

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 20: The Words That Jesus Gave Us

If there is any prayer that could be called the model Christian prayer, it would surely be the Our Father. We call it the Lord's Prayer, because it was given by Jesus to the disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray.

This is a prayer that has been used by Christians ever since, often several times a day. Early Christian writers speak of praying the Lord's Prayer every morning, at midday and every night. It has been the constant companion of Christians for two thousand years.

Since the early centuries of the Church's history, this prayer has also been used as part of our immediate preparation for receiving Communion. There are several aspects of the prayer that make it particularly appropriate for this part of the Mass.

First, of course, is the fact that this prayer prays for our daily bread. While this means more than just the Eucharist, it naturally calls to mind the Lord's gift of his body and blood as our food and drink. Second, it speaks of the forgiveness that enables the community to be reconciled with one another just as we are reconciled with God. Third, this prayer is addressed to Our Father, reminding us that we are one family in Christ as we come to share at the table of the Lord.

When this prayer first became part of the Mass, it was commonly said after the breaking of the bread. Near the beginning of the seventh century, Pope St. Gregory the Great moved it to its current position because he saw it as closely linked to the Eucharistic Prayer. It echoes the concerns of the Eucharistic Prayer that God be praised, that God's kingdom might come, and that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. Making this prayer our own can be a way of expressing some of the implications of our Amen to the Eucharistic Prayer.

Some people have become accustomed to holding hands during this prayer to express our unity. Others have learned to raise their hands in prayer. Neither gesture is prescribed in the official books, nor is either forbidden. Perhaps one of these locally developing trends will lead someday to a formal rubric in the liturgy.

The final petition of the prayer has long been expanded to ask for peace. This expansion, called the embolism, is followed by the acclamation "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours ..." The Byzantine Rite, one of the Eastern rites of the Church, normally concludes the Lord's Prayer with this acclamation, as do many of our brothers and sisters in other Christian churches. It seems to have been added to the prayer originally so that it would end on a more positive note than "deliver us from evil."

We say this prayer so often that it is good for us now and then to make a conscious effort to think about what we are saying. It is a prayer that challenges us to work for the things we pray for—to remember that we are one family, to make God's name holy, to work for the kingdom, to do God's will, to share our daily bread, to forgive as we are forgiven and to struggle against evil. It is a good prayer to pray several times a day.