



The Lord's Prayer in Worship

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AS IS COMMONLY KNOWN, THE LORD'S PRAYER IS FOUND TWICE IN THE GOSPELS—in Matt 6:9-13 in a longer form, where it is offered as a model for prayer and introduced by Jesus with the command “Pray then in this way,” and in Luke 11:1-4 in a shorter and perhaps more primitive form, where it is set forth as the distinctive Christian prayer and introduced by Jesus in response to a request from his disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” To the text in Matthew many early manuscripts add a concluding doxology, an indication that it was soon put to liturgical use.

The prayer itself is typically Jewish in its formulation: it moves from the praise of God to supplication, beginning with the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's reign or kingdom, and the accomplishment of God's will, and then going on to ask for “daily bread,” the forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from the time of trial and from evil (or more probably, from the evil one). Its distinctive feature is its address to God as “Abba,” “our Father.” It is a prayer entirely appropriate for those whom Jesus has brought into his own relationship with God, giving them the boldness (*παρρησία*) to approach God as Father—hence the wording of the introduction provided in the eucharist of the Roman rite, “We are bold to say.”

The prayer is primarily eschatological in its orientation: we might note in particular the petition for the coming of God's kingdom and that for deliverance from the time of trial and from the evil one. The petition for daily bread is difficult to interpret, for the word customarily translated “daily” (*ἐπιούσιον*) is unknown

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elsewhere in Greek, and its meaning is uncertain. Early Christian authors such as Origen and Jerome understood it to mean “supersubstantial”; more probably, it means “bread for the coming [day],” perhaps another eschatological reference, alluding to the messianic banquet. If this is the case, early Christian authors are justified in seeing it as a reference to the eucharistic bread as a foretaste of the messianic banquet and treating it as an especially fitting preparation for communion. We find this interpretation in such eastern commentators on the eucharist as Cyril of Jerusalem and the patriarch Germanos.

Christian tradition has regarded it as a prayer that sums up all our petitions, appropriate for all occasions. From the time of the *Didache* (late first or early second century), the Lord's Prayer has held a privileged place among Christian prayers. As adult candidates were prepared for baptism, the Lord's Prayer was “handed over” and expounded to them along with the creed as an integral part of their catechesis; in some traditions they were expected to “return” it (recite it publicly) before they were baptized. The Gelasian Sacramentary provides a formulary for this introduction of the Lord's Prayer to candidates for baptism. By the later middle ages, candidates for baptism were infants; we frequently find their godparents instructed at the administration of baptism that they are to teach their godchildren the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. The sixteenth-century reformers, with their emphasis on edification, retained this expectation and used the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments as the basis for their catechisms. The third section of Luther's Small Catechism is an instruction on the Lord's Prayer, and the seventh section includes the Lord's Prayer in daily morning and evening prayers for the household. Similarly the final section of the original catechism of the *Book of Common Prayer* was devoted to the Lord's Prayer.

The prayers that have come down to us in the liturgical tradition are usually presidential prayers, that is, they are reserved to the ordained and are their particular “liturgy” in public worship. But the Lord's Prayer may be offered by any Christian and for this reason has held a special place in both private devotion and public worship.

I. THE LORD'S PRAYER AS PREPARATION FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP

In the early centuries the Lord's Prayer came to be used as private preparation for public worship, preparation that at first was offered silently but eventually might become part of the public service. We find both usages in editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* through 1928: before the bishop or priest begins the celebration of the eucharist, it is suggested that he say the Lord's Prayer silently; at Morning and Evening Prayer, on the other hand, the Lord's Prayer has been part of the public preparation before the office proper. This reflects western Christian usage. Most eastern traditions have similar usages—the Lord's Prayer is said by the reader in the preparatory devotions before the morning and evening office and be-

fore the eucharist in the Byzantine tradition. The practice in other eastern traditions is similar.

II. THE LORD'S PRAYER IN THE DAILY OFFICE

The earliest reference that we have to the daily prayer of Christians is found in the *Didache*, a document which probably dates to the late first or early second century. Here Christians are instructed to pray three times a day, reciting the Lord's Prayer. When such devotions became public worship, presidential prayers frequently replaced the Lord's Prayer. But early monasticism was a lay movement, and in daily worship the monks frequently had no ordained officiant to offer the presidential prayers. In the place of these prayers, they used the Lord's Prayer, often together with the *Kyrie eleison*—the people's response in diaconal litanies. This is perhaps the origin of the western custom of including at the end of daily services a threefold *Kyrie* and the Lord's Prayer. At Rome, a similar custom developed, because in the early Roman tradition the presidential prayers at the conclusion of the office were reserved for the pope or his delegate. In the absence of such a person to officiate, the Lord's Prayer was used in place of the presidential collect. The Lord's Prayer proved so popular that even when presidential prayers were restored to the daily office, the Lord's Prayer was retained as part of the *Preces* (verses and responses used as prayers).

III. THE LORD'S PRAYER AT THE EUCHARIST

We find no reference to the use of the Lord's Prayer at the eucharist before the fourth century. When it was introduced to the eucharist, the Lord's Prayer was understood as a communion devotion, because the petition for daily bread was understood to refer to communion. Initially it therefore immediately preceded communion, but in the Byzantine tradition it was eventually placed before the breaking of the bread, and Pope Gregory the Great explains in a letter why the same custom is followed at Rome:

The Lord's Prayer we say straight after the eucharistic prayer (*prex*) for this reason, that it was the custom of the Apostles to consecrate the sacrifice of the offering by this prayer (*oratio*) alone, and indeed it seems inappropriate to me that we should say a prayer (*prex*) over the offering which a scholar had composed, and that we should not say over his body and blood the prayer our Saviour composed and handed down to us. But the Lord's Prayer (*oratio*) is said by the whole people among the Greeks, and among us by the sacred minister alone.¹

Although many of the sixteenth-century reformers altered the place of the Lord's Prayer, recent revisions have usually restored it to its traditional place in the rite.

¹Gregory to John of Syracuse (A.D. 598), *Ep.* 9.26, cited in Gordon P. Jeanes, *The Origins of the Roman Rite* (Bramcote, Nottingham, England: Grove, 1991) 48-49.

IV. THE USE OF THE LORD'S PRAYER AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR OTHER PRAYERS

In the middle ages in the west, worship remained in Latin after this ceased to be the language of ordinary people, so that services became increasingly unintelligible to ordinary lay people. To compensate for this loss, they were frequently instructed to use the Lord's Prayer as a substitute for texts that they did not know. This custom lies at the root of many traditional devotions. People might be instructed to say the Lord's Prayer at each of the hours of prayer. Lay brothers in the Cistercian order were instructed to repeat the Lord's Prayer while the choir monks were singing the office in Latin. Another custom was to substitute the Lord's Prayer for each of the psalms of the Psalter—the "poor man's psalter" of 150 repetitions of the Lord's Prayer, which was an early form of what was later to become the rosary.²

The Lord's Prayer was used in a similar way in the middle ages in the west in the vernacular devotions inserted into the middle of the Sunday mass, which was largely unintelligible to ordinary people. Massey Shepherd describes these devotions as follows:

During the ninth century directions were drawn up in the churches north of the Alps, including England, for priests to bid their people to prayers for the living and the dead after the sermon at High Mass. In the silent interval between each bidding and the priest's collect the people were directed to say quietly, each for himself, the Lord's Prayer. The exact wording of these forms varied from church to church, but all followed a common substance of subject matter.³

After the reformation in England, this set of devotions took the form of the bidding prayer, a series of biddings by the officiant concluded by the Lord's Prayer, recited by the congregation. While bidding prayers have fallen out of general use, they remain familiar through the use of a bidding prayer in the popular Service of Lessons and Carols for Christmas each year at King's College, Cambridge—a service widely imitated in this country.

V. VARIANTS IN THE USE OF THE LORD'S PRAYER IN LITURGICAL TRADITIONS

Many liturgical traditions developed in antiquity their own distinctive ways of using the Lord's Prayer. Thus, in the Byzantine rite it is usually recited by the reader at the daily office and by the whole congregation at the eucharist; in each case the priest concludes it by adding a doxology—a trinitarian expansion of the doxology found in some manuscripts of Matthew. In the Roman tradition (which did not use the doxology), it was traditionally recited aloud by the celebrant at the eucharist and silently by the officiant at the office. The people joined in by reciting the final petition (cued by the officiant's recitation of the immediately preceding petition aloud). Benedict, however, considered the Lord's Prayer so important that

²See the entry on the rosary by J. Connelly in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 469-470.

³Massey Shepherd, *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), commentary on pages 47-48 of the prayer book.

he required the officiant to recite it aloud at lauds and vespers. In the East Syrian tradition, the Lord's Prayer was fitted out with a refrain and recited responsorially between the officiant and the congregation. In the Mozarabic tradition, the officiant recited the prayer and the people added Amen to each of clauses. While the doxology was not used in the west, the Lord's Prayer was sometimes concluded with a supplementary prayer (which liturgical scholars refer to as the embolism). In the Roman tradition, this prayer begins, "Deliver us," picking up the last petition of the Lord's Prayer. Later, the churches of the reformation generally added the Matthean doxology to the prayer.

The Lutheran and Anglican traditions retained the use of the Lord's Prayer in their services after the reformation. Besides use in public services, they also recommended its use in more informal family worship—Luther, for example, recommends use of the Lord's Prayer in the section of his *Small Catechism* devoted to morning and evening prayers. Every service in the English *Book of Common Prayer* makes use of the Lord's Prayer at least once. Perhaps the most startling use of the prayer by Martin Luther was its use during the laying on of hands in the rite which he drafted for ordination! The Reformed tradition in English-speaking countries, which developed an aversion to "rote" prayer, was more ambiguous in its approach; the more radical wing of the Reformed tradition and others in the free-church traditions at some stages of their development avoided the use of the Lord's Prayer in public worship altogether.

VI. MUSICAL SETTINGS OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

In pre-reformation traditions the Lord's Prayer was usually set to chant when used in public services. In the Roman tradition, the setting for use in the daily office was very simple—monotone with a simple inflection (a drop in pitch) on the last syllable recited by the officiant and on the last syllable of the final petition with which the people responded. At the eucharist, where the Lord's Prayer was sung by the celebrant at the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer, the tone used was a variant of the preface tone used for the eucharistic prayer.

The Lutheran and Anglican traditions continued the tradition of chanting the Lord's Prayer at choral services, adapting the Roman tones, while Reformed and free-church traditions ceased to use chant for prayers. Twentieth-century chant settings of the eucharist often include contemporary settings of the Lord's Prayer. In the last century anthem settings also became popular in American churches, sometimes becoming so popular that they entered into congregational use. Another setting that has become popular is the folk-like Caribbean setting by J. Jefferson Cleveland and Verolga Nix, found in an arrangement by Carlton Young as Hymn 271 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*. This setting uses "Hallowed be thy Name" as a refrain repeated after each phrase. Settings of the Lord's Prayer should be simple enough that the music enhances the text of the prayer rather than distracting attention from it.

The Lord's Prayer retains its appeal to Christians of all denominations today. It is the one prayer that most Christians know by heart and therefore can easily be used in ecumenical worship, although the variant forms now in use make this more difficult than one would wish. As the model for prayer offered by Jesus, it continues to retain its place as the text that sums up all Christian prayer. ⊕

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