

A Fresh Look at the
Our Father

REDISCOVERING THE POWER
OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

“A Summary of the Whole Gospel”

TERTULLIAN, *DE ORATIONE* 1

As I began my ninetieth year as a Catholic and sixtieth as a priest, I was asked to teach a comprehensive religion course to the novices of the Poor Clare monastery in Huehuetenango, Guatemala.

I saw this as a call to gather together a rich life—almost a hundred years of Catholic living—and condense it all into a few conferences that would sum up everything I have learned about what it means to live as a Christian. A daunting task, but an exciting one! What I found is that everything essential is already summarized in the prayer taught by Jesus himself, the Our Father.

Don't take my word for this. Tertullian said, “The Lord's Prayer is truly the summary of the whole gospel.” St. Augustine agreed: “Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer.” St. Thomas Aquinas added, “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 what order we should desire them” (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2761–63).

Jesus originally taught the Our Father as an answer to his disciples' request: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). What he taught them was not a formula of words to be memorized, or even a method of prayer, but a list of things to pray for: what Jesus himself prayed for, lived for, and died for. Effectively, he was saying, *If you make my priorities your priorities in your prayer and in your life, you will learn how to pray. And how to live.*

Jesus knew that the more we ask God for something, the more we will grow to desire it. So the Our Father is a way to form our hearts to become like the heart of Jesus, longing and living for what he longed and lived for.

But see for yourself. Take a slow look at the Our Father, asking yourself how wonderful it would be if all it asks for were realized in your life—and throughout the world.

How to Begin

"Christ in you, the hope of glory" COLOSSIANS 1:27

Never just get out of bed in the morning. *Rise up* to live a life filled with joy, enthusiasm, and purpose. Jesus Christ is rising from the dead in you. You are his body. He is going to live this day *with you, in you, and through you*. Rise up to be *immersed in Christ!*

Rise up to swirl with the Three Persons in the dance of divinity. Rise up to "be God" by sharing in the divine life of Father, Son, and Spirit. By baptism you "became Christ" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 795). Rise up to live the mystery of your being, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," by which you live "in Christ" and Christ in you.

Then go out to live your day. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends you—to bear fruit that will enhance lives forever.

Praying the Our Father will get you started. It is a prayer to be absorbed, to recite reflectively and affectively. It is a prayer to enter into, in which to lose and find ourselves. It is “the Lord’s prayer,” the prayer of Jesus himself, meant to focus us on being like Jesus himself.

When we pray the Our Father, we want to take care not just to say the words, paying more attention to getting them said than to absorbing what we are saying. Instead, we want to ingest them like “sippin’ whiskey,” tasting each word, rolling it around in our heads, taking it into our hearts. When we really pray the prayers we say, truth travels from mouth to head to heart.

This way of saying prayers, stopping to taste every word, letting every thought sink in, is a way to pass from saying prayers to praying what we say.

Let us put this into practice now and, like Mary (see Luke 2:19), treasure all these words and ponder them in our hearts.

AWARENESS OF RELATIONSHIP

*Our Father, who
art in heaven*

“When you pray, say: ‘Father’..”

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. 1 JOHN 3:1

One of the most exciting things about Christianity is that by teaching us to pray “*Father*” Jesus redefined religion as *relationship*. He tells us the focus of our religion should not be on worship, obedience, service, or even adoration of God. All of these are essential. But they are not the most important, nor do they characterize our religion. What characterizes our religion is *relationship*.

Think what it means that Jesus tells us to call God “*Father*.” That overwrites every other way of relating to God—for example, as Creator, Lawgiver, Judge, even as God. In the Gloria at Mass “*Father*” is the title we build up to: “Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty *Father*.”

Jesus tells us that when we come before God in prayer, that most important of encounters, what we should be most aware of is this family relationship. “*When you pray, say: ‘Father’...*” God is no longer just our Creator. We are no longer just creatures. God has become our Father by sharing with us God’s own divine life. Infinite life. God has made us divine.

The first thing Jesus wants us to appreciate is this mystery that erases the distance that separates us. We have the right to call God “Father,” a right that is not to be taken for granted. We introduce the Our Father at Mass with the words, “*We dare to say: Our Father...*” We take it for granted only because it is granted.

This is unique to Christianity. Christians alone can explain how we are related to God as family. God doesn’t just treat us that way; now God actually is our true Father. By baptism we have been born a second time, reborn of water and Spirit (John 3:5) as sons and daughters of the Father. That makes us God’s family. And that makes us divine.

Everything in our religion should be based, and focused, on this new relationship and on all the relationships it entails: relationship with Jesus, not only as disciples, or even as friends, but as his brothers and sisters and as living members of his body on earth. Relationship with the Spirit whom God has sent into our hearts, bearing witness with our spirit when we cry, “Abba! Father!” that we are children of God (Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15–16). Relationship with other humans as our brothers and sisters “in Christ.” Relationship with the universe as responsible “stewards of creation.”

We need to begin every day trying to absorb this a little more. If we wake up praying “*Our Father, who art in heaven...*,” we begin our day consciously entering into the mystery of our all-transforming relationship with God and others. We enter into the mystery of who we are. We see ourselves now not just as creatures but as God’s own sons and daughters. As divine.

This is Christianity. Our religion is a conscious relationship with God as “*Our Father in heaven.*” That is the first thing Jesus wants us to learn: “When you pray, say: ‘*Father*’...”

We “*Become God!*”

(*St. Basil the Great*)

We mustn’t overlook the logical implication of being true children of the Father: we are *divine*. That is an inescapable conclusion. Like Father, like child. If God is our Father, we are not just God’s creatures but God’s children. And children are what their parents are. If our father is human, we are human. If our Father is God, we have to say we are God. We share in, and live by, the infinite, eternal life of God. This is our identity. This is what it means to be a *Christian*.

We don’t think of ourselves this way. It shocks us to hear St. Athanasius (c. AD 296–373) say the Word was “made human so that we might be *made God*” (*On the Incarnation* 54.3). St. Basil the Great (AD 329–379) writes: “Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God; indeed...we *become God!*” (Office of Readings, Tuesday, Seventh Week of Eastertide). As a result, the Trappist monk Michael Casey writes in his book *Fully Human, Fully Divine*: “According to the teaching of many Church Fathers, particularly those of the East, *Christian life consists not so much in being good as in becoming God.*”

St. Augustine is just as shocking. He says to the baptized, “Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians but *Christ himself*. Do you understand and grasp, brothers and sisters, God’s grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have *become Christ*” (quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 795).

For God to be our Father, we have to be God’s children. But God

has only one natural child, God the Son, Jesus, the “only begotten Son of the Father.” So the only way for us to be true children of the Father is for us to be sons and daughters “in the Son.” We share in God’s life by being incorporated into the body of Jesus at baptism. We are living in Christ; Christ is living in us.

That is who we are. Christians are those who, by mystically dying and rising in Christ, have become a *new creation*. “If anyone is *in Christ*, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Mass usually begins, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...be with you.” “Grace” means the gift, the favor, of sharing in the divine life of God. Once we understand this, we can celebrate Mass as we should, because we know who we are and how we relate to the one to whom we are speaking. We know Jesus himself is speaking *with us, in us, and through us*. Because we have *become Christ*, we dare to declare at the beginning of Mass that we are celebrating “*in the name* of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” And it is with this awareness that we live with our families, work at our jobs, and recreate with our friends. We have *become Christ*. In everything we do, we are aware of “*Christ in us*, the hope of glory!” (see Colossians 1:27).

Every time we see anyone whom we can presume to be living by God’s divine life, we should think, “*Christ in you*, the hope of glory!” It would be even better, when circumstances allow, to say it aloud as a greeting.

Christ in Us

Paul said these three words summed up everything he was sent by God to preach: “*Christ in you*.” And he added, “the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). How is that for a short summary of Christianity?

Is that what we are most conscious of when we think about what it means to be a Christian? Do we get up every morning to let Christ live and act in us? Is this the glory we find in every moment of our life? Is it what makes our lives matter? Does it, for us, make others' lives matter?

When we ask what it means to be a Christian, the first thing that should overwhelm us with joy is the realization that we share in the divine life of God. And it is filled with promise. It is our assured "hope of glory." We will enjoy it forever.

Jesus tells us to make this awareness of our identity the starting point of our Christian life. "When you pray, say: 'Father'..." (Luke 11:2).

Let's get down to earth. I happen to be writing this from the Poor Clare monastery in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Outside my window a workman named Neri Hernandez Martinez is passing by, pushing a wheelbarrow full of dirt from a drainage ditch he is digging. So we just played our little game. I called out to him through the window, "*Cristo en Neri, la esperanza de la gloria!*" Laughing, Neri turned toward me, dropped to his knees, and made the sign of the cross. Then he got up, still laughing, and continued pushing his wheelbarrow.

We both just had a "mystical experience," a moment of being consciously aware of the presence and action of God. The truth, the real truth, is that Jesus Christ just passed by, pushing a wheelbarrow in Neri, his body on earth. And if I were to go out and put a marker on the ditch he is digging that reads, "This ditch was dug by Jesus Christ," it would be nothing but the truth. The gospel truth (see Matthew 25:40, 45).

My practical suggestion—and don't laugh at it until you try it—is to use Paul's words frequently as a greeting to those with whom your relationship allows it: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory!*" I have been surprised at how easily I can say this to many people, and how well they receive it.

If we say it often enough, we won't see anyone in the same way anymore. Or ourselves either. If we keep saying to God, "*Our Father, who art in heaven,*" we will soon be saying to everyone we deal with, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

Then we will understand what it means to be Christian.

How Did Jesus Relate to the Father?

"The Father loves the Son...and shows him all that he himself is doing."

JOHN 3:35; 5:20; 10:17

Only one time, in all four gospels, does Jesus speak specifically of the Father as one who punishes. It is in a parable about a king who canceled the debt of a servant who owed him thousands of dollars. Then the king learned that the same man had a fellow servant jailed who owed him only ten dollars. In anger, the king said, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I did on you?" And he "handed him over to the jailers until he could pay his entire debt." Jesus concluded, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (see Matthew 18:23ff.).

The parable is not meant to be a literal description of what the Father will do. Jesus is just making the point that the Father is a forgiving God—not a punisher but a God of mercy and compassion. Jesus is saying to us, "Forgive each other's offenses" (see Matthew 6:15). Nevertheless, some of us did grow up with more fear than love for the Father. The best way to correct that is to let Jesus himself tell us what the Father is like. How, when he was on earth, did Jesus relate to the Father?

For Jesus, the Father was not a judge or punisher but the one he turned to in all his needs, the one—perhaps the only one—who understood him. The Father was his support and protector. Yes, even

when his Father let him be crucified. Jesus' dying words were, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

We don't have to be stuck in feelings, images, or experiences from the past. Jesus says, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). We need to look at Jesus now and let him give us a new, fresh look at the Father.

We should let Jesus tell us how God feels about us. If we devote ourselves to reading the gospels, we will experience what Jesus promised: "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). If at Mass we open our minds to "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father," we will experience the "communion of the Holy Spirit" that identifies the children of God.

And we will pray with understanding, "*Our Father, who art in heaven.*"

What Did Jesus Say about the Father?

"No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." MATTHEW 11:27

Fathers love, protect, and provide. We have Jesus' own word that the Father loves and cares for us. "The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27).

And protects us: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matthew 10:28–31; John 14:1–3).

And provides: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life,

what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them” (Luke 12:22–24).

And provides generously: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened!” (Matthew 7:7–8).

We need to see the Father always the way Jesus describes him. Try saying the Our Father while washing your hands. You may find you feel uncomfortable addressing “the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,” while washing your hands in the bathroom. If so, you are reducing God to God instead of letting God be your Father. Don’t millions of fathers show their little children how to wash their hands and help them do it? You may be relating to God the Father as one adult to another, forgetting what Romano Guardini said: “In the eyes of God we are all in the third grade!”

So we should see God as a loving, nurturing Father helping us in the smallest details of our life. If we let the Father wash our hands with us, we will feel God’s love. We will say, “*Hallowed be your name* for being close, for being involved in my everyday actions.” Saying, “*Your Kingdom come!*” will remind us that while establishing global peace and justice our Father also wants to enhance everything in our private lives. “*Your will be done*” says our Father is concerned about every hair on our heads. Our Father is the God who “walks among the pots and pans” (St. Teresa of Avila, *Book of Foundations* 5.8). We can pray to our Father everywhere. For everything. Jesus did.

Every time we pray, “*Our Father, who art in heaven,*” we can keep absorbing more deeply what it means to have the Father of Jesus as our Father. Every day it will come to mean more and more to us. One day, what it means to us will be our joy forever.

As it has been the joy of Jesus from all eternity.