

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP

THE  
CATECHIST'S  
GUIDE TO  
BELOVED  
CATHOLIC  
PRAYERS



UNDERSTANDING AND  
SHARING THE TRADITION



TWENTY-THIRD  
PUBLICATIONS

[twentythirdpublications.com](http://twentythirdpublications.com)

**TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS**

One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200

New London, CT 06320

(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411

[www.twentythirdpublications.com](http://www.twentythirdpublications.com)

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Cover photo: iStock.com / Ralf Geithe

Interior image: iStock.com / artisteer

ISBN: 978-1-62785-464-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019940115

Printed in the U.S.A.



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# INTRODUCTION

*“It is better to say one Our Father fervently and devoutly than a thousand with no devotion and full of distraction.”*

SAINT EDMUND (841–869)

St. Ignatius (1491–1556) once suggested to those who were searching to grow in prayer to pray the Our Father very slowly and silently in harmony with the pattern of deep, relaxed breathing. St. Ignatius also recommended a second method: become relaxed and dwell on the first word of the Our Father, for as long as it is meaningful. Then, move on to the second word.

A young novice once asked St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), “Mother, what shall I do to become a contemplative?” Without missing a beat, Teresa responded, “Say the Our Father—but take an hour to say it.”

In her autobiography, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), wrote that “Sometimes when I am in such a state of spiritual dryness that not a single good thought occurs to me, I say very slowly the ‘Our Father,’ or the ‘Hail Mary,’ and these prayers suffice to take me out of myself, and wonderfully refresh me.”

During a homily at Saint Martha's House (a building adjacent to St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City) on January 12, 2018, Pope Francis said that the gospel reading (which they had just heard) should prompt people to reflect on how they pray. Do people pray like "parrots," echoing words with no interest or care in what one is asking or do people "beg the Lord to help us (in) our little faith" and keep at it no matter the difficulties?

Our Catholic tradition has given us a rich treasury of prayers that enable us to pray as one community, for we all know, respect, and value the same words.

Once we memorize these prayers and deeply imprint them in our minds and hearts, however, how do we pray them? Are there times when we pray them on autopilot? Are there occasions when we pray them in parrot-like fashion? Do we know them so well that we don't really pray the words, pray the meaning, listen for the comfort, and become aware of the challenge?

The saints quoted above (and many others) and Pope Francis (and many other guides on our faith journey) have reminded us to pray these memorized prayers slowly, reflectively, and attentively, allowing the significance and implications of the words to enter our minds, hearts, and lives.

This book is a guide to ten of our cherished prayers. Much has been written—and could be written—on each of them. This is a short and introductory exploration of:

- Their history,
- Reflections on the words of the prayer,
- Suggested questions for prayerful reflection and conversations,
- Some additional ways to pray,
- Possible activities for home and/or faith formation use.

Even though we have named the book *A Catechist's Guide...*, many Christians—individually, in small groups, in families, or in adult faith formation opportunities—will find it encouraging and expanding for their own prayer lives.

Catechists (of children, youth, and adults) will discover some of the foundational realities and profound meanings of these treasured prayers—for themselves and to share with their learners. The suggested reflection questions will help catechists during their personal prayer and will provide conversation starters during catechetical gatherings. The best way to “learn” prayer, of course, is not just to read about it but to do it. As this book explores each of these ten prayers, further suggestions are provided to expand the praying (and living) of the meaning of each prayer. Practical recommendations are given for catechists to help learners experience the prayers during faith formation sessions and suggestions to send home to support and encourage family prayer.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the play and the opera, and grace before the concert and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing; And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.” For Chesterton, prayer was all-encompassing; there wasn’t an area of life that didn’t call him to praise and thanksgiving, to a deeper awareness and connection with our ever-present, unconditionally loving God.

As you use this book to more deeply understand, love, and live these prayers of our Catholic community, may you more deeply experience our faithful God and share God’s compassion with all those you touch.

*The* OUR  
FATHER

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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.  
Amen.



## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

We have received the Our Father from three sources. The shortest, and perhaps closest to Jesus' words, is in the Gospel of Luke (11:1–4) when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Matthew's longer version, in the sermon that includes the Beatitudes (6:9–13), is the basis of the traditional formula on which all Christians draw. The *Didache* (a brief, anonymous "Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" from the first or second century) adds to Matthew's text: "For yours are the power and the glory forever."

Jesus often spoke about prayer: pray with humility (the tax collector rather than the Pharisee); persist in prayer (the widow before the judge); forgive others before offering your gift at the altar. Then, Jesus gave his followers a prayer that reminds us of all these things (and much more). In the *Didache*, Christians were encouraged to pray the Lord's Prayer three times each day. Today the Our Father is a frequent daily prayer for many Christians; it is also an integral prayer at every liturgy, in the Liturgy of the Hours, in the Rosary, and in many other devotions and prayer times. The Our Father is not just a short prayer to memorize, not just nice words to fall back on. It is a comfort and a challenge; it is all-encompassing; it is foundational for our call as disciples.

### A model for prayer

In Luke, the disciples did not say, "Give us a prayer" but "Teach us to pray." When Jesus shared these words, then, it was more than a simple prayer. It is a guide, a teaching story, a profound "handbook" about the attitudes needed for all prayer. Jesus gave us a pattern or model for prayer. He was teaching his disciples how to pray, how to approach God in all prayer: expressing adoration, recognizing

God's attributes, and petitions for the grace, needs, forgiveness, and protection needed by humankind—and praying all of this in a few sentences and in simple words. Most important, Jesus teaches us to pray based on his intimate relationship with God; he wants that relationship to be the basis for our prayer—and our lives.

### **A communal prayer**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) follows the Tridentine Catechism in emphasizing that the Our Father is a communal prayer. We, of course, pray it in community during our celebration of liturgy. Yet every time we pray it, we pray “our Father,” not “my Father”; we pray “give us this day our daily bread,” rather than “give me....” (CCC, 2789–2792). Even as we pray it individually, we pray as one people, as people of one family, God's inclusive family.

### **The content of the prayer**

The *Catechism*, quoting St. Augustine, identifies seven petitions in the Our Father (CCC, 2803–2806). The first three focus on the glory of God, drawing us toward God for God's sake: God's name, the kingdom of God, and God's will. The last four center on requesting God's strength and help with our human needs and concerns.

The *Catechism* also quotes Tertullian, an early church father, who described the Lord's Prayer as, “truly the summary of the whole gospel” (CCC, 2761). Tertullian explained that the prayer incorporates, in concise form, “almost every word of the Lord, every remembrance of his teaching” (*On Prayer*, chapter 1).

## REFLECTING ON THE WORDS OF THE PRAYER

### *Our*

Nowhere in the Our Father do we find the words, “I,” “me” or “mine.” We begin the prayer with “Our” for two reasons: God is not only in relationship with Jesus, but with us; God is our father (Romans 8:15); and we are created as one, each of us is joined to everyone else for whom God is Creator and Father.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stresses that the word *our* “excludes no one.” The Our Father erases all boundaries; we are called into the universal family circle: saints and sinners, living and deceased, loved and feared, powerful and insignificant. “If we are to say it truthfully, our divisions and oppositions have to be overcome” (CCC, 2792).

### *Father,*

Jesus could have chosen any title for God; many names for God are found in the Old Testament. By using “Father,” Jesus was calling his followers to share in his deep and intimate and very special relationship with God. “Abba” was an intimate name, illustrating a relationship of concern, love, care, and ever-present availability.

Jesus was inviting us to do the same: to believe in the relationship that God desires, to experience the tender, nurturing, and secure presence of God. By using “father,” Jesus’ prayer was affirming that God intimately cares for us, rather than that stating that God is male. Father is an analogy, a valuable one, but an analogy, for we can only talk of the mystery of God through analogy, images, and metaphors.

Jesus invites us to pray—and live—in a radical relationship with God; we are intimate members of the family, welcome at the family table.

*who art in heaven*

When Jesus referred to heaven, he never spoke of a place but described a state of the heart, a way of being attentive to the sacred in ordinary things. The *Catechism* notes: “Who Art in Heaven: This biblical expression does not mean a place (‘space’), but a way of being; it does not mean that God is distant, but majestic. Our Father is not ‘elsewhere’: he transcends everything we can conceive of his holiness” (CCC, 2794). This line in the prayer confirms that God is always present here and now—in the everydayness of our lives. Jesus compared heaven to small things: a mustard seed, a pearl of great price, a treasure hidden in a field—our hearts and attentiveness to all blessings connect us to the continual presence of God, heaven with us.

*hallowed be thy name;*

We can find echoes of this petition in the first three commandments, which affirm that God is one, holy, and sacred. We also find resonances in the words of Isaiah: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!” (6:3).

We, of course, do not make God’s name holy, sanctified, and blessed; it already is. When we pray these words, we proclaim that God—the very essence of God—is holy. We are praying that we will always remember that.

This petition calls us to praise God; to honor God’s name, which points to God’s essential nature; to recognize God’s presence and appreciate the gift of life, of grace. It is finding words for what God is doing in us and in our world today. Perhaps, too, it calls us—in our prayer—to not only ask for our needs but to first recognize God’s holiness and goodness.

This petition also challenges us to an ever-growing holiness.

St. Peter Chrysologus, cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, said, “But we ask that this name of God should be hallowed in us through our actions. For God’s name is blessed when we live well... We ask then that, just as the name of God is holy, so we may obtain his holiness in our souls” (CCC, 2814).

*thy kingdom come,*

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that our text of the Our Father is a translation; the Greek word we translate as “kingdom” can also be translated as “reign” (CCC, 2816). Many Scripture translations prefer “reign” because it better describes the belief that God’s reign is a condition or action rather than a place, an earthly realm.

Jesus’ teaching and mission focused on a central theme: the reign of God. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Mark (a literary tip-off that this might be important) are, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (1:15). In Luke 4:43: Jesus says: “To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent.” Likewise, Jesus called his followers to make God’s reign their first priority: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Matthew 6:33).

Living in the reign of God is a life of prayerfulness; a life of presence and of seeing God everywhere; a life of unconditional love of all people; a life of service, mercy, and justice; a life of communion with all God’s people. We pray that we will be instruments of bringing about God’s dream of loving goodness for all creation. We bring the reign of God when we go beyond ourselves in love, in hospitality, in justice, and weave into a compassionate community those among whom we live and work.

*thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

Scripture, of course, continually asserts for us God's will. This includes the commandments; the words of Micah 6:8 ("You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God"), Jesus' two great commandments (Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:34) and our actions that mirror Jesus' role (Luke 4:16-19). Jesus continually teaches that we enter heaven not because of our words but by doing the will of God (Matthew 7:21; CCC, 2826).

As we pray this portion of the Our Father, we join Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and face the ongoing struggle and balance between our needs and expectations and God's bigger picture. Perhaps "thy will be done" is a litmus test for our faith, the trusting response because we acknowledge that our wise and loving God knows more than we do about what is best. Our first prayers often ask God for favors, explaining to God what we want to happen. Then our prayer changes to a willingness to receive what we are given, to find peace and healing in whatever happens because God is with us.

In the second portion of this line, we are offered an astonishing gift: we can live in heaven right here on earth. God's will is lived in heaven; when God's will is done on earth, earth will be like heaven. The reign of God is within us and among us; we are invited to live simply and kindly: to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger. The Our Father challenges us to bring Jesus' vision of wholeness for humankind to our earth.

A focus on heaven does not mean giving up on this world. Sometimes our culture tells us that heaven and earth are opposites, that loving heaven can only mean we don't care about this world. Jesus' prayer is the opposite.

*Give us this day our daily bread,*

At first glance, this seems to be one of the simplest phrases of the Our Father, yet it is a petition that has many meanings and calls forth committed responsibility from each of us. Each word is filled with meaning and challenge.

We pray for more than bread; bread is a symbol of life's basics: our physical needs (food, water, shelter, clothing, education, healthcare) as well as our spiritual nourishment (hope, reassurance, comfort, peace of mind, strength). We pray for God's gifts that sustain our lives, all the things we need for our commitment about living like it's done in heaven. Since bread suggests healthy basic nourishment, this is a petition for what we need, not for all we desire or want (we don't pray for lobster or steak, expensive cars or luxurious vacations).

As we pray "give," we recognize that all we have is God's gift; therefore, thanksgiving needs to be our constant prayer.

We often pray the Our Father privately, but as we noted above, we never pray as individuals. The pronouns "us" and "our" assert that we are praying in communion with others and we are responsible for others; "us" and "our" makes this more than a petition—it commits us to responsibility for others. If I have enough, others should too. Our prayer also goes beyond words. It is not enough to pray that others have their daily needs met; we also need to work to make it happen. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that "The drama of hunger in the world calls Christians who pray sincerely to exercise responsibility toward their brethren...This petition...cannot be isolated from the parables of the poor man Lazarus and of the Last Judgment" (CCC, 2831).

We pray for bread one day at a time. In explaining the gift of manna to God's people, Moses said, "It is the bread the Lord has

given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need’” (Exodus 16:15–16). For those who took more than they needed, by the next morning it bred worms and became smelly. This was a reminder that God would give them each day what they needed. Today, we acknowledge God’s greatness, guidance, and generosity and pray with trust that God will provide for us each day.

*and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;*

In these lines we pray to do something. In the previous petitions we primarily ask *God* to do something (for instance, “let your kingdom come” rather than “God, I will make your kingdom come”). Even here, we first ask God to forgive us, but then we say what we will do.

Because of what we say we will do, this is perhaps the most challenging part of the prayer: to forgive again and again. We are acknowledging that God’s forgiveness is not something we can keep to ourselves. If we have received this precious gift, we have no right to refuse it to another.

It is not a question of God withholding forgiveness, but rather that our unforgiving hearts make us unreceptive to God. “In refusing to forgive our brothers and sisters, our hearts are closed and their hardness makes them impervious to the Father’s merciful love...” (CCC, 2840).

This petition is related to the rest of the Our Father: The kingdom (reign) is the kingdom of forgiveness. God’s will is that we forgive. We honor God’s name when we forgive. We bring heaven to earth when we forgive.

The call to forgiveness—which is pervasive in the gospels—



is not only on a personal level but pervades all relationships, all groups, and all our efforts. After 9/11, St. John Paul II titled his World Day of Peace proclamation for 2002, “No Peace without Justice; No Justice without Forgiveness.” Reflecting on 9/11, as well as the enormous suffering of others throughout the world, St. John Paul said: “But because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the *forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations*. This is true in circumstances great and small, at the personal level or on a wider, even international scale. Forgiveness is in no way opposed to justice, as if to forgive meant to overlook the need to right the wrong done. It is rather the fullness of justice, leading to that tranquility of order which is much more than a fragile and temporary cessation of hostilities, involving as it does the deepest healing of the wounds which fester in human hearts. Justice and forgiveness are both essential to such healing” (3).

*and lead us not into temptation,*

This has often been called the problem petition; it has raised questions for some, giving the impression that God directly or intentionally causes temptation.

On December 6, 2017, Pope Francis mentioned that the current English translation is not a good one because God does not lead people to sin. Pope Francis suggested using “do not let us fall into temptation.” He said, “It is not God who throws me into temptation and then sees how I fell...A father does not do that; a father helps you to get up immediately.”

The apostle James reminds us, “No one experiencing temptation should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God is not

subject to temptation to evil, and he himself tempts no one” (James 1:13). Some countries (e.g., Benin, France, Switzerland) are using wording that conveys “do not let us enter into temptation.” Canada began using that wording in December 2018. Bishop André Gazaille of Nicolet, Québec, wrote that the new version “better reflects the spirit of the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples.” Many Scripture scholars point out that this phrase, found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, can be translated literally by “let us not go in the direction of temptation.”

In praying this line (in whatever translation), we are acknowledging the reality of temptation. In the midst of desiring God’s will to be done, longing for God’s reign, we also experience wanting our own will, craving for other things more than craving for God’s reign. As we pray this petition, we are asking God for the gift of wisdom, the gift of discernment, the gift of God’s strength to choose the good. We, once again, affirm our reliance on God, God’s support and guidance for everything in our lives.

*but deliver us from evil.*

*Amen.*

“In this final petition,” says the *Catechism*, “the Church brings before the Father all the distress of the world. Along with deliverance from the evils that overwhelm humanity, she implores the precious gift of peace and the grace of perseverance in expectation of Christ’s return” (CCC, 2854).

This last petition, in some ways, is the most practical, expressing how we often experience life. How often do we pray (or think), “Please, God, just help me stay out of trouble; let nothing bad happen to my loved ones and to me”?

Similar to the previous petition, we are affirming confident

dependence on God. We believe that our provident God will always help us.

*For the kingdom, the power, and the glory  
are yours, now and forever.*

Found not in the gospels, but in some of the old liturgical books of Eastern rites and the *Didache* (a “catechism” of the first or second century), this doxology (a hymn of praise) was added to bring the Our Father full circle. It “takes up again, by inclusion, the first three petitions to our Father: the glorification of his name, the coming of his reign, and the power of his saving will. But these prayers are now proclaimed as adoration and thanksgiving, as in the liturgy of heaven” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2855).

In 1970 Pope Paul VI adapted and linked this ancient doxology with the praying of the Our Father during our celebration of the liturgy.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION**

*Which line of the prayer means most to you today? Why?*

*Are you satisfied with praying the Our Father the way you always have? Might there be new ways of praying it?*

*What two recent events have helped you realize that God's reign is in your life? Where do you see God's reign in the world today?*

*What are your favorite names for God? We are called to be like God. What do those names call you to be like?*

*What is God's will for you?*

*How does God give you daily bread?*

*Are there hurts you need to forgive and let go? Are there relationships you need to mend and restore?*

*Because you pray the Our Father, is God calling you to do something differently in your life?*

### **IDEAS FOR CONTINUING PRAYER**

- Imagine God, like a loving parent, holding you close, telling you how deeply you are loved. Relax in the embrace of your loving God.
- Choose one line of the Our Father. Write your own prayer, using that petition as your theme.
- As you reflect on “Thy will be done,” pray the prayer of Fr. Mychal Judge (a Franciscan priest and chaplain to the New York City Fire Department who died during the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center): *Lord, take me where you want me to go, let me meet who you want me to meet, tell me what you want me to say, and keep me out of your way.*

- If you prayed “thy love be done” (instead of “thy will be done”), would that change anything for you?
- At the Church of Pater Noster in the Holy Land, Christians recall Christ’s teaching the Lord’s Prayer to his disciples. On the walls of the church, translations of the Lord’s Prayer in 140 languages are inscribed on colorful plaques. Learn the Our Father in another language.
- Use “Thy kingdom come” as a prayer throughout the day, especially when you see someone bringing the reign of justice and peace to our world.

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**SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES  
AND/OR CATECHETICAL SESSIONS**

As a family—or class—compile a booklet on the Our Father, each page containing one phrase with matching pictures.

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Be on the lookout for magazine/newspaper/internet articles and TV shows that are related to the lines of the Lord's Prayer.

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Designate a week to use your cell phone camera to take pictures of situations that illustrate each line of the Our Father.

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Design and make an Our Father quilt with each quilt block containing the words and illustration of one of the lines of the prayer.

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Make a tablecloth for your dining room table or prayer table. Using fabric crayons, write the lines of the Our Father around the edges.

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