guest. It is “all appropriate goods and blessings, both material and spiritual” (*Catechism*, #2830). And what we ask for we must be willing to give insofar as we are able. We cannot hope to receive a hearty loaf of seven-grain bread if we are giving no more than a loaf-shaped stone to those who hunger for three squares a day, for companionship, for work, for the word of God.

✦ **Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.**

(O, Lord, we know not what we pray! If we did, we’d don crash helmets before uttering this self-incriminating petition.) Our pastor tells the story of a Native American whose house on the reservation burned to the ground one night. The man and his wife escaped. But they were unable to save their child. Thereafter the man, a recovering alcoholic who hadn’t had a drink in several months, was vilified by his neighbors. They said he had been dead drunk and caused his own son’s death.

In the eye of this storm of gossip, the man remained calm and unvengeful. When his pastor asked, “How are you able to forgive such cruel treatment?” the man replied, “I realized that I either had to learn to forgive or had to leave town. I had no other choice.”

That man’s choice is ours. Who among us has not met at least one “impossible to forgive” person? I encountered one several years ago. She hurt me deeply and often, with no apparent remorse. I said I forgave her. I went to Confession. I continued to speak to her with courtesy. But my jaw was clenched, my words cold. In time I realized that I had allowed my enmity with this woman to drive me out of my own home: the inner hearth where God abides in us.

What a joy it must be to learn to forgive like the father of the prodigal son! “While he was still a long way off,” Luke says, “his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (15:20). How liberating for the father as well as for the son! To forgive others as the Father has forgiven us is a life’s work worthy of the best we have to give.

Guidance and deliverance

✦ And lead us not into temptation.

This awkward translation from the Greek seems to cast God the Father as a sly trickster who on occasion dangles forbidden fruit before our noses just to see what we will do. What we are really saying is “do not allow us to enter into temptation” and “do not let us yield to temptation” (*Catechism*, #2846). As many of the saints have noted, temptation itself is good for us. Without it, we would be untried warriors who, in their first major battle against evil, wind up as POWs.

We are asking our loving Father for the gift of discernment: “Dad, help us to know the difference between a hard testing that exercises our spiritual strength, and a temptation that, if given in to, makes us vulnerable to sin.”

What we ask for we must be willing to give: We must help others surmount temptation. Many teens and young adults go starving for spiritual and moral guidance. Every adult in the parish is accountable to God for training the young to recognize and do battle with the

The Bible's Two Versions

The earliest and probably most authentic version of the Lord's Prayer is found in Luke's Gospel (11:2-4). It contains only five petitions (for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of the Kingdom, for daily bread, forgiveness and deliverance). The more familiar liturgical version appears in Matthew's Gospel (6:9-13) where Jesus offers the prayer as part of his Sermon on the Mount.

Both forms of the prayer stress the fatherhood of God, the communal character of the Church and our dependence on God whose love sustains us day by day. The final doxology (“For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever”) was added for liturgical emphasis early in the Church's history.

UPDATE

Question Box

1. What do we mean when we say “Our Father”?
2. Why does praise precede the petitions?
3. Is one petition more meaningful to you than the others? Why or why not?

black knights of greed, lust, addiction, prejudice, violence and self-loathing. St. Francis de Sales encouraged seekers to glean guidance from as many sources as they could find. “There is no harm, it seems to me, in gathering from many flowers the honey which we cannot find in one alone,” he said. When I provide my neighbor the honey of a wise word or of a moral example, I am doing for others what I ask the Father to do for me.

✦ But deliver us from evil.

In a collection of children's letters to God compiled by David Heller, I came across this one from a nine-year-old. “To God, How do you know Satan when you see him? Can you give me any clues?” The letter is signed, “Your loyal little girl, Charlene.” We do well to follow this child's lead in asking God's help to identify the sources of evil. For if we recognize Satan, the “ruler of the world” (John 14:30), we have a much better chance of locking him outside our city gates.

The Church recognizes Satan as “the angel who opposes God” and “throws himself across God's plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ” (*Catechism*, #2851). Satan is the “father of lies” through whom sin and death entered the world. At his “definitive defeat” at the end of time, the world will be liberated from sin and death (#2852).

What clues do we look for in spotting this arch-deceiver, this unholy adversary, this thorn in our collective side? We will know him by his bulging sack of glossy possessions, vain ambitions, useless fears, seductive control buttons. He works under cover of darkness and the fruit of his labors is discord. He sets husband against wife, parent against child, black against white, nation against nation, one faith against another.

We oppose Satan best by sticking together, closing ranks around God, our caring Father. “Resist the devil,” St. James advises, “and he will flee from you” (4:7). Together we raise our shield of prayer against the evil that has been (bombing of innocent people, the Holocaust), that is now (the arms race, child abuse) and that shall be (environmental devastation, media-fed violence). As Church, we plead for the peace the world cannot give.

A map into the Kingdom

Whenever we pray the Our Father, whether alone on our knees or standing strong in the congregation, we overcome the divisions and oppositions sown like weeds amidst the wheat. We pray it well by living it, consulting it frequently as our map into the Kingdom of God.

A young novice once asked Teresa of Avila, “Mother, what shall I do to become a contemplative?” Without missing a beat, Teresa responded, “Say the Our Father—but take an hour to say it.” Those who heed her advice will have Jesus himself as their teacher, and his prayer as their sure guide. ■

Gloria Hutchinson is a former teacher and catechist who writes extensively on the spiritual life. Her books include A Retreat With Gerard Manley Hopkins and Hildegard of Bingen, Praying the Way: Reflections on the Stations of the Cross and Praying the Rosary: New Reflections on the Mysteries, all by St. Anthony Messenger Press.

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