

The Our Father

A Prayer's Power
to Touch Hearts

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Liguori
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest: Harry Grile, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications, Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Billy, Dennis Joseph.

The Our Father : a prayer's power to touch hearts / Dennis J. Billy.
-- 1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Lord's prayer--Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Catholic Church--Doctrines. I. Title.

BV230.B55 2012

226.9'6--dc23

pISBN 978-0-7648-2210-1; eISBN 978-0-7648-6732-3 2012025604

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Excerpts from the English translation of *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal* from *The Roman Missal* © 2010, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.

Compliant with *The Roman Missal*, third edition.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of The Redemptorists. To learn more about The Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.

Printed in the United States of America
16 15 14 13 12 / 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

*In loving memory of my father,
Michael Billy, Sr. (1924–2009)*

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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.

The Roman Missal, 3rd edition
(Matthew 6:9–13)

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Introduction

The Our Father, also known as the Lord's Prayer, has been called the perfect prayer. It possesses an aura of excellence, not because of the words themselves—poetic though they may be—but because it reveals how Jesus wants his disciples to pray. Along with the Beatitudes, it forms the center of Jesus' teaching both in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (6:9–13) and during his journey to Jerusalem in Luke's (11:2–4).

The earliest Christian communities looked to this prayer as a way of entreating and calling upon the God of Israel, whom Jesus called "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). When they examined it, the Church Fathers nearly always saw something new and enlightening. Through the centuries, theologians have turned to it regularly for insight into Jesus' relationship with the Father. For nearly two millennia, Christians the world over have memorized it, reciting it frequently in the quiet of their hearts, in their private devotions, and when celebrating the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours.

Setting these historical influences aside, the prayer is very straightforward in both structure and content. It begins by addressing God in a familiar, intimate way, and then by recognizing the heavenly place from which God reigns. Seven simple petitions follow: the first three give glory to the Father with respect to the holiness of his name, the coming of his reign of love, and the ultimate accomplishment of his will; the final four look to our present needs of daily nourishment, forgiveness, freedom from temptation, and deliverance from evil.

By highlighting God's glory and power, the first three petitions offer praise to God and, while doing so, underscore our creaturely status and need for help. By focusing on the most basic of our needs, the final four petitions reveal what is necessary for our entrance into God's kingdom and emphasize our need to turn to God in prayer. The prayer is thus both a hymn of praise and a litany of petitions. Because it comes from the Lord Jesus himself, no other enjoys a more highly esteemed and venerable status in the library of Christian prayer. For this reason, it represents "the sum-

mary of the whole gospel,”¹ and many consider it the Christian prayer par excellence.

Along with this sterling endorsement, however, comes an important caveat. Today the Lord’s Prayer has almost become a victim of its own success. Although we must take care to avoid sweeping generalizations, we should not be afraid to identify certain tendencies within Christianity that almost unwittingly move believers away from rather than toward their intended goal. All prayer—whether vocal or silent, alone or with others, devotional or liturgical—should express the yearnings of our heart, the deepest of which is our need for God. Otherwise, it ceases to be prayer and becomes nothing but a cheap imitation and a meaningless flow of words.

In the case of the Lord’s Prayer, its immense popularity over the years has had the unwanted effect of weakening its hold over the Christian imagination and turning it into an unwelcome harbinger of the status quo. Rather than leading believers into the deep,

1. Tertullian, *De oratione* 1 (PL 1.1155). See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2761 (www.vatican.va/archive).

personal intimacy shared by Jesus with his Father in heaven and thus deepening a person's relationship with God, for many, it has simply taken on the trappings of a "token prayer," one recited by rote memory without heart and with little (if any) enthusiasm. As such, it has become a formal prayer linked to external religious observance but has lost its power to touch the heart and shape the soul. For many, its words have lost their power to enter into dialogue with the Living God, the Lord God of Hosts, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the heavenly Father of Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world.

How did such a situation come to pass? What can be done about it? How can we retrieve some of the insights this rich prayer has to offer Christians today?

An overemphasis on the words of the prayer itself—beautiful as they are—in the end contributed to its weakening hold over the Christian imagination. The fact that the gospels preserve two different versions of the prayer should encourage us to look beyond the words and focus instead on what they seek to convey.

We sometimes forget that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1), they were looking for much more than words. Being devoted Jews, they already had access to a large repertoire of prayers from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Some of these prayers number among the most intimate ever written and speak of a relationship with God that is personal, passionate, and deeply spiritual. The disciples did not turn to Jesus merely for an additional installment of eloquent, spiritual words; they wanted what he had and turned to him for guidance. They asked him to teach them how to pray because they wanted to share in his intimate relationship with the Father.

When Jesus responded, he gave them more than mere words. He showed them a man at prayer, someone fully alive and pouring his heart out to his Father. It was revealing this deep interior life to them on every level of his being—body, soul, and spirit—that gave Jesus' words the power to change their lives.

This book seeks to remedy some of the difficulties today's believers may have with the Lord's Prayer by delving beneath the words

and trying to uncover the rich spiritual heritage Jesus bequeathed to his followers. It does so by looking at each phrase of the traditional version—the one we recite at Mass—and trying to understand its underlying meaning.

In doing so, it stands in line with the tradition of commentary on the prayer started by the Church Fathers, which lies at the very heart of the Church's teaching on this perennial prayer of the Christian faith. "Sacred Scripture," we are told, "is the Word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit."² In this respect, it mediates God's presence and invites us to reflect on and listen to it with care. The Lord's Prayer does so in a special way because it comes from Jesus' lips and reveals his close, intimate relationship with the Father.

It is my sincere hope that the following pages will leave you with a sense of the prayer's deep spiritual potential and help you look upon it in a way you never before imagined.

2. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), 9 (www.vatican.va/archive).

“Our Father”

The Lord's Prayer is a simple prayer of the heart. Jesus warns his disciples many times in the gospels against the ostentatious public prayers of the hypocrites and the babble of the pagans (Matthew 6:2, 7). In its classic English form, the prayer is a mere fifty-five words in length (fifty-seven in the New Testament Greek). This insight alone indicates Jesus is more concerned that the words we say to God adequately convey the inner sentiments of our heart. Lengthy prayers or those carefully crafted to attract attention can get in the way. For Jesus, it is much better to find a quiet, solitary place to pray in secret (Matthew 6:6).

Here we hit upon one of the essential insights of Christian prayer: short, intense prayers from the heart are far more desirous (and effective) than long, drawn-out speeches that display our eloquence and self-interests. Ancient Christian prayer traditions such as the “Jesus Prayer” in the East and “Ejaculatory Prayer” in the West have preserved the unique insight that Jesus was trying to convey to his

disciples. True prayer, Jesus is telling us, arises from the silence of our heart and resonates like the strings of a harp in the words we speak to God. Too many words fail to preserve solitude of heart. They produce nothing but noise, making it difficult to hear what God is telling us in the present moment.

It is also important to remember that when he gives his disciples the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is fulfilling his role as Master ("Rabbuni"), or Teacher. In Luke's Gospel, the disciples ask Jesus specifically to teach them how to pray (11:1). They point to the way John the Baptist taught his disciples the prayer of repentance for the sake of the kingdom, and they turn to Jesus, their Lord and Master, for something distinctive that will set them apart and help to identify them as his disciples.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Lord's Prayer is addressed not to the disciples, but to the crowd gathered around him on a hill (5:1). The discrepancy between the two versions indicates that the early Christians saw in Jesus' prayer to the Father an important tool that would bring people into the fold and transform them into genuine and committed followers. Jesus'

“teaching,” in other words, is oriented toward both the many and the few. It seeks to serve those who seem lost and without a shepherd, while at the same time offering them the possibility of sharing in the deep spiritual intimacy of Christian discipleship. In this sense, the Lord’s Prayer is a universal prayer, one that seeks to bring people into the fold, unites believers in the faith, and offers them intimacy with the Father through the Person of Jesus.

“Our Father,” the very first words of the Lord’s Prayer, reveal some of Jesus’ deepest convictions about his understanding of the Divine: God, for him, is a loving parent. He is so bold as to address the God of Israel, the Creator of the world, the Lord of history, the Lord God of hosts—the God whose very name, according to Jewish tradition and practice, is too holy for human lips to utter—as “Father.” God, for him, is not some distant, impersonal force or a clouded, transcendent mystery, but a living, personal Being with whom he shares close, intimate ties.

Jesus’ prayer to the Father, in this sense, is preeminently conversational, involving close person-to-person dialogue. He addresses God

as “Abba, Father” (Mark 14:36) and expects to be heard and responded to. When seen in this light, prayer’s primary goal is to help us enter a relationship with a loving, personal God. All else is secondary.

If Jesus addresses God as “Father,” the obvious question is, What kind of father is he? Some say they cannot identify strongly (if at all) with the Lord’s Prayer because of the disastrous relations they’ve had with their own fathers (biological or otherwise). They argue that their relationship with their fathers has disrupted their lives to such an extent that to call God “Father” would place an unnecessary (even distorting) burden on their religious and spiritual sensitivities. Many of them say they would prefer to use a more impersonal title such as “Creator” or to mitigate what they perceive as the overtly patriarchal hegemony of the Judeo-Christian tradition with a more nurturing, maternal title such as “Mother.”

Although it would be unfair to ask anyone to address God in a way with which they profoundly disagree, such an approach seems to display not only a degree of fatalism but also a lack of courage and imagination. Although

we all are victims of our past to a certain extent, we should not overlook our capacity to overcome adversity and transcend our impoverished backgrounds. Otherwise, we allow the past to control the present, the future, and our entire vision of reality.

In the present case, Jesus' calling God "Abba, Father" reminds us that all language falls short when trying to express the mystery of God. Regardless of our past experiences, we all have a yearning in our hearts to relate to the ground of our existence as a loving father. Jesus' unique insight is that, before all else, the God of Israel is a benevolent, loving Father. He is a masculine God who battles abuses wherever he finds them. He actively pursues his children's well-being by leading them, protecting them, and providing for them. He is deeply in love with humanity and wants each of us to be deeply in love with him. This understanding of God is a touchstone of the Judeo-Christian tradition and should not be taken lightly.

Another important reason for exercising caution when expressing one's private concerns about the adequacy of the word *Father* arises from the collective spirit that Jesus in-

stilled in his disciples from the very outset. He tells them that when they pray, they should say, “*Our* Father,” not “*My* Father.” Human beings are social by nature, and Jesus wishes to acknowledge this important dimension of our existence from the start. Although care must be taken to maintain a proper balance in the relationship between the individual and the community, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the God of the Lord’s Prayer relates to us first as a people and then as individuals. God is our Father because we are his people.

This insight has deep roots in the history of the people of Israel, who struck a covenant with their God based not on individual loyalty (important as that may be) but on the collective whole. The understanding of the Church as the “People of God” also stems from this unique insight, as does the entire notion that redemption takes place first for all of humanity and then, in the light of Jesus’ collective saving action, afterward to individuals. By asking us to call God “Our Father,” Jesus is not denying individual relationships with God; he is simply placing them in a larger context. In doing so, he does not impoverish our individual

ties with God but actually enriches them. As members of God's family, each of us can experience intimacy with God both as individuals and as a community. These two dimensions of human existence complement each other and contribute to what it means to be fully alive before God.

The very first words of the Lord's Prayer spark our imagination and invite us to share in a profound relationship of intimacy with God both as a people and as individuals. We address God as "Abba, Father," not in our own right, but because Jesus has done so first and bids us to do likewise. We do so not because our relationship with the Father is the same as our Lord and Master's, but because, through him, God has adopted us as his very own sons and daughters.

When seen in this light, we are more than mere creatures fashioned in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), and even more than friends (John 15:15). He looks upon us as his children and treats us like members of his family (John 1:12). Because of Jesus, the Father has granted us a very high place in his kingdom, one higher than allocated to the angels them-

selves but one that bears many challenges. To be a son or daughter of God carries with it much weight and responsibility, not the least of which is to share with others the same love, respect, and devotion that our Father in heaven gives to us. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we should be mindful of our unique dignity as sons and daughters of God. To do otherwise does nothing but trivialize its meaning and diminish its sway over the Christian imagination.

Reflection Questions

How do you relate to God? Do you have an intimate relationship with him? Do you relate to God primarily as an individual or as a member of God's family? Do you have an easy or difficult time calling God "Father"? What strikes you most about the opening words of the Lord's Prayer? What insights have you gained from the above reflection? Do you disagree with anything?

Praying the Lord's Prayer

Find a quiet place where you can be alone with God for about five minutes. Think of the first