

Our Father is privileged chat with God

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Faith & Family

Catholic Courier | Diocese of Rochester, NY | November 2004

By Fr. Dale Lauderville, OSB/CNS

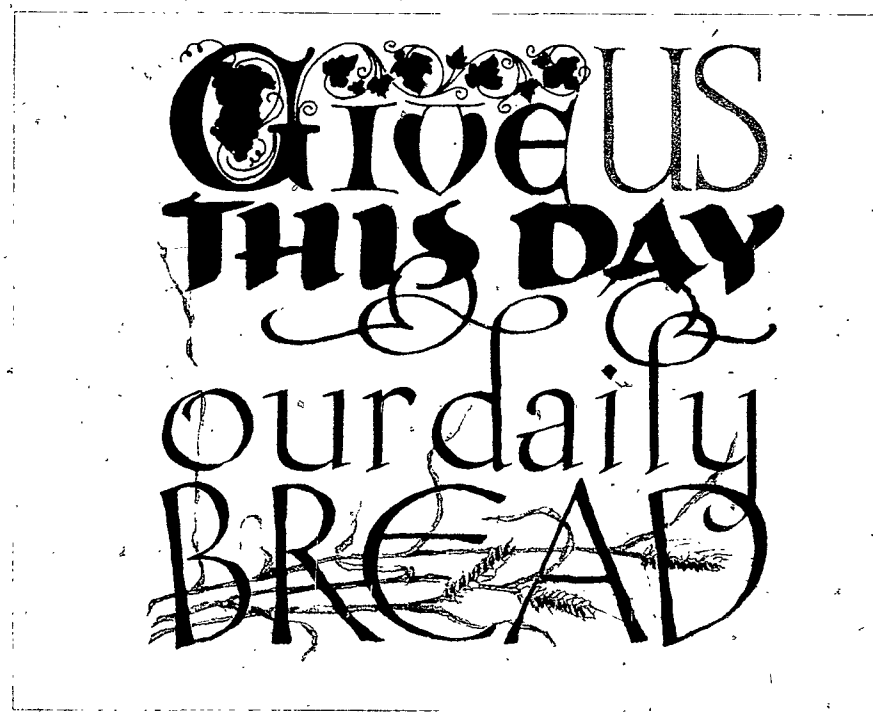
The New Testament preserves two versions of the Our Father. The shorter version in Luke 11:2-4 may be closer to the Aramaic version of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. The longer version in Matthew 6:9-13, containing two more petitions than the Lucan version, is the basic form of the prayer used by Christians through the centuries.

In the opening petition — “our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9) or “Father” (Luke 11:2) — Jesus instructs his disciples to address God on the same intimate basis that sons or daughters address their fathers.

The Old Testament rarely refers to God as “our father” (Isaiah 63:16; 64:7). Certainly the Psalms and other Jewish prayers urged the Jewish people to communicate directly with God. But with the “Our Father,” Jesus distinguishes himself from the Jewish tradition by promoting a higher level of familial intimacy.

“Hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2) expresses a desire that God reveal himself and his power so that all nations might acknowledge his holiness (cf. Ezekiel 36:22). The Lord, God of the Israelites, is holy; his sphere of being transcends the ordinary human sphere. Therefore, when believers pray this petition they are asking that God’s uniqueness and sovereign power be honored by all beings.

The next petition, “your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:3), joins closely with the preceding one by calling for God’s sovereign rule



CNS illustration by Diane M. Jones

In the Our Father, the word “bread” refers not only to bread or barley products but also to a range of physical and spiritual needs.

to become visible on earth. Jesus instructs his disciples to pray fervently for the full manifestation of God’s kingdom, a kingdom of which they already have a foretaste. Regular communication with God will allow them to see God’s sovereign rule in their midst in ways they might not otherwise have perceived.

The next petition, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is present only in Matthew 11:10. The reference to “earth” and “heaven” is an ancient Semitic way of expressing “totality.” Heaven and earth

were the two poles of the cosmos, marking out a sphere that includes everything on the land, in the sea and the air — whether visible or invisible. This prayer emphasizes not only the central role of God’s actions but the human desire that God be honored as sovereign Lord.

When believers pray “give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3), they acknowledge that God is the one who supplies their material needs. Here the word “bread” refers not only to bread but also to the whole range of life’s phys-

ical needs. The Christian tradition also has understood the word “bread” in this petition to refer to Christ’s body in the Eucharist.

The Greek word for “daily” might alternatively be translated as “tomorrow.” Thus, petitioners would be asking today for tomorrow’s bread, for the bread of the future kingdom or the heavenly bread of the Eucharist. So by praying this petition, we ask God to provide us with daily physical sustenance as well as with the heavenly food of the Eucharist.

The next petition, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12; cf. Luke 11:4), incorporates another theme central to Jesus’ preaching: forgiveness. The word “debts” in Matthew 6:12 is an ancient Semitic expression referring not just to money or material goods, but more generally to sins or transgressions.

With this petition Jesus instructs the disciples to link their desire for forgiveness with their readiness to forgive others. Because God freely bestows his forgiveness, Jesus expects his disciples to do likewise. So in praying this petition, we not only ask God’s forgiveness, we also challenge ourselves to imitate God’s generosity. If we fail to forgive others, we cannot expect God to forgive us.

The petition “lead us not into temptation” (Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4) promotes the belief that God controls the course of events. The Greek word for “temptation” can also be translated as “trial.” Thus, on the one hand this petition requests protection against daily temptations that can undercut our relationship with God; it also asks deliverance from an intense crisis in which we might be called to put our lives on the line for God.

In Matthew 6:13, an additional petition highlights another dimension of the struggle to remain faithful to God: “Deliver us from evil.” The Greek expression here for “evil” can also be translated as “the evil one.” If evil is defined simply as “the lack of due good,” it is not as threatening as the evil personified by Satan — evil that is sinister, that can scheme and maneuver.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray in private and to avoid making a public display of piety. He teaches them that the Our Father is a privileged means of communicating with God and that it challenges them to trust fully in their Father’s care.

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Bible helps us hear answers to prayer

By Dan Luby/CNS

In the silent circle of elderly residents, eyes are closed, voices stilled. The visiting Hospice chaplain starts the CD. Singer/songwriter Jesse Manibusan’s musical prayer cascades over them: “Open my eyes, Lord, help me to see your face. Open my ears, Lord, help me to hear.”

“When you open your eyes,” the chaplain says, “try to see the face of Jesus on the faces of the people around you. When we begin to read and discuss the Scriptures, remember that we are hearing the voice of God.”

Most people who try to take prayer seriously realize that an important part of it is talking to God: naming hopes and fears, giving thanks, asking for what is needed, invoking blessings on others.

Many struggle, however, with the conversation’s other side, listening to God. We tend to think that God speaks clearly only to the world’s Mother Teresas and Archbishop Romero.

That’s where the Bible comes in. In its stories and poetry, its law codes and hymns of praise, we are assured of hearing the very word of God.

Although there are lots of different ways to pray with the Bible, many people find it helpful to have a clear, simple structure for reflection and prayer in a group.

First, the Scripture passage is proclaimed aloud, clearly and slowly. Listeners note words or phrases that strike them. Without discussion, they share some of their responses, and the passage is proclaimed again. One member then offers a short presentation on the passage’s background

and context, often using one of the readily available Catholic commentaries as a resource.

Participants then are asked to “name the good news” — to reflect on and discuss how this passage brings God’s loving mercy to light. Next they share a challenge, acknowledging the cost of discipleship. Together they explore the implications of all this, often committing themselves to some specific action in response. They conclude with shared prayer.

This simple structure can be adapted for individual prayer as well, in the spirit of the ancient prayer practice called *lectio divina* (“sacred — or divine — reading”).

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