

# THE OUR FATHER: *summary of the whole Gospel*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 2759-2865)*

## Introduction

The Our Father has been taught to us from the earliest age, and many of us will not be able to remember a time when we did not know this prayer. Sadly, this has meant that for many Christians, the Our Father has remained just that - a memory from childhood with all the residual childhood associations: a child's prayer, reminiscent of morning prayers in the classroom before starting the day's work. We can become so familiar with the Our Father that we begin to forget how extraordinary a prayer it is or the depth of spiritual truth it penetrates and opens up to us.

Of all Christian prayers, the Our Father is the most complete and it serves as an immensely profound model for all types and forms of prayer. We ought to remember that if we pay attention to the formulas of prayer that the saints gave us (like St. Francis' prayer – “Make me a channel of your peace” or St. Richard of Chichester “We give thee thanks, almighty God, for all the blessings which Thou hast given us” etc.) then we should make all the more attention to the prayer which *Christ* gave us.

We should note at the very start *why* Christ gave us this prayer – it was in direct response to the request from the disciples that he teach them how to pray (Lk. 11:1). Think for a minute about Christ's reply, because it is not how you or I might have replied. If we were to be asked in this day and age to teach someone how to pray, we might find ourselves going down a wholly different route: we might give advice on posture, on how to clear the mind so as to be able to concentrate, on what to do with distractions, on the importance of praying with our own words as a form of self-expression rather than being tied to a set formula which might not correspond with how I am feeling that particular day. Perhaps we would talk about aids to prayer like candles, meditational music and the like. YET, none of these (albeit helpful tips) actually answer the question: Christ teaches them to pray by giving them a formula, a set group of words which speaks truly of our needs before God, but also truly speaks of who God is.

The brevity of the Our Father is sometimes baffling, especially when as Christian people we point to it as the most complete and perfect prayer. Sincerity in our moments of prayer and concentration are as important as the content of our prayer: mindless repetition of prayers we have learned (even if they are the Our Father)

without the raising up of mind and heart to God is absolutely fruitless. It was in an effort to impress on the disciples the folly of equating length of prayer with quality of prayer that Christ (in St. Matthew's Gospel) gives the Our Father to the disciples:

- *“And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven...” (Mt. 5:7-9)*

This is the Our Father's uniqueness: it is given to us by Christ himself for our instruction and for our prayerful maturation: through prayer, especially the heartfelt and sincere immersion in this one, the disciple is taken up into the worship which the Spirit offers to God the Father from the temple within us. The Spirit has been poured into us (Rom. 5:5) and from that Temple (the soul) it is *the Spirit* who cries out: he cries not “have mercy on me” or “Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz” but “*ABBA! FATHER!*” (Gal 4:6). I find that significant: St. Paul is implying that the very prayer which Christ gave us is in some way uniquely tuned into the prayer of adoration which the Spirit offers to the Father: we are being led by Christ to immerse ourselves in the way the *Spirit* adores and prays. Only in this way will our prayers have innocence and effectiveness.

From the very beginning of the Church, the Our Father has been at the heart of Christian prayer: it has *always* been a part of the Church's public prayer, especially in the Mass, but also in the Divine Office of the Church. By the second century it was being prayed three times every day by those who had been received into the Church and had been established as the bedrock of private as well as public liturgical prayer.

With frequent recitation came greater perception: quite early on Christian theologians and mystics began to examine the Our Father: after all, it is not just a form of prayer which we are allowed to use - it is also an instruction in prayer, given as it was in answer to the petition that Christ teach us to pray. The more we regard and meditate on the words of the Our Father the more we will come to understand about the mystery of prayer itself and how we can deepen our expression of love of God through this relationship.

## 1. THE OUR FATHER - opening

### **“Our Father”**

St. Francis was unable to get beyond the first two words without weeping: he saw in them the implications that we take for granted. Despite sin and the unworthiness we feel in approaching God, we do so claiming the privilege of family. We call on God as “Father” because that is what he has become to us. We are his children in two ways:

1. In the natural order: as the creator of all life, God is father in the material sense. He brings to life all that shares his life, and he brings into existence all creation.

2. In the supernatural order: God has become the personal Father of all those who have been reborn in Christ. God the Father has always been Father because he has eternally begotten his divine Son, Jesus Christ, from before there was any matter or creature that God had created. BUT, beyond this, God has extended this family relationship to us by incorporating us into his eternal and divine Son through the sacrament of Baptism. This is a privilege we had no right to, even when humanity was pure and sinless. After sin, mankind forfeited all grace and privilege: and yet it was after sin that God poured out his Spirit on us and bound us to himself through joining us to Christ and allowing us to share the divine Sonship of Christ. Through Baptism, we are 'sons in the Son' ('filii in Filio'), sharing by grace alone in the most intimate relationship that could exist - the purity and fullness of love between the Father and the Son. When we pray the Our Father, we are referring to the pure gift which has been offered to us by Christ from the cross and in the resurrection through which he forgives our sins, fills us with his grace and reconciles us with his (and now *our* Father). All this happens in Baptism, when Christ applies to us the victory of Calvary and the resurrection, shattering our solidarity with Adam and forging our new and unbreakable solidarity with himself, the new Adam. We receive "the spirit of Sonship" (Rom. 8:15), making us children of God (Rom. 8:16), sons of the Father, sharers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), heirs of God and coheirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Calling on God as Father refers us to the whole mystery of salvation, should bring to mind all that the Trinity has done to bring us back. It should call to our minds the miracle of Baptism and our justification, which we have received not by becoming worthy of it but through the merciful faithfulness of God to the children who have become prodigals.

Many commentators have noted the first word of this prayer - **OUR** - not *my* Father. We claim God's paternity not as individuals living in a form of spiritual solitary confinement. We relate to God, no matter our external circumstances, from within the great family of the Church. The only reason we can call on him as Father is because of what God did for us in Baptism (by adopting us into Christ, his Son). BUT Baptism only incorporates us into Christ by incorporating us into the *mystical and visible Body of Christ* - **THE CHURCH**. We become the children of the Father by entering the Church, which is Christ his Son's body on earth, where Christ is supernaturally present. When we pray the Our Father, we are claiming our membership of the Church, and grounding all our prayers on this status. It is through membership of the Church that we are able to claim God as Father, and on a personal level, it is only because *I* am a member of the Church (i.e., because I am united to the disciples who make up Christ's mystical body) that I can turn to God in my private prayer and claim this intimate relationship.

This says something very important to us about prayer for the Christian. Whether we are in public or alone, whether in a crowded Church or in the isolation of our private room, we pray from within the Church, reminding ourselves and God that we come to him not as an individual but as part of the great community whom he has washed in the blood of Christ and animated with the Holy Spirit. This is why there is no such thing as absolutely private prayer for the Christian: in some form or other it is a participation in the endless sacrifice of praise and petition which the Church as Bride of Christ offers in adoration of the Father. In the words of the Catechism:

- “Finally, if we pray the Our Father sincerely, we leave individualism behind, because the love that we receive frees us from it. The “our” at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer, like the “us” of the last four petitions, excludes no one. If we are to say it truthfully, our divisions and oppositions have to be overcome.” (C.C.C. 2792)
- C.C.C. 2779-2793

## 2. “Who art in heaven”

A simple phrase, the meaning of this line is often misunderstood - or overlooked. It is not a geographical location (obviously): it refers instead to God's nature: God is not of this creation, he does not exist in the way that all other things exist because they are created, finite and dependant on him. God is above and utterly beyond all limitations of this universe and everything that exists, whether we know about them or not. This line could be rendered “Our Father, *who utterly transcends all creatures and things, and whose existence is infinitely greater than all that exists that is not Him*” (but that would be quite a mouthful at Mass on a Sunday morning!)

There is a form of theology called *Pantheism* which holds that God is identical with the whole of the universe: somehow all that exists is a part of God (including the inanimate things) and that God is the soul of the universe just as your soul is the animating principle of you. God is the entire universe and the entire universe is God. (A derivative of this opinion is *Panentheism*, which says that the whole universe is part of God but that God goes a little beyond the whole universe). These opinions are held by many religions (especially the more New Age cults, as well as some of the more Eastern religions) and are enjoying something of a resurgence today. Many eco-warriors (like Swampy, who protested at the building of the Reading by-pass and the Honiton by-pass at Fairmile in the mid to late 1990s) have a concept of religion at the heart of their defence of the environment, and for many of these there is more than a little pantheism/panentheism at work. Nature takes on an almost sacred quality, not because God has made it but because it has become somehow identified with God (often in the form of an earth-mother goddess figure). However, this line from the Our Father is enough to show us that we are not a pantheist Church. God is not material, nor is the material universe God's natural domain: God is absolutely beyond and infinitely greater than anything in, or the whole of, creation. God transcends creation utterly because ultimately He (*and ONLY He*) is not created.

NOW - when we proclaim that the transcendent God (whose ‘home’ is not the universe, but who fills it with his presence) is our FATHER, then we make an important statement. **OUR HOME IS NOT THIS PLANET, OR THIS UNIVERSE:** our home is **HEAVEN**. Although we were created as beings in this universe, and together with all beings other than God we are *created*, not eternal, nevertheless God has destined us for life in eternity beyond this material universe: we are called to life with him forever, sharing his life and nature in a way which goes completely beyond all concepts of time, space, distance or duration. This is why we speak (and have done since the time of Christ) about this earth as a place of *exile* rather than of belonging. We no longer fit in entirely, because there is within us that which is not thoroughly at peace in this limited created universe, but which will only be satisfied in the nature of God - in the words of St. Augustine, “*You created us for you, O Lord, and our hearts*

*are restless until they find their rest in you.*” We speak of the Church as a “pilgrim people”, journeying to our homeland, using the image of Moses and the people of Israel in the desert (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The Church is a foreigner on this earth: it is like a colony of the Kingdom of Heaven, which takes for its laws and values the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven (hence in so many ways, we simply do not fit in with our society, defending as we do such apparently archaic values as the sanctity of life, the indissolubility of marriage, the virtue of holy poverty, the spiritual value of voluntary submission in obedience, the value of chastity for all people whether married, single or celibate/consecrated etc.). We attempt to live by the values of our homeland (God himself) and hence our out-of-step-ness (if that horrific word is allowed!) with this world and the values of our society.

## **SUMMARY**

“Our Father who art in heaven” tells us:

- What God is - *FATHER* of the family we have become through Baptism.
- Who we are - the adopted and en-graced children he has chosen as his own and shared his life with.
- What our nature is - called to something infinitely greater than all we have seen with our eyes or heard with our ears. We are only able to understand human nature when we look into the soul to contemplate God, for HE and he alone is the homeland for which we are created, and only in that homeland will we reach the fullest potential of the human person.

## **2. The Seven Petitions of the Our Father**

The rest of the prayer is a series of petitions. The first three are more like benedictions - blessings that we address to God seeking the glorification of his name, the establishment of his reign and the acceptance of his authority throughout all creation. The last four make specific reference to the greatest needs that we have as disciples of Christ.

### **1. “Hallowed be thy name”**

This does not mean that we ask that God's name *become* holy for of course it already is. We petition that his name be hallowed – be praised as holy by all creation, be revered throughout the earth for the holiness it evokes. We are interceding with the Father for the eyes of the world to be opened for all to see and recognise the Father for the glory that is his as God.

This is not really about wanting God to receive the praise that is his due, as if we were flattering a despot. It is about mankind finding his destiny in recognising the glory and holiness that is God's nature. Of all the adjectives that the Sacred Scriptures apply to God, only one is used three times in a row. God is described as merciful, just,

compassionate, jealous, almighty, gentle, forgiving etc. St. John describes God as love. BUT while all of these are absolutely true, only *one* is applied three times over, and from this flows all the other adjectives. Isaiah sees a vision of God in heaven, surrounded by the angels, by incense and the glory of the heavenly court - the angels cry out “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts*” (Is. 6:3). This vision is repeated in the Book of Revelation when St. John is also given the vision which Isaiah saw, and the angels sing out “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.*” (Rev. 4:8). God's holiness is the inner core of his being, the impenetrable mystery of his transcendent Godhead, his distinctive and eternal character. His holiness is absolute and pure, without the admixture of any base imperfection. For this reason, God's holiness is absolutely incompatible with sin: nothing sinful or imperfect can withstand in the presence of God.

YET God's holiness is not a jealously guarded private possession: God's desire, in love, is to share the glory of his holiness with his children - this means making them holy by purging out sin. The petition “hallowed by thy name” is to seek to participate in this process, to open ourselves to the purifying process by recognising with progressive clarity the utterly transcendent nature of God's total holiness, and by recognising it being transformed by the understanding. We petition God to show the holiness of his name, i.e., of himself, for the nations to see and be drawn towards. We ask that in the revealing of God's own nature mankind is brought back to the fount of life and comprehend that only in God does man see the culmination and fulfilment of his unfulfilled yearnings. As the beauty of God's holiness is revealed, we pray for the conversion of all peoples (beginning with ourselves, who are yet to be fully converted to Christ and away from our sins).

“Hallowed be thy name” is our prayer that all nations come to understand that their very nature is bound up with God, that God is the key to understanding who we are. It is the expression of our keen hope that all peoples will turn to God and recognise him as “*the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End*” (Revelation 22:13). It is only in recognising this and accepting it with joy, that mankind discovers the very depth of his nature and being. In hallowing God's name, we uncover the goal towards which our lives are tended and the fount from which all meaning and purpose in this life originates. To praise God's name is to answer the question of the meaning of life.

- C.C.C. 2807-2815

## **2. “Thy Kingdom come”**

The Kingdom of God has many manifestations, particularly the Church, but only one of these is complete and entire: the Kingdom in its fulfilment is *Heaven* at the end of time when all creation has returned to God and his reign is without question. This is the point to which the entire book of Revelation tends. St. John describes what he sees in heaven: the martyrs, who have given their lives for Christ and who look from heaven to see the Church on earth persecuted by the beast, the dragon and their disciples, call out in prayer to God to vindicate the holiness of his name and to defend those who are suffering terrible trials on account of the name (Rev. 6:9-11, 8:3-4). As the Book develops, the real persecutors of Christ's disciples are slowly unveiled and

reveal themselves, only for those who would trample on God's family to be overthrown. Then the cry goes out that the Kingdom of God has finally and irreversibly been established:

- “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying, “We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” (Rev. 11:15-18)

The establishment of God's Kingdom is found in the recognition of his holiness (thus this petition flows from the last one). Anywhere that God's name is revered, there at least to some degree is found the Kingdom. Most of all this refers to Christ himself: he is the Kingdom of God fully present within himself, as he proclaims and establishes the authority of God over all that would threaten God's family (hence his casting out of devils, unclean spirits etc., in the Gospels). In his preaching, Christ speaks of the Kingdom as a *coming* reality – but also as a **present reality**.

1. He speaks of the Kingdom being “*at hand*” (Mt. 3:2) “*very close*”. He tells his critics that since he works by the power of the Spirit, “*the kingdom of heaven has come upon you*” (Mt. 12:28). Whenever they preach they are to say that the Kingdom of God has overtaken them (Mt.10:7).
2. When he tells parables about the Kingdom it is often to stress how the kingdom grows on us and develops within us – something that describes the earthly experience of being converted and *cannot* be true of heaven. For instance, the seed that is sown and some reject it, some accept it initially but soon fall away, some are overwhelmed by worldly desires (Mt. 13:2-23) – the good seed, he says are “*the children of the kingdom*” (Mt. 13:38). Another example is the mustard seed that grows into the biggest shrub (Mk. 4:30-32). The Kingdom is “discovered” like treasure in a field, or a pearl of great price (Mt. 13:44-46) – all these are about human beings coming across the faith and choosing to accept it and mould their lives around it ***in this life***.
3. The Kingdom is something we live in here on earth - it is like a field where good seed grows intermingled with darnel and weeds: “*Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers*” (Mt. 13:40-41) – if the weeds are present in the Kingdom, Christ can only mean this life, not the next because in heaven there will be no imperfection. The very keys of the Kingdom are entrusted to human beings for them to use – whatever Peter and his successors bind on earth, using the keys of the Kingdom, are bound in heaven (Mt. 16: 19). Christ teaches that the Kingdom of God is “*in the very midst*” of us (Lk. 17:21).

SO – according to Christ, the Kingdom is not just to be understood as Heaven but somehow with an earthly manifestation as well – it is to be found where people receive and accept the teaching of Christ and the apostles. It is to be entered into - a society of people who live by the values of heaven while still on earth. It is identifiable as a community of people (not just a loose association of like-minded people). What does all this add up to? The answer should be obvious – the Church.

How can this be so? Since the presence of Christ *is* the presence of the Kingdom, then it follows that wherever Christ is, there is the Kingdom of God, at least in embryonic form. This is particularly so in the Church because the Church has become by the grace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the *Mystical Body of Christ*, irreversibly united to the Son of God. The Kingdom is present in the acts of the Church, especially the Mass because here we come face to face with Christ and receive him body, blood, soul and divinity into ourselves. What is dramatically true of the Mass (where, after all, only the power of the Kingdom of God could explain the transformation of bread and wine into the very presence of Christ himself) is also true in *all* the sacraments. When they are celebrated, the Kingdom establishes another foothold on this world, as another soul turns towards Christ and accepts his salvation. In holy Baptism, people are regenerated in the Holy Spirit and united to Christ, made citizens of Heaven only in exile. In Confirmation, they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for the spread of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is established as an outpost in this world through the activity of the Apostles who preach the gospel and call people to conversion. The Kingdom becomes a present reality (although not in its mature and completed form) in our own lives through the prayers, acts of charity and devotion, justice, self-sacrifice, worship etc. that call us to live by the values of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is not just “to come” - it is already here and among us, but incompletely. It is the mark of the disciple to wish and pray for the extension of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth - and at the same time it is the faith of the disciple to perceive that the Kingdom is not an earthly construction (we are not building utopia here on earth, for we remember that our Father is “in heaven” - and this is our true home, where the Kingdom is most fully established). Thus, “thy kingdom come” is a prayer for many things – for the ongoing conversion of all who believe, so that our faith may become fuller and our love of God more sincere; for the spread of the faith to those who have no faith in Christ; for the completion of the faith in our separated brothers and sisters who have accepted Christ but not the fullness of his teaching in the Catholic Church.

This petition calls to mind and places before us the urgent prayer of the early Church, “*Maranatha*” (best translated ‘Come, Lord God’). The earliest disciples (and up till quite recent times) had a keen appreciation of the reality of the return of Christ at the end of time. This is not to be confused with the more hysterical millenarian prophesies of the last few generations which have seen cults grow up in the expectation of Christ's imminent return by a certain date, only to be disillusioned by his failure to show up, or (even worse) to anticipate his coming with mass cultic suicide (remember what happened in 1997 with the appearance of the Hale Bop comet?). The Church and all disciples of Christ do eagerly await the return of the Lord since it is only out of *love* of the Lord that we follow him - and it is surely one of the characteristics of love to want to be in the presence of the beloved. Our prayers begin to take on this flavour as we long for the establishment of the reign of God in its fullness, through the destruction of evil and imperfection.

- C.C.C. 2816-2821

### **3. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”**

This petition centres on radical change of heart. It is an impossible prayer to pray until we are reconciled to the truth that whatever the Father wills for us is not simply acceptable or even good for us, but beyond this - that his will is *the best course of action for each of us*. What makes this prayer difficult for us to offer is that long-term happiness (i.e., holiness) is only achieved through short-term sacrifice. We need to learn to sacrifice our self-centred instincts and our appetites for earthly pleasures which may not in themselves be harmful but will certainly be more attractive to us than the goal of our eternal joy in Heaven if only because the first is an immediate, if lesser, pleasure, while the second is not only deferred (rather than here and now) but also can only be achieved through suffering and foregoing those immediate pleasures we find so enticing. “Thy will be done” may involve immediate consequences which I have no liking for. If God is aware that I am prone to pride in my achievements then I will need to learn humility: that is a painful lesson and one that none of us would choose for ourselves - and yet it is unavoidable if we are to mature as children of God and so enter the Kingdom.

The pursuit of the will of God guarantees us Heaven in the long run: but it makes no promises for the short-term. Even personal holiness will not mean that we will be able to avoid personal suffering – after all, it was God's own Son, whose purity and innocence have never been matched, who was asked by the Father as an act of love, to be prepared to give up his life on the cross so that we might live. St. John's Gospel (more than the other three) stresses Christ's voluntary act of obedience to the Father's will, and this is a refrain that regularly punctuates Christ's words in his Gospel. We are not talking about an exercise in masochistic self-denial as an end in itself: we are talking about looking at this life with the eyes of a citizen of heaven who is prepared to give up anything of lesser value in order to gain the pearl of infinite value. He is a fool who clings to what he can not keep rather than gain what cannot then be lost by giving up what he will not be able to hold on to. I think that's a rather complicated way of saying:

- *“Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal.” (Jn. 6:27),*
- *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Mt. 6:19-21)*

Obedience is the path to holiness - this is the truth that Christ demonstrates in his life (Hebrews 5:8) and it is prayed for in this petition of the Our Father. All our prayers need to be inspired and begin from the mentality of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane: *“Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” (Lk. 22:42)* We need to bring our prayers before God

with the confidence that no matter what God asks us to endure, it can only end up with the glorification of his children (i.e., us), and that he asks us to endure patiently what becomes the means of purifying us, so that, in the image of Sacred Scripture, our holiness breaks forth like the mid-day sun.

- C.C.C. 2822-2827

#### **4. “Give us this day our daily bread”**

This petition places at the heart of prayer the need to pray for the very goods of the earth that we (especially today) are prone to take for granted. The bread we eat is not produced by science but by the fertility of nature which is itself created by God and governed by the ordinances laid down by the creator. It is God who provides bread for the eating, and sun for warmth. In a scientific age we are obsessed with the fascination of explaining as much of our world as possible - but often forgetting that we are never able to explain, only to describe. Science can tell us from observation how the forces work which ensure that the earth does not fly off the course of its orbit around the sun and spin off into deeper space: but science can only suggest that there are laws of nature which govern the motion of the planets etc. without actually telling us why on earth these laws should be there in the first place. Scientific ‘explanations’ do not remove the need for God; they simply describe how it is that God is acting. Even in the most mundane ‘laws’ of nature that govern every minute of each day (such as gravity), it is the wisdom of the creator who provides conditions and environments suitable for our survival. It is to God, therefore that we go both in thanksgiving for what he has provided and the wisdom of its organisation, and also to seek the continuance of his help.

The purpose of this petition is not to suggest that God might not provide these needs if we failed to ask him to be faithful. Nor does the petition mean we do not have to lift a finger to contribute to the earth's fertility: it is there in the Our Father for our education (to remind us of the true source of the goods of the earth) and so relieve us of the worry that God might withdraw his providence and protection. In the words of the Catechism:

- *“Our bread”: The Father who gives us life cannot but give us the nourishment life requires - all appropriate goods and blessings, both material and spiritual. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus insists on the filial trust that cooperates with our Father's providence. He is not inviting us to idleness, but wants to relieve us from nagging worry and preoccupation. Such is the filial surrender of the children of God: To those who seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, he has promised to give all else besides. Since everything indeed belongs to God, he who possesses God wants for nothing, if he himself is not found wanting before God.” (C.C.C. 2830)*

From the very beginning of the Church, we have seen a greater meaning in this petition than merely the provision of our earthly needs. Our daily bread is a reference to the gift of the Mass, the spiritual food which Christ offers to us himself, the bread which brings life to the world, which is real food, and without which he teaches us that we cannot have life in us (Jn. 6:51,53,55). As the body needs sustenance each day

for its health to be preserved, so the soul needs to be sustained with spiritual nutrition: the food for our souls is Christ who alone can satisfy the yearnings of the heart and mind and bring tranquillity as well as spiritual fitness to his disciples. “*Give us this day our daily bread*” is a reminder to us that the *whole* person is dependant on God for development, body and soul, and that *daily* nourishment as well as exercise is required for the fitness of BOTH. As the body cries out for bread to provide it with strength, so the soul cries out for the Bread of Life, Christ in the Eucharistic species.

This petition, like the word “*Our*” at the start of the prayer, draws us from private meditation back to the mystery of the Church as a community of faith. The Our Father inspires us to pray in the plural, constantly reminding us that even when we are physically (or emotionally) alone, we are still at the most profound level “WE” and not “I, on my own”. More than this, the fourth petition of the Our Father locates the centre of our private devotion at the heart of the community's public act of worship and declaration of faith – “*Give us this day our daily bread*”: there is nothing private or individualistic about the Mass because it is the celebration of the *entire* Church through which God feeds those united to him through the Church. The Our Father points us back to the Mass as the community meal of redemption: this is where the Father feeds his children through the sacrament of the death and resurrection of Christ.

- C.C.C. 2828-2837

## **5. “*And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*”**

This petition comes in two parts, which are so interconnected that while they can be distinguished they cannot be separated.

1. “*Forgive us our trespasses*” - we ask for forgiveness. This is going to be a constant feature of our prayer because it is in coming to love God that we become more and more aware of how we fail to love. We seek forgiveness as a son seeks it from his father: confident of the love that his father has for him but not so presumptuous that he takes it for granted. We ask to be forgiven not because we *deserve* it but because we are reassured that the Father is anxious to heal and forgive the members of his family. Remember that this is a feature of our public liturgies as well - the Mass *begins* with the penitential rite in which we renew our baptismal repentance, renounce sin and seek to be received into the fullness of the Lord's family.
2. “*As we forgive those who trespass against us*” – we associate the measure of forgiveness we request from God with the measure of forgiveness we are prepared to offer those who offend us. The phrase “forgive us ... AS we forgive those” should be understood to mean “*judge me with the same severity or generosity with which I judge those who come to ask forgiveness of me.*” This puts a whole new slant on the manner in which we are forgiven by God – it is I who set the standard God will use to judge me. The more demanding and unrelenting I am in giving forgiveness, the more reluctant I am to forgive and cold-hearted to those who truthfully seek reconciliation, then the more

demanding God will be of me when I come to be judged. Suddenly it is not God who judges me and expects me to live up to his high standards – it is God who judges me by the standard I myself set during my own lifetime.

God offers forgiveness to us freely - we cannot qualify for it, nor do we need to become holy enough to be worthy of it, BUT *we can disqualify ourselves from this free gift if we choose*. Forgiveness for our own sins is linked to the forgiveness we are prepared to give to others. Indeed, we *ask* God to measure out to us forgiveness according to the generosity that has characterised our forgiving of our own enemies. The meaner we become with compassion, forgiveness and mercy, the more difficult we will find it to open mind and heart in love of God. The less we forgive, the less we are conscious of the need for it in our own conduct and attitudes: the less we forgive the less we will feel we need to be forgiven, or even *want* to be forgiven. As always, the Catechism is far more succinct than I can be, and a great deal clearer:

- *“Now -- and this is daunting -- this outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us. Love, like the Body of Christ, is indivisible; we cannot love the God we cannot see if we do not love the brother or sister we do see. In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father's merciful love; but in confessing our sins, our hearts are opened to his grace. This petition is so important that it is the only one to which the Lord returns and which he develops explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount. This crucial requirement of the covenant mystery is impossible for man. But “with God all things are possible”.” (C.C.C. 2840-2841)*

This petition, which the Church has not added but has remained true to because Christ himself put it there, reflects Christ's own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (as the Catechism mentions):

- *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Mt. 6:14-15)*

Christ repeatedly unites forgiveness for personal sin with the forgiveness we are prepared to offer –

- *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” (Mt. 7:1-2)*

The parable of the merciless servant, who is pardoned a debt of 10,000 talents but refuses to release a fellow servant from the paltry debt of 100 denarii, strikes the same note - forgiveness is ours to the degree that we have given it: the degree of ruthlessness with which we treat those in any form of debt to us will be the standard by which we are treated by God:

- *“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger, his lord*

*delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (Mt. 18:32-35)*

In effect we are given by God the power necessary to determine the degree of the forgiveness we receive: and more than this, Christ reminds us of this each time we pray the Our Father. God's love for us is absolutely unconditional (he will continue to love us without diminishing that love no matter what we do) - but his mercy **IS** conditional (on our willingness to forgive).

- *“Christian prayer extends to the forgiveness of enemies, transfiguring the disciple by configuring him to his Master. Forgiveness is a high point of Christian prayer; only hearts attuned to God's compassion can receive the gift of prayer. Forgiveness also bears witness that, in our world, love is stronger than sin. The martyrs of yesterday and today bear this witness to Jesus. Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father and of men with one another.” (C.C.C. 2844)*
- C.C.C. 2838-2845

## **6. “And lead us not into temptation”**

While this petition seems to hold God responsible for the temptations which fall our way (which would make him partially responsible for sin), this impression is there only in the English and most certainly NOT there in the original Greek of the Our Father.

This petition is about divine wisdom and spiritual discernment. The wise disciple realises his inner weakness: he is aware of the ease with which his resolve crumbles in the face of temptations. While he has a certain confidence in his resolution to live the Gospel and refuse sin, nevertheless his humility leads him to recognise that his own strength is negligible and that he is utterly reliant on the grace and strength of God to preserve him from giving way to the temptations which are most trying. The self-aware and realistic disciple does not often yearn for the day when his love of God is tested because he is very consciously aware that his resolve might give way. He prays to be spared from the trial which could overwhelm him - and yet with the confidence that whatever he does face, he faces through the strength of God, and that even if his own spiritual strength is weak, he has only to be reliant of the grace of God to know that he can resist whatever temptations he is assailed by.

“*Lead us not into temptation*” is the prayer of the spiritually humble. It is also the prayer for spiritual discernment and for the gift of supernatural wisdom such that when under temptation we can recognise the difference between an apparent good and an actual good. In the words of the Catechism:

- *“The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death. We must also discern between being tempted, and consenting to temptation.*

*Finally, discernment unmasks the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a 'delight to the eyes' and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death.*

*"God does not want to impose the good, but wants free beings... There is a certain usefulness to temptation. No one but God knows what our soul has received from him, not even we ourselves. But temptation reveals it in order to teach us to know ourselves, and in this way we discover our evil inclinations and are obliged to give thanks for the goods that temptation has revealed to us." (Origen, De orat. 29)  
C.C.C. 2847*

Prayer involves itself in the spiritual battle that takes place inside each of us. It acknowledges that while we are responsible for the path that we tread (that we truly have the capacity to welcome or reject the help of God), we do not have the strength to follow through our decisions on our own: for that we are reliant on God, and need to be regularly reminded of this. This is so not in order that we are constantly reminded of how small we are (an exercise in humiliation) but so that we do not get over-confident in our own ability and try to face life without constant reference to the grace and love of God. Alone and without the strength of God, we are only capable of departing from him and choosing the path of self-destruction. *"Lead us not into temptation"* places the emphasis and focus where it should be: the almighty power of God – *"For with God nothing will be impossible."* (Lk. 1:37) While we are given the ability freely to choose what we are going to do in any given situation, we need to centre ourselves on God, for it is only by his power that we will be able to carry out our intentions. Think of a child who is asked by his parents where he would like to go on a bank holiday outing: the child is given the power to choose where the family will go - but although he can freely make this choice, he is still reliant on the parents to arrange the travel and get them to wherever the child would like to go. The same is true of us when we aim to resist temptation: having decided our course of action, we need in all honesty to remember that we must have recourse to a power greater than our own to execute our decision.

- C.C.C. 2846-2849

## **7. "But deliver us from evil."**

This petition flows from the last: in addition to asking to be mercifully strengthened against temptation so as to overcome it, we ask to be delivered from the power of the devil.

Nowadays it is fashionable to regard the devil as a figure of the imagination, a fictional personification of mankind's awareness of evil inside himself. The Catholic Church accepts as inspired by God the references that occur in almost every Book of the Sacred Scriptures to the very real personhood of the devil.

Satan is no more than an angel - he is not a rival or lesser god but a creature no less than you and me. St. Thomas Aquinas said that for this reason, there was more in common between an angel and a piece of straw than there was between an angel and God. This being true, angels we believe surpass human beings in every faculty (they

are stronger, faster, more intelligent as well as wiser etc.) Being spirits, angels are not subject to the laws of physical nature as we are: the Jews, and we follow them, always believed that the fallen angels, who sided with Satan in the rebellion against God, retained their angelic powers which they used to manifest themselves on earth in the form of other gods - the cultic idols of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, Assyria, Philistia, Babylon etc. Many of these were bloodthirsty in the extreme, demanding frequent human sacrifice, sometimes of children, as well as the most depraved cultic rituals including incest and ritual prostitution. I mention all this because we certainly do believe that the power of the angels, both the fallen and the holy, is well beyond our own and is spectacular enough to appear quasi-divine. Satan may be more like a straw than God, but from the perspective of lesser creatures (such as human beings), his power and strength appear more akin to that of God himself. Think of the natural world – Satan is to God as we might appear to a Tyrannosaurus Rex – tiny, puny, and insignificant. BUT Satan is to us as a human being is to a butterfly – massive, strong, powerful and threatening.

For this reason, we are right to fear the power of the devil, but not to stand in abject terror of him as we would of an unstoppable force. In the Book of Revelation, the devil is depicted in terms that emphasise his power to injure and terrify mankind:

- *“And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth.” (Rev. 12:3-4)*

Christ describes Satan in the most damning of ways: the devil

- *“was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (Jn. 8:44)*

The point of this is to indicate that in Christ's eyes, and in the understanding of the early Church (but sadly not today) the devil is to be regarded as a potent and deadly opponent who seeks our downfall because of the malice he bears towards God. It is vain to think in terms of a human being defeating an angel, let alone an archangel, to say nothing of the greatest and most glorious of the angels - Lucifer, the shining one, the light-bearer. This is not a battle of equals.

For this reason, Christ tells us to pray for deliverance from the devil. Alone we are unable to stand up to him - however we are not asked to withstand him alone: we are led by Christ to turn to the Father. God has already triumphed decisively over the power of evil through the unequivocal victory of the cross - Christ points us to the victory of the cross and resurrection as the means by which we share in the triumph over the devil and evil. The Book of Revelation shows us the end that God has already revealed and towards which he is working, through human history. The Our Father leads us to participate in that end by uniting ourselves with the One who has already delivered the mortal blow to the devil. Without God, we have no hope of survival against Satan - but united to God we have no cause for doubt or fear because

the victory has already been achieved and simply waits to be manifested when time has run its course.

- C.C.C. 2850-2865

## **8. “Amen”**

This Hebrew word means, “So be it” or “Let it be so.” The one who ends prayer with “Amen” is confirming their acceptance of all that is contained in the prayer. It is not a resignation to the inevitable, a sort of fatalistic passive tolerance of what God has decided to bring about, the stiff-upper-lip, grin-and-bear-it school of spirituality! It is a dynamic participation in God’s plan of salvation that flows from the realisation in faith that God’s understanding surpasses ours, and that his motives are purer than we could imagine – we can have confidence in the path he has marked out for us because he is committed to us in love as our Father.

“Amen” unites us with Our Lady – it could be rendered “Fiat” (simply the Latin translation), or in the words of Mary to the archangel Gabriel “Let it be done to me according to your word.” Just as Our Lady was called by God to offer herself as a key part of his plan of salvation, to accept the invitation to become Mother of Christ, so we receive on a daily basis God’s invitation to become willingly the means by which he will bless the world. Like Mary, we are called to bring Christ to the people around us by the witness of our lives and through prayer for their salvation. In ending our prayers with “Amen”, we are echoing Mary’s wholehearted desire to adopt God’s plan as her own and to give herself without reservation as an ambassador for Christ.

Fr Guy de Gaynesford