

The Prayer Jesus Taught Us: Our Father

Fr Ugo Vanni

Preface by Pope Francis

NOTES ON PRAYER

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Foreword

“For whatever other words we may say – whether the desire of the person praying go before the words, and employ them in order to give definite form to its [the prayer’s] requests, or come after them, and concentrate attention upon them, that it may increase in fervour – if we pray rightly, and as becomes our wants, we say nothing but what is already contained in the Lord’s Prayer. And whoever says in prayer anything which cannot find its place in that gospel prayer, is praying in a way which, if it be not unlawful, is at least not spiritual; and I know not how carnal prayers can be lawful, since it becomes those who are born again by the Spirit to pray in no other way than spiritually”.

These words of St Augustine (*Letter 130*, 12, 22) allow us to grasp the profound meaning of the prayer of the *Our Father*. Jesus could not have imparted to His disciples any prayer other than this, a synthesis of His entire Gospel. Over the centuries the Church has referred to it in various ways: “Prayer of the Lord’s Day”, “the Lord’s

Prayer”. For Christians, it remains simply the *Our Father*, the prayer that Jesus Himself has taught us. Far from any formula, here lies the heart of the relationship with God and what the Christian experiences in the depths of his heart. This is the prayer of the individual believer and of the whole Church, which experiences in this way the perennial presence of the life-giving Spirit.

It is no accident that the first text after the writings of the New Testament, the Didaché, should dwell on the *Our Father*, instructing the first believers that this prayer is to be recited “three times a day” (VIII, 2). In its catechetical simplicity, the book highlights that in the crucial moments that mark the Christian’s day, the *Our Father* remains the essential point of reference.

As we know, Pope Francis has asked that the year immediately preceding the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025 be dedicated to prayer. This has led among other things to the creation of a simple series, entitled “Notes on Prayer” to indicate that speech or writing about prayer can only outline some of its aspects. The mystery of prayer endures, the cargo deep within it proving unfathomable. After all, who could presume to exhaust the essence of prayer, which always remains a privileged action of the Holy Spirit who comes to the aid of each one’s weakness, as the apostle reminds us (cf. *Rom* 8:26)?

Among these “Notes”, a text introducing the *Our Father* could not be left out. There are many commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer, and they span the two thousand years

of our history. From Tertullian to Pope Francis, it is possible to produce an extensive review that highlights the permanent interest in this prayer, which persists in its uniqueness. I chose the text that in his day I had asked of a friend and colleague, Fr Ugo Vanni to write. I remember the circumstances perfectly. I had been tasked with preparing a commentary on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that would be published within a few months. The congregation for doctrine had sent me the drafts of the text in its first French edition. In a few days I managed to put together a team of professors, most of them colleagues from the Gregorian, who immediately went to work.

I also knocked on the door of Fr Vanni, who welcomed me with his good-natured and sincere smile. Fr Ugo was a true man of God. A profound teacher and a very fatherly priest. He knew how to convey fellow feeling and trust in a natural manner, without pretence or clerical attitudes. He possessed a humanity that allowed his goodness to shine through, and lived a spirituality that opened the hearts of those who turned to him for sure guidance. I asked Fr Vanni if he could write a commentary on the *Our Father*, the last chapter of the *Catechism*. The look he gave me was one of surprise. Then he said, “Don Rino, if it’s you that’s asking, I can’t say no...but I’ll confess that it’s quite a challenge”.

So it was that Fr Vanni wrote his beautiful commentary on the *Our Father*. He managed to combine exegesis with

your prayer” (*Demonstrations* 4, 14). In other words: the prayer of the *Our Father* asks that God’s will be done, but this must be sought in prayer that is turned into action. To return to the thoughts of Bishop Aphrahat: “Let man do God’s will, and this will be prayer” (*Demonstrations* 4, 16). In short, prayer does not detract from the tasks of everyday life but supports them and indicates the path to follow.

+ RINO FISICHELLA

Introduction

The *Our Father* was born and took shape in the experience of the early Church, so it could be enlightening to revisit its origin and early development. That is what we propose, but let us be more specific.

We find at the beginning of the second century, the “Lord’s Prayer” already in use in a formulation corresponding to the current one, in the liturgy of the early Church (cf. *Didaché*, 8, 3), where the “quadriform” gospel also began to be read, the gospel, that is, according to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The concurrence of the use of the Lord’s Prayer and the reading of the four gospels is significant. It constitutes the arrival point of the journey of a manifold tradition, which developed amid various events and tensions – one could simply think of the tensions within the Pauline and Johannine Churches – and culminated in the second century in what has been called “the great Church”.

What is the journey that the Lord’s Prayer made in the tradition that merged into the great Church? More

specifically, given that the Lord's Prayer has been seen as the synthesis of the whole gospel (Tertullian), what is its specific relationship with the "quadriform gospel"?

An answer to this question will allow us to identify the theological-biblical structure underlying the Lord's Prayer, and to situate it in the living environment of the early Church. This will give us a framework of reference, and as a result we will see first the antecedents in Mark, then the systematic presentation of Matthew, Paul's push forward, the accentuation of Luke, and, finally, the mature synthesis found in John.