

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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T. LUKE tells us that one day the disciples were watching Christ at prayer. Attracted by His example, one of them perhaps reflected within himself: "How I wish I could pray as Christ does, give honor to God as meetly as He, draw strength from Heaven in the measure He does! But I do not know the true nature of prayer, what to ask for, how to begin, how to phrase my prayer!" Turning to the Master, he said simply: "Lord, teach me to pray."¹ Christ lovingly answered the request by composing that marvelous model of prayer, the *Our Father*.

The *Our Father* is the perfect prayer. Christ prayed perfectly, and this is His prayer. It is the prayer God Himself composed for man, and as such it is perfectly acceptable to His ears. As the product of Wisdom Itself, it bears the stamp of its Author in its perfect arrangement and embodiment of the attributes of true prayer. Consequently, to understand the *Our Father* is to understand prayer. Accordingly, the *Our Father* merits profound study both because of its Author and because of our own need for instruction in the art of praying. We propose to enter into an examination into the meaning and arrangement of the phrases of the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father. The prayer begins in orderly fashion with a greeting designed to gain the attention of God. It at once establishes the common ground on which we can meet with God. We can dare to address Him because He is our Father. By these words we adore Him as superior to us and in authority over us, as a parent over his children. By these words we thank Him, recognizing that He has provided for us like a true father. By these words we voice our right to ask Him to take care of us, for that is the duty of a father. By these words, too, we express sorrow for our sins by which we have been ungrateful and undutiful to our parent. From this phrase, then, we can deduce four types of prayer. We pray with one, or all, of four goals in mind: (1) To adore God for what He is, the supreme and perfect Being, the infinitely good Lord of all creation. (2) To thank Him for His countless favors to us, for creating, preserving, redeeming, and converting us to Him, for all the goods of body and

¹ Luke, 11, 1.

soul with which His mercy has provided us. (3) To ask Him for further gifts. (4) To declare our sorrow for our sins against Him. These elements of adoration, thanksgiving, petition, and contrition are found recurring constantly throughout the Lord's Prayer.

Who art in Heaven. In the acquiring of knowledge, man begins naturally with easily known truths and passes from these to more difficult ones. Children are not plunged into the depths of calculus, but begin with simple addition and the multiplication tables. No created mind can fully understand the Truth which is God. This is especially true in this life. By the help of Faith and reasoning, however, by rising from the things we know better, using them as imperfect examples or symbols, we can grasp some inadequate idea of God: "His invisible attributes are clearly seen—His everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made."² Hence it is a natural and orderly procedure to consider God first in His relations with us, and under the guise of a father. If we do not understand much about God, we do know about ourselves and the idea of fatherhood, and we can apply these notions to our study of Him. So we take this easier approach first, and then pass on to the more difficult consideration of God as He is in Himself. Having viewed God in His relation to this earth, we ascend to an appraisal of Him as He is in Heaven. Here again we find the four elements of prayer. Because God is in Heaven, we adore Him. He created Heaven because He is infinitely good, and He rules over it because He is infinitely powerful. Hence He is to be adored. Moreover, Heaven is God's home. Since we have already claimed God for our Father, we know that it is rightfully our home, too. Accordingly, we thank Him for building this home for us, and for destining us for it, as Christ promised: "In My Father's house there are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you."³ Because God is Lord of Heaven and has prepared it for us, we feel sorry for the sins which keep us from the home of our Father. We beg for pardon of our sins and for the graces which will bring us to our home. We beg with confidence only when we know that he from whom we ask a favor has both the desire to help us and the power to fulfill that desire. But God, as Father, loves us and has promised us aid: "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you."⁴ God, considered as dwelling in Heaven, has also the requisite power to implement His desires and promises.

² Romans, 1, 20.

³ John, 14, 2.

⁴ Luke, 11, 9.

Hallowed be Thy Name. Man's will speaks in these words. But no one can will what he does not first know. Love, desire, and enjoyment of God are acts of the will. Just as a child cannot desire a lollipop if it has never before tasted, seen, or heard of one, so, too, we cannot lift our hearts to God until we have lifted our minds to Him. The order of the *Our Father* is accommodated to this trait of man. In the preceding phrases we have reflected on truths concerning the nature of God and His relations with us. These are the motives for our acts of will. Now we can lift up our wills in an earnest wish that His Holy Name be held in honor among men. Hence we see why prayer is defined as the lifting up of the heart and mind to God. It involves the use of the two highest faculties of the soul, the intellect and the will, and in that order.

We can wish *hallowed be Thy Name* in four ways, also: in adoration, for these words are a wish that all creatures may adore God; in thanksgiving, for by them we praise our Benefactor; in petition, for they express our love for Him and thus propitiate Him to favor us with new benefits; and in contrition, for they offer reparation for our sins and direct our minds to our true goal and encourage us to persevere in pursuing it. But principally they are words of adoration, by which we worship the Supreme Majesty, and of thanksgiving, by which we wish well to our Benefactor. It is right that adoration and thanksgiving should here take precedence among the acts of our will, for they are the highest kinds of prayer and the only kinds that will be said in Heaven. In heaven there is no sorrow or need. But in Heaven the *knowledge* of our former needs and sins remains, and so it is fitting that this distinction among the elements of prayer was not made previously in the opening phrases which concern a knowledge of God.

Thy kingdom come. Continuing the acts of the will, we now fervently wish for the recognition of his kingdom, for the day when all shall yield to His rule. Why should His Name be hallowed? Because He is the King of Kings. We willed first the glory of His Name for His own sake alone; now we will His glory as we can share in it as subjects of His kingdom. First we honored a name, now we describe the person who bears that name, and next we give an attribute of that person, his will.

Thy will be done. Logically, we expect—and find—next an explanation of how God's kingdom can come: by the universal acceptance of His will. His is a kingdom of the spirit. He must rule in the hearts and wills of men. He does so only when these wills agree with His.

On earth as it is in Heaven. What is the extent of this conformity of our will to that of God? For an answer we must look to Heaven. There His Name is already hallowed, there He reigns, there His will is done; it is only on earth that He does not yet rule the hearts of all His creatures, or rule perfectly those in which He does reign. If we would have His kingdom come, we must do His will, and do it perfectly. We are not only told what to do, but are also fortified with an example. We, with our free wills, must strive to obey Him as exactly as the blessed in Heaven whose wills, no longer free, are so in accord with His that they cannot deviate from it in the slightest detail.

Give us this day our daily bread. Now the emphasis changes from adoration and thanksgiving to petition, as we pass from the more perfect to the less perfect kinds of prayer. We have said that the intellect passes from the imperfect to the perfect, but with the will the order is reversed. The will differs from the intellect in being drawn after its object, as iron is drawn to a magnet. Unlike the intellect, the will does not receive into itself an idea of a thing, but seeks to go out after that thing, to be united to it and possess it. It is attracted like a bee by honey. The sweeter the honey, the greater the attraction. Consequently the will gave its attention first to the most desirable of all goods, the Supreme Good, by the prayer of adoration. Now it descends from Heaven to earth, from our future home to our present abode, from the infinite to the finite, from the goal to the means to that goal, from the very source of all good to the lesser goods derived from that source. In the prayer of petition we ask God for our daily bread; that is, for all our material needs of food, shelter, health and the like, which are best symbolized by bread, the staff of bodily life, and for the supersubstantial bread, the Eucharist, the Bread that nourishes the life of the soul. "I am the Bread of life."⁵

And forgive us our trespasses. If, like the Blessed Virgin, we had never committed sin, we would still have to adore, thank and petition God, but the prayer of contrition is peculiar to sinners alone. As the lowest form of prayer, it is fittingly voiced last of all. It enters here, although the prayer of petition continues since it, too, is one of the lower forms of prayer found only on earth (that is, petition for our own needs is found only on earth, though in Heaven there is petition for the needs of those on earth). Sin is the chief of all evils, hence we first of all declare our sorrow for it.

⁵ John, 6, 48.

As we forgive those who trespass against us. If our contrition is real, it will not be merely verbal. Actions speak louder than words. Our acceptance of God and desire for His forgiveness can readily be measured by the extent to which we forgive others, obeying His command: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."⁶ Thus we pray that God may forgive us to the extent that we forgive others. But the words go beyond this plea for simple justice. Who would be satisfied with strict justice from God? Our plea is for mercy beyond our due. We point out, with a note of delicate insinuation, that "the disciple is not above the master."⁷ If even we poor sinners forgive our debtors to the best of our power, let God likewise forgive us to the best of His power, which is that of infinite mercy unrestrained by the limits of strict equality of justice. Emphatically we ask for a far greater forgiveness than we ourselves show to others. For the trespasses of others against us are finite, whereas by every sin of ours we contract an infinite debt to God. We pray merely that He follow our example of forgiveness.

And lead us not into temptation. Forgiveness of our debts will blot out the past, but what of the future? We are eager never again to contract debts to God. Sorry for our past transgressions, we ask for the graces to avoid all the pitfalls that lie ahead on the path to our home. We use the simple words "lead us not into temptation." St. Alphonsus says of them: "How are these words to be understood? Does God sometimes tempt us — does He lead us into temptation? No, for St. James says: 'God is not a tempter of evils and He tempts no man.'⁸ This text we must understand as we do that of Isaias: 'Blind the heart of this people . . . lest they see.'⁹ God never blinds any sinner, but He often refuses to grant to some, in punishment for their ingratitude, the light that He would have given them had they remained faithful and grateful. Hence when it is said that God makes any one blind, it is meant that He withholds the light of His grace. This therefore is the sense of the prayer, *and lead us not into temptation*; we ask God not to permit us to have the misfortune of being in those occasions of sin in which we might fall."¹⁰

But deliver us from evil. This phrase is a restatement of the preceding one; it is another supplication to keep us free from sin. But it is more than that. Order demanded that we deal first with the

⁶ Matthew, 5, 45.

⁷ Matthew, 10, 24.

⁸ James, 1, 13.

⁹ Isaias, 6, 10.

¹⁰ Short Explanation of the Prayers of the Mass, Fourth Part, § 6.

greatest evil that can beset our future path. That evil is sin, and for freedom from it we begged before. With that paramount plea voiced, we can enlarge our request to include freedom from the evils less than sin: the wants of soul and body we feel in this life, as a punishment for sin and the punishment for sin due to us in the next life.

Amen. The meaning of this Hebrew word is: So be it. *Amen* sums up each of the preceding phrases of the Lord's Prayer. It is an acceptance of God's Fatherhood and Kingship and a reiteration of all the desires expressed in the remainder of the prayer. It likewise serves as a terse word of conclusion. St. Augustine says: "If we pray rightly and fittingly, we can say nothing else but what is contained in this prayer of our Lord."¹¹ All its petitions having been expressed, there is nothing left to be said but this simple repetition and summary of them all: *Amen.*

The reader has now glimpsed some of the more superficial facets of the jewel of orderly arrangement which is the Lord's Prayer. Order is present in its division into a salutation, body, and conclusion, like a well-written letter or sermon. Notice, incidentally, that the salutation uses the plural, *Our Father*, thus implying from the outset the doctrine of the Mystical Body or Communion of Saints. Order is manifested in the precedence given the acts of the intellect over the acts of the will. Order is again present in its treatment of the four kinds of prayer, first all in general, then each in particular according to its proper rank. This order has enabled us to educe a true definition of prayer, one which accords exactly with the one the Catechism gives: "Prayer is the lifting up of our minds and hearts to God to adore Him, to thank Him for His benefits, to ask His forgiveness, and to beg of Him all the graces we need, whether for soul or body."¹²

St. Thomas sees the order in the *Our Father* somewhat differently. In an analysis of this prayer he says: "Now in the Lord's Prayer not only do we ask for all we may rightly desire, but also in the order wherein we ought to desire them . . . first . . . the end, and afterwards whatever is directed to the end. Now our end is God, towards Whom our affections tend in two ways: first by our willing the glory of God, secondly by willing to enjoy this glory. The first belongs to the love whereby we love God in Himself, while the second belongs to the love whereby we love ourselves in God. Wherefore the first petition is: *hallowed be Thy Name*, and the second: *Thy kingdom come*, by which we ask to come to the glory of His king-

¹¹ Letter 130 to Proba.

¹² Baltimore Series of Catechisms, No. 0, Q. 1099.

dom."¹³ St. Thomas then points out that of its very nature, directly and principally, merit leads us to that end, and since we acquire merit by obeying God, we pray next: *Thy will be done*. Instrumental aids helping us to this merit are the Holy Eucharist and our bodily bread, so next we pray: *give us this day our daily bread*. Thirdly, we can be helped in a negative way by the removal of obstacles. Obstacles are of three kinds: (1) sin, and hence: *forgive us our trespasses*. (2) temptation, hence: *lead us not into temptation*. (3) "There is the present penal state which is a kind of obstacle to a sufficiency of life, and to this we refer the words: *deliver us from evil*."¹⁴

Indeed, the Lord's Prayer, as the product of Divine Wisdom, must contain still other and deeper aspects of order than those we have given. That is why it forms an inexhaustible source of fruitful meditation. That is why St. Thomas can truthfully say that it contains in itself, as it were, all other prayers: "Our Lord instituted this prayer, not that we might use no other words when we pray, but that in our prayer we might have none but these things in view, no matter how we express them or think of them."¹⁵

¹³ *Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, Q. 83, art. 9.

¹⁴ *loc. cit.*

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, Q. 83, art. 14, ad. 3.