

MISSION: Prayer 6 “Talking To God”

Words are powerful. The old adage "the pen is mightier than the sword" is assuredly true. Words can start wars, ensure peace, or get my dog to roll over ... sometimes. Words can even create relationships. Unless you used one of those "check this box if you'll marry me" notes, one simple word - "yes" - signals an engagement. Two not-so-simple words - "yes, dear" - ensure a happy marriage.

Of course, it's God himself who really proves the power of words. In the beginning he "spoke, and it came to be" (Ps 33:9). Starting with "let there be light," the whole universe came into existence simply through the power of God's words. That's some pretty impressive speech.

In the New Testament we discover even more about the power behind God's words. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). Not only that, but "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). In other words, the Word is a person. It's Jesus Christ, the Creator and Redeemer of the whole world. He is the Word. And we are created in his image (see Gn 1:26-27).

Chitchat

People are talkers. All over the world millions upon millions of conversations are taking place right this moment. In just about any public place aside from a library or cemetery the din of voices is the dominant feature. To converse is human. And in this regard, some people are more human than others.

I once asked my brother-in-law, to say a blessing over a family meal at my house. Having prayed publicly on many occasions, he's quite eloquent. On this day, however, his abilities were not appreciated by my two-year-old neice. Being used to the traditional "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts" prayer, she lost patience forty-five seconds into my brother-in-law's longish, "from the hip" prayer. Upon his taking a breath, she cried out, "Amen!" effectively signaling the beginning of the meal.

Long prayers are one thing, but all too often we talk about the wrong kinds of things in general conversation. Gossip and slander, for example, are two things God can't stand (see Rom 1:29 and Ps 101:5). A lying tongue is an "abomination," and you deceive yourself if you think you're religious but can't "bridle" your tongue, says the Bible (see Prv 6:16-17 and Jas 1:26). James goes so far as to warn,

"The tongue is a fire ... staining the whole body" if we're not careful (Jas 3:6). One careless whisper can destroy a friendship or someone's reputation. Worse yet, words can destroy your relationship with God.

Even so, talking is essential to how people relate to one another. Words are essential to communicating thought. Unless it's early morning on a school day, my kids don't just stare at me hoping I'll understand when they want more milk or cereal. Before they can even form coherent words, children attempt to communicate through sounds. It's natural. Replete with lungs, vocal chords, and (big) mouths, we have the God-given ability to express ourselves in a physical way. We aren't pure spirits like angels. Nor are we bumps on a log with no spiritual soul. We are a combo platter of body and spirit with the God-given ability to communicate externally. And the person with whom we most need to speak is God.

Forms of Prayer

Vocal prayer, the kind with which most of us are familiar, is a vital part of our relationship with God. There are several different forms vocal prayer can take. The *Catechism* lists adoration as the first kind of prayer because it acknowledges that we are creatures before our Creator and "exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us" (2628; see Ps 95:1-6). Adoration is due to God alone because only he made us and sets us free from evil.

While adoration has pride of place, when most of us think of prayer, the first kind that comes to mind is petition. That's because it seems we're always asking God for something. In truth, we have to. If man hadn't fallen, says Spiritan priest and author Father Edward Leen, "our utterances would mainly consist of words of praise and adoration and worship." But as it is, "all our dealings with God must have a background of pleading in them."¹⁸ Only God can give us what we need.

When things aren't going so well, we turn to another kind of prayer - intercession - which is done on behalf of another person. Intercessory prayer is really powerful because it "leads us to pray as Jesus did" (CCC 2634). In other words, it's a twofer, helping us because we're acting like Christ, and helping the other person for whom we're praying. Intercession is so important that the Holy Spirit himself "intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Rom 8:26) - which sounds like an effective way to clear a seat or two in a crowded adoration chapel.

If our priorities are straight, thanksgiving, a third kind of vocal prayer, should be one of our most natural forms. After all, God is good and offers us salvation even

though we deserve death. That's something to be thankful for in my opinion. And he gives us many more reasons to be thankful in this life as well, beginning with the Eucharist. Every Eucharistic liturgy is a "sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father" (CCC 1360). Indeed, *eucharistia*, the Greek word from which we get "Eucharist," means "thanksgiving."

Praise, the last form of vocal prayer mentioned in the *Catechism*, recognizes that "God is God," and gives him glory simply for who he is (see 2639). We especially like to praise people after they've done something good. (Toddlers undergoing potty-training are the most praised people on earth.) But God is worthy of praise simply by virtue of being God. Progress in prayer always entails the prayer of praise. It's foundational. In fact, it "embraces the other forms of prayer and carries them toward" God (CCC 2639).

The Bible Tells Me So

If you've ever perused the Bible for any length of time, you've probably noticed vocal prayer is everywhere. Their last encounter wasn't exactly an International Coffee moment, but Adam and Eve talked with God in the Garden of Eden. Noah and God spent a fair bit of time conversing about the weather. Abraham even tried to negotiate fire insurance for Sodom and Gomorrah with God (but the premium was too expensive). This kind of thing happens throughout the Old Testament. Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, and many others speak with God about all kinds of stuff.

Of course, in the New Testament, people didn't stop praying. Numerous stories of the apostles, Our Lady, St. Paul, and many others praying or referring to prayer abound. On the eve of Pentecost, the beginning of the Church, many "with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14). And they didn't stop once the Spirit came. Acts tells us the three thousand new converts "held steadfastly to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers" (2:42). Jesus had taught them well.

When you read through the Gospels, you simply can't escape the great importance Christ placed on prayer. Right before all the big events of his life - choosing the apostles, the Transfiguration, and his Passion, to name but a few - he's talking it over with his Father. While still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that "according to the testimony of Holy Scripture, the center of the life and person of Jesus is his constant communication with the Father."

Now ask yourself this. If talking with God was so critical to all the important characters in the Bible, not to mention the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, how important should it be to us? Yep. Really, *really* important. So let's delve into a little more detail about this "essential element of the Christian life" (CCC 2701).

Straight from the Heart

Since we are a union of body and soul, it's important to remember that vocal prayer isn't just a physical exercise. You can flap your yap all you want, but if your words aren't coming from the heart you're not praying. Even Mr. Golden Tongue himself, St. John Chrysostom, said, "Whether or not our prayer is heard depends not on the number of words, but on the fervor of our souls" (CCC 2700).

Vocal prayer must be an expression of our interior life. One of the reasons the Psalms are so powerful is that their author is letting it all hang out: "I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping" (6:6). This guy (King David) obviously had some serious problems. Perhaps a few sessions with a good counselor or spiritual director might have been in order. Regardless, he didn't hold back from telling God exactly how he felt. One of the lessons we can learn from David and others is that sometimes our vocal prayers are too sanitary or weak. We hold back, thinking this or that issue wouldn't be proper to talk about with God. I'm not saying we should treat God as a gossip partner or blithely discuss immorality with him in prayer, but we need to remember just who he is. He is the God who gave us life. He is the God who knows exactly who we are and what he wants us to be. He is the God who is our Father.

Father God

Prayer isn't simply the conversation of a created person with the Creator. It is the personal "conversation of a child with its heavenly Father," says the great abbot and spiritual writer Blessed Columba Marmion. We can't forget we remain creatures, but God gave us the dignity of being part of his family through his Son. Because of his Incarnation, Passion, death and resurrection, we now relate to God through Jesus Christ. This understanding is a must if we are going to comprehend prayer.

And when we say that "God is Father," we're not making an analogy. As I previously noted, God isn't *like* a family, he isn't *like* a father. It's who he is. It's his personal name, his identity. My name is Dave. It's who I am. Well, God is Father. It's who he is. Jesus shows us that "Father" is God's name by virtue of his own identity as "Son." But he also explicitly reveals the Father as such. He told his disciples to baptize converts "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

Referencing Pope Benedict XVI, theologian Scott Hahn points out that while we have all kinds of other titles for God like "Creator," "Lawgiver," and "Physician," those titles only apply after he has created, given the law, and healed people. But he is "Father forever, because He eternally generates the Son, and together they breathe forth the Spirit, the bond of their love." Put simply, there was never a time when he was not Father.

Why am I putting such emphasis upon God's fatherhood? Because Jesus did. He calls God "Father" seventeen times in the Sermon on the Mount alone. Blessed Columba Marmion said that God's fatherhood is the fundamental dogma which precludes all others.²² In other words, everything we believe starts with the understanding that God is our Father ... which presents some challenges.

Grasping God as Father is difficult for a lot of people because, let's face it, human fathers are just that - human. Even dads who take their paternity seriously make mistakes. Speaking as the father of five children (so far), I can tell you I fall flat on my fatherly face every day in dealings with my little rug rats. But God isn't like me, or any other human father. In fact, the *Catechism* tells us he is more *unlike* human fathers than like them, and we had better be careful not to think otherwise. "God our Father transcends the categories of the created world. To impose our own ideas in this area 'upon him' would be to fabricate idols to adore or pull down" (CCC 2779).

God's fatherhood is different because he isn't an earthly father. He is "Our Father who art in heaven" (Mt 6:9). To understand the depth of his love for us, his family, we have to stop imposing our false notions of father upon him. Many people endure seriously wounded relationships with their earthly fathers, or perhaps no relationship at all, so this is really hard. But it doesn't do God justice to equate him with those who might have failed us. And doing so keeps us from recognizing who we are in Christ Jesus - true children of God who can address the Father with all the familiarity of the Son. That's why the most perfect prayer ever designed is the one Jesus taught us, the Our Father.

The Perfect Prayer

Every Christian knows the Our Father by heart. At least I thought so until I realized my two-year-old niece thought it ended with "deliver us from Nemo." Continuing the tradition a few years later, my three-year-old son thought it was "deliver us from people." (Both translations have their merits.)

Whether or not all the words are always said correctly by children or adults, it remains the most famous vocal prayer in the world, and it was given to us by Christ himself. In the Gospel of Luke, a disciple rolls up to Jesus and simply says, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1). So Jesus obliges. And this wasn't some spontaneous, thrown-together prayer designed to make him look good in front of his followers, which is what I would probably do. Rather, this prayer is the key to worshiping the Father in "spirit and truth." It's the secret to holiness that teaches us who God really is; his will, his love, his mercy, and how we're supposed to treat others.

The Lord's Prayer is the centerpiece of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and a summary of the whole Gospel. As St. Augustine said, search all the prayers of the Bible and "I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer" (CCC 2762).

Not only does it sum up the Gospel, it does what the disciple requested - teaches us to pray. St. Thomas Aquinas said, "This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them" (CCC 2763). So let's take a little lesson in vocal prayer from the Master himself.

The first thing to note is the Our Father is made up of seven petitions that can be divided into two parts: those directed toward God, and those directed toward us and our needs. The direction of the petitions, starting with God, forces us to start where we are unaccustomed, outside ourselves. It turns our fallen, "natural" priorities upside down and reorients us to God.

The Lord's Prayer is unique because the Divine Son himself gave it to us and it is the prayer of God, but it is also the prayer of Jesus' human heart, which he shares with the rest of us. In other words, it's a perfect prayer bridge from humanity to divinity. And Jesus gives us not only the words, but the Spirit, to pray them. Praying in and through Jesus guarantees that our prayer gets to God, because he is "the one Word [God] always hears" (CCC 2769).

We Dare to Say: Our Father, Who Art in Heaven

I once heard Fr. Michael Scanlan, tell the story of a Muslim man he invited to attend Mass at the school. After watching the students move through the Communion lines and receive Our Lord in the Eucharist, the Muslim stated, "There's no way they actually believe that is God." More than a little surprised, Father Scanlan asked, "Why not?" "Because if they did, they would be crawling on their faces toward him," he responded.

What disturbed this Muslim, and has shocked many others, too, is the primary idea of the Lord's Prayer we've already discussed - God's fatherhood. How dare we be so familiar with the Almighty God who created everything? But that's the scandal of the Gospel. We are created to be part of the family of God in a real way. We don't just get a legal name change when we're initiated into the family through the sacraments. It's a *divine* adoption. We become what we were made to be. It's a whole new identity in Jesus Christ. This is real!

Of course, it's sometimes hard to grasp how he is "Our Father" in "heaven," totally beyond us in glory and honor and majesty, and yet with us at the same time. But he is. Every dad knows it's impossible to father from a distance. Our Father in heaven is always close by. He always hears our cry, "Abba! Father!"

Hallowed Be Thy Name

Every year, fathers all over the world receive new ties, mugs, and cards in celebration of Father's Day. Mostly celebrated on the third Sunday of June, it's a day devoted to honoring the tough job of being a dad. I find it apropos that it is generally celebrated on the Lord's Day since our human fathers are an earthly image of our heavenly Father. In Germany, it's actually celebrated on Ascension Thursday.

So I ask, if earthly fathers deserve to be so honored, how much more our heavenly Father? That's what "hallowing" is all about. It means we give God glory and honor and praise in a way no one else deserves. But it's still kind of funny we're the ones "hallowing," or blessing, the name of God. After all, we're the creatures and he's the Creator, right? We can't make God's name any more holy than it already is. So what's going on here?

The *Catechism* indicates that this petition is primarily expressing our desire to be holy through him. Through the sacraments we have become part of him. Baptized into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we now bear the same name. We're really a part of his family, "immersed in the innermost mystery of his Godhead" (2807). In this petition, we're asking God to make us worthy of his name, to make us holy through his grace and love because we can't do it without him (Rv 15:4). That's it in a nutshell. That's why our petition to be holy "embodies all the others" of the Lord's Prayer (see CCC 2815).

Thy Kingdom Come

We have a room in my house called the "pink room," so called because of the carpeting. Before you begin questioning my manhood, allow me to explain. First of all, the technical color of the carpet is "dusty rose." (Yeah, that still doesn't work for me.) Second and more important, my little girls insisted we leave the pink carpet in place after moving in. Neutral colors were of no interest to them.

Piled high in one corner of our "pink room" is a mountain of princess dresses. Chiffon, velvet, lace, they all converge in a menagerie of royal girl-ness. It's all good until they dress up your only boy in so much purple velvet he resembles a living Infant of Prague. The simple fact is they love to be princesses, and in the years to come (I'm hoping thirty or so), they'll start longing for princes.

The point is that even in an age of republics and democracies the idea of kings, queens, princes, and princesses never really fades. And Christ uses the language of "kingdom" in his prayer. In fact, this kingdom is the primary theme of his entire ministry on earth as he refers over and over to "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven."

In the historical sense, when Israel first became God's people, he was their king. But as time went by, they rejected God as ruler and demanded a human king like the other nations (see 1 Sm 8:5). God finally gave them what they wanted, which, after a false start with Saul, eventually led to the kingdom of David. It was the high point of Israel's history. God actually swore a covenant with David, a man after his own heart, promising David his son would be God's son and that David's kingdom would last forever (see Acts 13:22; 2 Sm 7:8-16). Though David's historical kingdom is the longest unbroken line of dynastic succession, it eventually was conquered and fell apart. So when it all went kaput, it appeared that God had broken his "forever" promise. Of course, God doesn't lie. His oath to David was eventually fulfilled in his Son, Jesus Christ.

In the very first verse of the New Testament, Matthew begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David." In other words, Jesus is of the royal line of David.

He's the heir to the throne. He was even born in the same city as King David - Bethlehem (which interestingly means "house of bread"). And as we said, his ministry was based on proclaiming that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3:2). Through Christ, God has come to lead his people again. Even so, the Kingdom isn't fully here, though it's "been coming since the Last Supper," states

the *Catechism*, "and, in the Eucharist, it is in our midst" (2816).

When we pray "Thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer, we're asking for his kingdom to be made completely manifest. We're praying for our King, who was made flesh for our sake, to return in all his glory and reunite his kingdom.

Thy Will Be Done

This petition goes back to the discussion we had earlier about grace and freedom. God is unchangeable, and his will is going to be accomplished one way or the other. We can either accept it, a choice that leads to happiness, or reject it, a choice that leads to misery. It's that simple.

Still, I know some of you continue asking, "If it's ultimately going to happen one way or the other, why bother to pray?" As noted previously, part of the answer is that we don't totally understand the dynamic of prayer. God is unchangeable, and his will is going to be done one way or the other. But just as there are many ways to arrive at a particular destination, God's will can come to fruition in any number of ways. He is constantly working around our mistakes or capitalizing on our faithfulness. Prayer is part of that faithfulness.

Another aspect bears mentioning again. Prayer is the way God desires to communicate with his children. We are the children. God is the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving Father. Assuming he is the one who needs to bend to our will is the wrong perspective. It's basically saying God doesn't know what he's doing. The value of prayer is its power to conform us to God's perfect will. Why would we want to change perfection? Praying "Thy will be done" gives us grace to accept his will and the strength to follow it.

Recall that the point of this life is to be like Jesus Christ, who humbly gave himself over to the will of the Father, praying, "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Lk 22:42). By praying for God's will, we aren't resigning ourselves to an outcome over which we have no control. Rather, we're acting like children who trust their Father in heaven to always do what's best for them.

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

For a long time, this petition seemed to me to be a bit impertinent. Who am I to demand something from the God of the universe? It wasn't until I recognized my place as a true child of God that I could start to pray this petition with confidence. As Father, he promises to take care of all my needs, which I find pretty comforting. Of course, this doesn't mean we can sit around all day playing video games or

watching soap operas while eating coconut bonbons. An old saying often attributed to St. Ignatius Loyola tells us to "pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you." And our prayers are not to solely revolve around our needs. We are God's hands and feet, so we must be instruments of God's provision for others who are in need.

But this petition isn't solely about material needs. At its heart lies a request for the "bread of life," the "medicine of immortality," the Eucharist, "without which we have no life within us" (Jn 6:35; CCC 2837). We also often overlook the fact that we're asking for "daily bread." Not so St. Ambrose:

But if it is "daily" bread, then why do you take it so infrequently? Take daily what will help you daily. And live so that you deserve to receive it daily. He who does not deserve to receive it daily does not deserve to receive it once a year.²⁴

And Forgive Us Our Trespases, As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us

If I ever find my mind drifting off when praying the Our Father, this petition is the one that jolts me back to reality. We're basically saying, "God, don't forgive us unless we forgive everybody else who has ticked us off, stabbed us in the back, taken our stuff, or in any other manner wronged us." Yikes.

Don't forget, one of the primary ways we love God is through loving others. It's part two of Jesus' command to love God and love neighbor. If we can't open our hearts to forgive those who have harmed us, we can't be open to receive God's love either. There's no doubt this is hard, but it's not impossible. In asking God to forgive us, an exercise in humility, he gives graces to help us forgive others. God's cool that way. He knows we can't do it on our own, so he's constantly giving us help as he calls us to greater holiness.

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

This petition seems a bit odd at first blush, doesn't it? Why in the world would God lead us into temptation? That doesn't sound right! Relax. He doesn't. That's Satan's job. Even so, the Greek is a little hard to translate into English in a way that conveys the original meaning. To help provide context, the Letter of James says, "Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one" (1:13). Jesus himself warned, "Woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!" (Mt 18:7). Okay. So what's the deal with this petition?

Remember that God made us free, but freedom is a two-edged sword. On one

hand, it allows us to freely give our love to God. On the other hand, it opens us up to temptation. We're not robots, so there are going to be times when we're faced with choosing either for God or against God. He doesn't create the temptation, but he permits it. Why?

It's kind of like that old saying, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I never really liked that, because it meant whatever I was dealing with could actually kill me; never a pleasant option. But the truth is, when tempted we come face-to-face with our weaknesses. We experience our total dependence upon God because we can't overcome it without him. And that's the beautiful thing in all of this. "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13).

But be careful not to deliberately put yourself in a situation where you could fall into sin. Just because trial and temptation provide opportunities for growth and God permits them, we shouldn't seek them out. You'll have plenty of opportunities to be tested without seeking them. That's why we pray "lead us not into temptation."

But Deliver Us from Evil

In the final petition of the Our Father, we're not simply praying against evil in general. We're praying directly against the Evil One. We're basically asking God to keep the devil from throwing us any curveballs that would cause us to strike out and head to the spiritual bench. We need this petition, because while we know the final outcome has been decided through Christ, the devil still "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

Finally, note that the entire Our Father is in the first person plural. It's not just you and God. We're praying to "our" Father for "us." We're praying with the rest of the Church, the rest of the Body of Christ, because we're all connected. That's why vocal prayer is used so frequently in the liturgy. It allows us to communicate with God as one voice. And when you're doing it correctly, with your heart fully engaged, vocal prayer can actually become meditation and contemplation.