

CATECHISM PART IV

PRAYER (PART 2) – THE LORD’S PRAYER

(C 2700-2719, 2759-2865, USC pp 473-474 & Ch. 36)

This lesson is divided into two parts: (1) Vocal Prayer, Meditation and Contemplation, and (2) The Lord’s Prayer.

PART ONE: Vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation (C 2700-2719, USC p. 473-474)

We can and should relate to God with our whole being, body, mind, and heart. Three ways to do this is through vocal prayer, meditation and contemplation.

Vocal prayer – praying with our bodies. By means of vocal prayer, the prayer in our heart is given outward expression. This spoken prayer may take the form of liturgical prayer, shared prayer with others, charismatic or personal prayer alone in our home, vehicle or some other place. In vocal prayer, we are not only using our lips but other parts of our bodies to bow, genuflect and raise our hands and whole being to God.

Meditation – praying with our minds. By use of our mind, we can meditate on the scriptures, the truths of our faith, spiritual books, religious icons, or the events and encounters of our lives. In the scriptures, we find Mary pondering the events of her life (Lk 1:66, 2:19).

As followers of Christ, we are encouraged to especially meditate on the Gospel so that we can come to know and love Jesus and his word ever more deeply. Without regular meditation on the scriptures and other sacred texts, we run the risk of becoming victims of passing fads and of allowing ourselves to be guided by the “wisdom” of the secular world rather than by the “surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8).

It should be pointed out that Christian meditation has its own particular mindset. In this form of prayer, we put aside what is sometimes called our “computer intelligence” which we use to gather information, analyze it and manage it. In meditative reading, we don’t attack a text as we might when studying. Rather, we prayerfully and humbly sit with a text asking the Holy Spirit to help us hear its message for us.

The same approach applies to our meditation of icons or the events and encounters of our lives. Like Mary, we ponder to discern their meaning and message.

Contemplation – praying with our hearts. In the prayer of contemplation, we are not *talking* to God or *thinking* about God or Jesus and his message. Rather, we are *resting* in his presence, much like a couple in each other’s company in wordless communion. In Ps

46:10, God tells us “to be still and know that I am God.” In the prayer of contemplation, we embrace the words of a medieval mystic: “*While we rest in him, he works in us.*” There is always the danger that we become too busy in prayer. We may feel that our quiet time with God is a waste unless we read ten pages of a book, read our favorite prayers and pray the Rosary. We bring the busyness of our workday in our time of prayer. We may think that if we are not *doing* something, our prayer is a waste of time. When we are too busy in prayer, we have embraced the heresy which maintains that our spiritual transformation depends on *our* efforts. When we spend time in wordless communion before God, we are saying that we believe that while we rest in him, he does indeed work in us. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once said: “I always begin my prayer in silence, for it is in the silence of the heart that God speaks.”

Contemplative moments. We don’t have to be in a quiet time of prayer to experience contemplation. Contemplative moments can happen to us at any time and place. Suddenly and unexpectedly, we find ourselves embraced and cherished by God. We have a deep feeling of inner peace and a sense of connectedness with all of creation. Such graced moments may happen as we walk down the street, take a stroll on the beach, sit at our desk, hold a small baby in our arms, sit alone in church, paint a picture, dance, look into a microscope, or whatever. Fr. William Barry, S.J., gives us the following example of a contemplative moment in his book *God and You*.

“A man was walking along a beach at night and saw the moonlight touch with silver the crest of a wave. He was delighted and felt at peace and in the presence of someone who himself delights in such things. He felt that God was close and loved him even though he often drank too much and got angry with his family. He knew that God knew all about him and yet loved him, and he felt freer than he had in years.”

Developing the art of reflective living is the best thing we can do to facilitate contemplative moments.

Pause: Do you tend to be active in prayer or do you tend to be more contemplative? Can you see the importance of the latter?

PART TWO: The Lord's Prayer (C 2759-2865, USC Ch. 36)

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas says: *"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"* (C 2763).

The Our Father is called the "Lord's Prayer" because Jesus, our Lord and model of prayer, is its author. The prayer is Christ's response to his disciples' plea to "Teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer. The shorter version by Luke (11:2-4) has five petitions while the longer version by Matthew (6:9-13) has seven petitions. Matthew's version is the one the Church has adopted in its liturgical tradition. The conclusion we pray at Mass: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever," comes from the *Didache*, a first century catechetical textbook.

As prayed by the Church, the Lord's Prayer or "Our Father" has seven petitions. The first three glorify God, express reverence for his name, pray for the coming of his kingdom and for the fulfillment of his will on earth. The last four petitions focus on our needs: the daily nourishment we need to live, healing of our sins, victory over temptation, and protection against evil. Because Jesus is the creator of these petitions, they are more than simple requests. They teach us what we truly need to live happy, holy and moral lives. Before we look at the seven petitions, let us understand the opening words: *"Our Father who art in heaven."*

"Our Father"

When St. Teresa of Avila prayed the Our Father, she found it almost impossible to get beyond the first two words. They were like a beautiful country that she wanted to dwell in forever.

"The opening address of the Lord's Prayer reveals to us the deepest truth about ourselves: We are a relationship with God. Before all else, we belong to God, and that belonging is our very identity. Therefore, the most reasonable – the most human – the thing that we can do is cry out to the Mystery who made us" (Peter Cameron O.P.).

We call God "Father" because Jesus revealed him as such and because he also called God his Father. The Hebrew word "Abba" is more accurately translated as "daddy," a term of endearment. Through our union with Jesus through baptism, we are adopted children of God, and with Jesus we too can call God "daddy" or "dada."

The word "Our" is very important in the Lord's Prayer. It signifies that here on earth; *all* other humans are our brothers and sisters. All of us are sons and daughters of the one God. What happens to any one of us should concern each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. In the Lord's Prayer, the word "Our" expresses our solidarity with everyone in our human family.

The word "Our" should draw us away from any tendencies towards individualism and isolation from others, and move us in the direction of communion with all humankind. In our global family, there should be no "us" and "them," only "us."

"Who art in heaven"

The word heaven does not refer to some faraway place on another planet, but to a state of being with God who is both very close to us and yet totally transcendent from all of our concepts and images of him. Even though heaven refers to our eternal destiny, we experience a foretaste of it in our celebration of the Eucharist and when we experience moments of deep love with another. (For more on heaven, see Article 11, *What Happens after Death*.)

Pause: What forms of prayer attract you the most?

Petition #1 – "Hallowed be thy name"

The term "hallowed" means "to be made holy." *We* do not make God's name holy; God is the source of his own holiness. But we give witness to God's holiness by living holy and loving lives. So the first petition of the Our Father is a call to holiness, a call to honor God by the quality of our lives. (For more on this petition, see Article 21 on the First and Second Commandments.)

In his book *Holy Longing*, Fr. Ronald Rollheiser writes: *"Hallowed be thy name...may we always acknowledge your holiness, respecting that your ways are not our ways, your standards are not our standards. May the reverence we give your name pull us out of the selfishness that prevents us from seeing the pain of our neighbor."*

Petition #2 – "Thy kingdom come"

The kingdom of God is not an earthly or territorial one. It is a spiritual reality. It is "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, peace and love" (*Preface for Solemnity of Christ the King*). Jesus preached and embodied the kingdom of God when he was here on earth. But God's kingdom is not yet fully realized because we live in a world where there is still much violence, injustice and lies.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer calls us individually and as a Church to pray for and work to build a society imbued with love, justice and peace.

Petition #3 – “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”

In this petition we face one of the big challenges of the spiritual life, namely, to embrace God's will in all things. In John 4: Jesus says: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.” In Gethsemane, he sweat blood as he struggled to embrace his Father's will. In this petition, we are praying for the grace to be seekers and doers of God's will. This petition, like the previous one, raises the fundamental challenge for individuals and societies to build God's kingdom and not our own kingdom, and to seek and follow God's will, not our own will. Daily, we can choose God's way or our way.

Commenting on this petition, Ronald Rollheiser writes: “*May the work of our hands, the temples and structures we build in this world, reflect the temple and the structure of God's glory so that the joy, graciousness, tenderness, and justice of heaven will show forth within all of our structures on earth.*” (ibid)

Petition #4 – “Give us this day our daily bread”

In the second set of petitions, we pray for four key needs of the human heart.

The *Catechism* states: “Our daily bread’ refers to the earthly nourishment necessary to every one for subsistence, and also to the Bread of Life: the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (C 2861).

“**Give us**” reminds us that we, like little children, are radically dependent on God for what we need to make it through *each* day. “*Give...life and love to us and help us to see always everything as gift. Help us to know that nothing comes to us by right and that we must give because we have been given to. Help us realize that we must give to the poor, not because they need it, but because our own health depends upon our giving to them*” (Rollheiser).

“**This day**” reminds us that we are only to be concerned about today and not tomorrow. Jesus says to us: “Do not be anxious about tomorrow. ...Let today's trouble be sufficient for the day” (Mt 6:34). Tomorrow we return again to God for the bread we need tomorrow. When the Israelites journey through the desert, God provides them daily with manna enough for each day. Moses commands them “not to keep any of it for tomorrow” (Ex 16:19). This petition of the Lord's Prayer reminds us of our call to place our trust in God for our daily needs.

“**Our daily bread**” is invoked “*so that each person in the world may have enough food, enough clean water, enough clean air, adequate health care, and sufficient access to education so as to have the sustenance for a healthy life. Teach us to give from our sustenance and not just from our surplus*” (Rollheiser).

Petition # 5 – “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”

The *Catechism* states: “This petition is astonishing... for the two parts are joined by the word ‘as’” (C 2838). The challenging implication of this petition is that God's mercy towards us is dependent on our willingness to forgive *all* those who have hurt us. Just as God stands in readiness to forgive us *all* of our sins, we too must be willing to forgive others all of the ways they may have hurt us. Is it possible to forgive *all* hurts? Not if we depend on our own strength. But with God's grace, all things are possible. We know the truth of this statement when we hear inspiring stories of *ordinary* people forgiving heinous crimes. Finally, let us remember that the best way to obtain God's mercy is by showing mercy. The fifth beatitude states: “*Happy are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them*” (Mt 5:7).

“**And forgive us our trespasses**” – our blindness toward our neighbor, our self-preoccupation, our racism, our sexism, and our incurable propensity to worry only about ourselves and our own. Forgive our habit of watching the evening news but doing nothing about it.

“**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**” “*Help us to forgive those who victimize us. Help us to mellow out in spirit, to not grow bitter with age, to forgive our imperfect parents and systems that wounded us...*” (Rollheiser). (For practical steps on how to live the message of forgiveness, see my book *How to Forgive Yourself & Others*, Liguori Publications.)

Pause: What speaks to you most in the first petitions of the Lord's Prayer?

Petition # 6 – “Lead us not into temptation”

This petition may be puzzling as it seems to imply that God leads us into temptation. But St. James (1:13) says: “God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.” In the original Greek, *lead us* means both “do not allow us to enter” and “do not let us yield” (C 2846). So we can restate the petition in this way: “God, do not allow us to enter situations of temptation” or “do not let us yield to temptation.”

“Do not enter” and “yield” are like road signs. In this petition, we ask God not to allow us to take the road that leads to sin. “The Holy Spirit acts like a ‘do not enter’ sign in the hearts of those who pray, by helping us to identify and respond to temptations” (*The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth*, p. 366).

Temptations are invitations or enticements to do unwise or immoral acts. The problem with temptation is that it often presents itself as good, desirable and “delightful to the eyes” (Gen 3:6). Paul warns us that “*Satan himself goes disguised as an angel of the light*” (2 Cor 10:14). It is a good daily practice to ask our guardian angel to protect us from false and evil ways. A good one-liner prayer is “Jesus, protect me this day from false and evil ways. Keep me in your truth.”

Petition # 7 – “But deliver us from evil”

The final petition of the “Lord’s Prayer” continues the theme or focus of the previous one, namely, the struggle against evil. The petition moves us away from our personal struggle with evil to pray with the whole church that our world would be delivered from the false and treacherous ways of Satan whom Jesus calls the “father of lies” (Jn 8:44). For the Christian, Satan is not an abstraction. He is a real evil being who seeks our destruction (1 Pt 5:8-9).

In this final petition of the Lord’s Prayer, we ask “God the Father to deliver us from the snares of Satan and a sensuous, materialistic, and violent society that ignores God and tempts us to rely solely on ourselves. We pray that God may spare us from the evil of accidents, illness, and natural disasters. We pray that God will strengthen us to confront the evil for which we too share some blame - using others, injustice, prejudice. And we pray that no situation arises that might tempt us to deny our loving Creator. This would be the worst evil of all” (*This is Our Faith* p. 330).

The *Catechism* tells us that “one who entrusts himself to God does not dread the devil. If God is for us, who is against us?” (C 2852, Rom 8:31).

Doxology

The word “doxology” means “word of praise.” The Lord’s Prayer has a doxology which was added on by the early church: “*For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.*” It is recited during Mass by Latin Catholics after the line “deliver us from all evil.” These words of praise echo the first three petitions and we use them as words of adoration in union with the liturgy of heaven.

Amen

We conclude the Our Father with the “Amen,” which means “so be it.” In our “Amen,” we joyfully ratify or say “yes” to the seven petitions of the Lord’s Prayer. We make them our own.

The connection between prayer and belief

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 God 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” (USC 491).

Pause: How do you see the connection between prayer and belief?

Action suggestion

This week spend some time praying the Our Father slowly and meditatively.

Meditation

Anointed by our morning light I lift my spirit to receive the gift of this new day.

Open my eyes to the beauty that surrounds me that I may walk through this day with the kind of awareness that calls forth grateful living.

In all of creation let me see the brightness of your face.

Shine in my heart and on my life, filling me with joy, creativity, hope, and laughter.

Draw me into the radiant glory of your presence and into the small lights of those with whom I live and work.

Inspire me to take time for those who are discouraged.

May I live with the kind of presence that enables others to feel at home.

Great Dawn of God, hear my prayer.

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