"This meditation on the Our Father is vintage Shea: theologically astute, spiritually alert, deeply attuned to the needs and aspirations of the human heart. Anyone interested in cultivating a more intentional relationship to God should read this book."

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— Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, is president of the Oblate School of
Theology in San Antonio, Texas

# To Dare the Our Father

*A Transformative Spiritual Practice*

John Shea

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*To All*

*Who have prayed the Our Father*

*Who are praying the Our Father*

*Who will pray the Our Father*

# Contents

**PREFACE**

# A Personal Preface

This is *not* a book about the Our Father/Lord's Prayer (two titles for the same set of words). It is a book about praying the Our Father/Lord's Prayer so that it transforms how we think, will, feel, and act. These transformations open us to the ultimate Source of life, facilitate the flow of Spirit in and through us, and enable us to carry out the agenda of the prayer. Although praying the Our Father is commonplace Christian fare, praying it as a transformative spiritual practice is a more challenging undertaking.

The traditional invitation to the Our Father—"We dare to say"—is correct.[1] This prayer is a series of spiritual and social imperatives. To take it on is to be initiated into a vocation that, even as it remains a mystery, demands concrete changes in consciousness and behavior. I have been praying this prayer most of my life, and it is something I continually learn to do. Although I struggle with it in innumerable ways and do not completely live up to it, I have come to accept its dare as a life companion.

## A Prayer for All Seasons

I have prayed the Our Father routinely and with great passion, in liturgical assemblies and in the anguished wakefulness of three a.m., with full-body participation and without moving my lips, in inner states of peace and in inner states of turmoil, in a slow, meditative frame of mind and rushing headlong for the last word. I have a history with this prayer, a history of confusion and clarity, of awe and boredom, of being unable to start it and being reluctant to finish it. But, most of all, my praying is an ongoing history and, with full Irish sentimentality, I hope to pray the Our Father or have it prayed for me at the hour of my death.

I grew up inundated with spiritual practices—Mass on Sunday and holy days, receiving Communion before daily Mass, monthly confession, the rosary, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, a catalog of prayers (Morning Offering, Act of Contrition, Acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity, etc.), Lenten fasting, May processions, spiritual reading, and meditation on gospel texts. As my life unfolded, I left behind many of these spiritual practices.

Practices that served me well in my youth often became the unwanted baggage of my middle years. Sometimes I dropped a spiritual practice because I realized it was reinforcing negative aspects of my personality. Sometimes I dropped a spiritual practice because its assumptions clashed with my present state of intellectual development. Sometimes a spiritual practice dropped me. I would return to it again and again, hoping to find fruit on its tree. I grieved that it was barren, and remembered past times when it filled me with spirit and love. I blamed myself and tried harder. To no avail. In the end, I had to bury it with honor.

I was relieved when I heard the Buddha's advice: you do not need to carry the canoe once you have crossed the river.

It put a positive spin on my history of shedding spiritual practices. The abandoned practices had done their work: they had helped me cross the rivers that needed crossing. They may no longer be relevant, but they had fulfilled their mission. Other practices were now needed. But whatever interpretations are brought forward to describe my on-again off-again affairs with spiritual practices, the fact is there are many abandoned canoes in my wake.

However, I did not let go of the Lord's Prayer. It is a canoe I have paddled since my youth and still do. It has survived the purification of my inherited spiritual practices, and I do not think I am alone. For many Christians, the Lord's Prayer/Our Father accompanies their lives. When they are happy or when they are sad, when they eagerly wait for a child to be born or silently stay as an elder dies, when they hear of a plane going down or attend a church going up, when they stroll alone in the woods or gather together in Christian assembly, when they are filled with gratitude or emptied by grief, when they are driven to praise or dragged to repent, they reach for the Lord's Prayer. It is a prayer they know; the familiar words are on their lips. The Our Father has become an all-purpose prayer, a prayer for all seasons.

But it is not a prayer for all seasons because it suits every occasion. It is not topical. The Christian tradition has produced a multitude of prayers for specific situations—marriages, deaths, anniversaries, graduations, weather, victories, births, homecomings, traveling, healings, sufferings, desired outcomes of all kinds, and so on. Since God is the ultimate reality who contextualizes and permeates every individual happening, human imagination and creativity calls upon God to become an actor in those situations or calls upon the human players to become aware of the presence and activity of God in those situations. The words of these prayers are situation-specific;

and some of the most gifted Christian wordsmiths have crafted beautiful and moving meditations.[2]

But the Our Father is person-specific. It identifies and strengthens the central Christian truth about the person in relationship to God and creation. This truth is always present. Although the prayer is not detailed and fine-tuned toward particular situations, it influences how we think, will, feel, and act in whatever situations we are in. This is an unsuspected relevancy. A particular situation challenges us with all its concrete pressures, and the last thing we think we need is to pray the Our Father. But if we do so with attention, the words take us down a path of insight and creativity, showing us possibilities we could not see without it. This has always been a surprise to me, but I have learned to both respect it and expect it. Remembering who we most deeply are makes the Lord's Prayer a prayer for all seasons. No matter what the season is, it is we who are experiencing it and it is we who are called to respond.

## Some of the Seasons

If you ask my wife, Anne, what the best thing is that has happened in our marriage, she will say, "Praying together." I agree, but I am not as forthcoming about it. Every night, as a prelude to sleep, we pray together the Our Father. If we are not together at the end of the day, we connect by phone to make this end-of-day ritual happen. Once we prayed the Our Father while I was at a session break in California and she was walking down a relatively deserted street in downtown Chicago. We do not sleep until the Our Father has brought us together.

We alternate phrases. If Anne begins, "Our Father," I follow with "who art in heaven," and she continues with "hallowed be thy name." We are off and running, our bed or phone connec-

tion a chapel of antiphonal prayer. When the prayer is over, we pray for all our friends and everyone in the world who is severely challenged. Connecting the Our Father to solace and betterment for all we know and know about seems right.

In 1995, my father, John, was in Lutheran General Hospital. The doctors had put him in a drug-induced coma. They hoped that would give the antibiotics time to work and check the blood infection that was coursing through his body. Although my father was eighty-two years old, they were optimistic.

My mother and I had just come from her doctor who had prescribed, at her request, some antianxiety medication. As we exited the elevator on the ninth floor of the hospital, a pastoral care person met us. I do not remember what she said. But as soon as I saw her, I knew my father was dead.

My mother and I went into the room where his body was. My older sister was already there. My father's head was back and his mouth was open. Mercifully, his eyes were closed. We stood around the bed, stared at our father and husband, and stared at one another. Cried. Instinctively, we took each other's hands and said the Our Father. My sister said, "Daddy's no longer here. Let's go."

Eleven years later, my mother, Ann, was in Oak Park Hospital. She had suffered a massive stroke. My two sisters, my wife and I, and some of our mother's grandchildren spent about a week sitting by her bedside. One night my wife and I left at about ten. We lived only three miles from the hospital. As we opened the door to our condominium, the telephone rang. I picked it up and the voice of a young woman simply said, "Miss Ann passed."

We contacted everyone and returned to the hospital. We stood around our mother's body, looked at her and one

another. Cried. We instinctively held hands and prayed the Our Father.

When I facilitated groups of faith reflection, I would often ask, "What is your favorite part of the Mass?" After someone got the easy laugh with "the end," people would be silent. They were taking time to work with some internal evaluation process. When the answers finally came, a wide range of liturgical moments was usually mentioned. The theologically appropriate and probably most correct "hearing the word of God" and "receiving Communion" were always mentioned. But so were "the Creed," "the homily (sometimes)," and "the kiss of peace." Also, a surprising contender was "saying the Our Father together."

The harder question that followed was, "Why is that your favorite part?" People were not as articulate with this question, but a common characteristic was that at their favorite part of the liturgy their participation sharpened. There was a heightened engagement, a sense that they were included in something larger and important. This response was more affective and intuitive than carefully reasoned. It was discovering a preference rather than selecting something desirable. I assume that this question would be answered in different ways at different times and, in particular, at different ages. When we are young, one way; as we age, another.

Recently, when I have asked the question of myself, I have found that the combination of the "saying the Our Father and the kiss of peace" comes to mind. The two seem to flow into one another and are part of a single movement. When I asked myself why, I found myself tracing my history with the Our Father. What I discovered was that saying the Our Father was a practice I often engaged in but usually took for granted. Doing it in a community liturgy and finding myself deeply attached

to it pushed me to reflect more on how it was working in my life. Moving toward others with peace from the consciousness of that prayer was an unfolding with which I was familiar. Something happens to me in that prayer that makes extending peace a natural and fulfilling expression.

## Praying Alone

But it is not only in interpersonal and social settings, with people I love and with members of my church community, that I pray the Our Father. I pray it alone, an interior act of saying the words slowly and with as much sustained attention as I can manage. There is an irony in talking about praying alone a prayer that begins with the word "Our." Even when we pray the Our Father in solitude, we are not alone. Our praying participates in the monastic wisdom that the monk does not have to leave his room to be present to the whole world. It is this more leisurely time with the prayer that informs and enriches the more timetabled conditions of community prayer.

Praying the Our Father with other people always moves fast. Some have called it "speed praying." It is difficult to let the words sink in and have their effect on our minds, wills, and feelings. But if we have experiences of praying it privately, we can quickly import the meanings we have discovered during private time into the speed of the social settings. So, from my experience, personal alone time and social together time are partners in the project of Christian formation through the act of praying the Our Father.

But it was in praying alone that I became aware of difficulties that eventually pushed me into a deeper relationship with the prayer. I was saying the words of the Our Father and drawing blanks, nothing going on in my mind or will or feeling and no pictures of future behaviors beckoning to me. I could

not get on board with what I was saying. Sometimes it was problems with the words and phrases. But at other times, a more structural questioning set in. I was not comfortable with the whole idea of petitioning. Requesting a transcendent and separate subject, imaged as a Father, to make things happen and give things to me and us, even when they are very desirable things and good for all, was an increasingly difficult "ask." At the time this is what I thought the words were forcing me into, a way of thinking that was increasingly less credible to me.

But at the same time, it seemed an "ask" built into me. Although my adult image thought asking for help seemed childish and unreal, my actual self was often quick to engage in it. Whenever I was in trouble, and even when I was not, I was prone to immediately recruit divine assistance. This instinct triumphed over rational resistance on a regular basis. I began to wonder if this tension would make praying the Our Father go the way of other practices. Did I need this canoe?

## Praying and Studying

These types of tension—and this is only one of them—made me realize I had to *learn* to pray the Lord's Prayer. So I began to study. After all, the Lord's Prayer is the central prayer of the Christian tradition to which I belong and from which I seek resources to live an authentic life. It deserves a long and careful look. This study has taken me down scriptural, liturgical, theological, and spiritual paths. But it is driven by more than intellectual curiosity and academic interest.

Whatever I find in study I think is valuable and resonates with something deep inside me, I bring it into my act of praying. Under the impress of these learnings, my way of praying has changed and the imaginative phrases of the prayer have taken on new meanings. A particularly strong influence has

been spiritual wisdom traditions, especially the writings of mystics and those who have been inspired by mystics. As I read them, I found they often articulated a cognitive-affective consciousness in a flurry of images and ideas. It was more abundant than precise, more a rich display than a sustained argument. Perhaps the prayer was a mystical text, seeded with a set of lures into different levels of consciousness—most importantly the mind of Christ?

This mystical guess gave me a new appreciation for the dense imagery and evocative phrases of the Lord's Prayer. Its sparseness was not a shortcoming but a way of demanding maximum engagement from those who would pray it. I never thought the Our Father was a pedestrian prayer. It had always left me with the feeling that my mind had not completely grasped what my mouth was saying. But now I began to see it as an invitation into a consciousness that was more fully developed than my normal structures of awareness. The mystery and elusiveness of the prayer was its teaching design.

But the more I entered into and entertained the mystical, the more I felt it pressured my interpersonal and social life. If these mystical appreciations were ultimate and, as ultimate, had a legitimate claim to call into question "how we do things around here," how did we measure up? So praying the Our Father became a dialogue between the mystical and the social with the surprising results that both reinforced and criticized each other.

## Persevering

I was not sure I wanted all this. But I felt to back off was to walk away from something that was quintessentially real, even if I was "in over my head." Also I suspected if I did back off, it was something that would not go away and would eventually

catch up with me. It is too dramatic to call it the "hound of heaven." But I did feel a sense of being pursued. Perhaps more apt, ala *The Godfather*, it felt like an offer I couldn't refuse. I caved and continued.

These dawning realizations caused the flow of my prayer act to slow down. I even allowed it to be interrupted and returned to, or interrupted and never returned to—at least not in the immediate prayer time in which the interruption occurred. In other words, consciousness was in the process of being altered and I was exploring its emerging perceptions and evaluating how to respond to them. I was following the thread through the labyrinth.

Praying the Our Father in this way includes pausing and reflecting when appropriate lures emerge. As such, it becomes an investigation of both hardened and flexible mental tendencies and the types of behaviors they validate. As I followed the calls in the praying, I was sent back to the act of praying with an expanded consciousness and, very often, a revised action agenda. Something was definitely afoot even if I was hard-pressed to give it a convincing name and a rationale of respectability.

In short, praying the Our Father became the way I consciously committed myself to life itself. My days were occupied with within-life dreams that were more or less realized and within-life strategies that were more or less effective. As I scrambled to get what I wanted, I brought this prayer about life itself with me. And surprisingly it had a lot to say about my dreams and strategies. It worked for me the way mountains work in spiritual literature. When we are on the mountain, we gain perspective. We see more, and we see it all interconnected. When we return to ground level, we try to act from the perspective that we had on the mountain. Many of the times I prayed the Our Father, it took me out of myself (mountain)

and then returned me to myself (ground). The trip was well worth it. It is the backstory of this book.

## A Transformative Spiritual Practice

Through praying and studying I gradually came to appreciate and engage the Our Father as a transformative spiritual practice. It was transformative because it gradually changed the way I thought and felt about myself and how I perceived and acted in situations. What the prayer seeks to transform is our conventional consciousness, our normal ways of thinking, willing, feeling, and acting, our take-it-for-granted convictions. In other words, it targets the mind and its ingrained habits. It was spiritual because with the mental changes came increased openness and cooperation with Spirit.

Spirit is not the effervescence of physical, psychological, or social experience. It is a dimension of reality with its own laws and operations. When our mental perceptions of this reality sharpen, we begin to risk its influences. We begin to dare the prayer. The game is afoot and we are following its tracks. This book is about the ins and outs of this experience of praying the Our Father as a transformative spiritual practice.

Chapter 1, "Praying Someone Else's Prayer: A Meditation Text," explores what is entailed when we pray a prayer that is not our own but one that is meant for us. It is the *Lord's* Prayer, but it is meant for his *followers* to say. As such, it is memorized and we have to deal with the mindlessness that often accompanies memorization. It also provides a harness that gives direction to thoughts and feelings. There is discipline involved. Christians recognize the legitimacy of extemporaneous praying, free-floating talk with and to God. But the Our Father is another type of prayer experience. It is basically a prayer of discipleship, inviting sustained attention and sharpened focus.

Therefore, it can be appreciated as a meditation text and engaged as a transformative spiritual practice.

Chapter 2, "Seven Challenges of Transformative Spiritual Practices," identifies some of the issues that are consistently present in engaging transformative spiritual practices—resistance, gradualness, integration, desire, expectations, compliance, and attention. Two teaching stories help us explore these issues that most likely will enter into our praying the Our Father, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly. That is why a spiritual teacher or director is often a savvy companion as we engage in a transformative spiritual practice. They have experienced these issues and can help us turn what could be obstacles into development possibilities.

Chapter 3, "Seven Challenges of Praying the Our Father," identifies issues of the Our Father when it is prayed within the Christian tradition of the imitation of Christ. They focus on the dynamic elements that are involved in making the mind of the prayer our mind. We have to understand and undertake the project of putting on the *mind* of Christ, trace the symbols into relevant meanings, use the prayer as religious motivation for social action, adapt petition language into a way of human openness rather than a way of asking for divine intervention, live comfortably on the continuum of faith, understanding, and realization, experiment with integrating behaviors consistent with the prayer, and pause to sync our mouth with our mind as we pray the words of the prescribed text.[3] If these distinctive challenges are not clarified and at least partially resolved, they generate confusion and undercut perseverance.

Chapter 4, "The Identity of the Ones Praying," describes who we are when we pray this prayer. The opening address, "Our Father who art in heaven," implies we are people of spiritual depth who have the chutzpah to call ultimate reality, in line with St. Paul, "Abba! Father!" This indicates the Divine

Spirit is generating our spirits and loving us into existence. This self-understanding has radical consequences, changing our consciousness on spiritual, psychological, physical, social, and cosmic dimensions. But we may not recognize ourselves in this description. It may be an identity with which we are not completely familiar and one which we have trouble accepting. Yet it is the first and most important of the transformations into which the Lord's Prayer invites us. So we must have some practices that help us make it our own. Nevertheless, at least for me, this identity is always a "formidable ask" and brings a dimension of daring into the whole prayer.

Chapter 5, "The Mission of the Ones Praying," examines the important imaginative move of bringing heaven to earth. This entails remembering and hallowing "thy name" on an earth that is prone to forgetting "Our Father who art in heaven," being committed to "[t]hy kingdom" of essential human dignity/common good on an earth of selective human dignity and dominating social arrangements, discerning "[t]hy will" on an earth where it is hidden in situations and cooperating with that will to maximize its influence. These phrases of the prayer state our commitments to the name, kingdom, and will of "Our Father who art in heaven." If this is what we are about, we naturally perceive the world through those commitments and begin to strategize how to act on them.

Chapter 6, "The Strategies of the Ones Praying," identifies the areas and issues of earthly concern. We are called to give bread in order to communicate love to vulnerable life, to forgive in order to find a new life beyond retaliation and reconcile the future, and resist temptation and evil as the way to center ourselves and act faithfully out of our true identity. Although no tactics are provided for these strategies, they impel us to engage many contemporary interpersonal and social situations. As we conclude the prayer, we may realize the purpose

of our praying. In its promised way, the prayer is transforming our minds and releasing Spirit. We are becoming moment by stumbling moment disciples of the One who gave us the prayer.

Chapter 7, "Transformations and the Emergence of Spirit," is a summary of the seven transformations that we are invited into when we pray the Our Father. Through these transformations Spirit is released into our minds and bodies and elevates our interpersonal and social interactions. The previous chapters have explored this vision in detail, but the language of this summary contrasts the "before and after" of the transformations and envisions the emergence Spirit as a homecoming.

Some themes are reiterated throughout the chapters. But these are not needless repetitions. The book is a sustained and expanding reflection. Ideas that were developed in one context need to be further expanded in a new context in order for the flow of thought to build on what was previously established and move seamlessly forward. This is particularly the case with interpreting the prayer in terms of an identity, mission, and strategy that inspire the ones praying to create tactics for the concrete situations of their interpersonal and social lives. Hopefully, the outcome of this textured, multilayered approach is a coherent and consistent presentation of daring to pray the Our Father as a transformative spiritual practice.

## Your Experience

Since this book is a reflection on my experience of praying the Our Father over many years, it does not propose anything normative. Nothing in this book is a model to be imitated. In fact, many theologians, scripture scholars, spiritual teachers/directors, and committed Christians in general might object to this way of proceeding. Also, many of the ideas might need nuancing and even refutation. This makes the book what it

is meant to be: a dialogue partner. Therefore, the best way to prepare to read its chapters and to interact with them is to recall your own history with the Lord's Prayer and the convictions, values, and behaviors it has generated and encouraged.

When did you first learn the Our Father and who taught it to you? What are the settings in which you pray it? When has praying it been a positive experience? a negative experience? a neutral experience? Are there some things about the content or process of the prayer that confuse you? Are you satisfied with praying it the way you always have? Are you open to thinking about new ways of praying it? Do times of praying it ever come to mind during the day as situations unfold and issues arise? Would you call the prayer a "companion" in any way? How does this prayer and how you pray it sync with other ways in which you pray? Is the whole idea of when and how to pray changing for you?

I always have been shaken by the maxim of the spiritual life that warned, "If you do not progress, you retrogress." It rules out standing still as an option; and that is an option my lethargy highly favors. My writing these reflections has been a way I have gone forward; I hope reading them will contribute to your going forward. Although the uniqueness of each of our paths has to be respected, spiritual development feels best when it is a joint venture.

## A Companion Volume

Previously, I wrote four volumes on *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers.*[4] The first three supplied commentaries and teachings on the Sunday readings for Cycles A, B, and C. The last volume addressed the gospel readings that are recommended for feasts, funerals, and weddings.

This volume, *To Dare the Our Father: A Transformative Spiritual Practice*, can be a companion to those books. The imagery of the Our Father resonates throughout the four gospels. The more familiar we are with those texts, the more understanding and meaning we will bring to the prayer. The Our Father is a very compressed prayer. Unpacking its significance through gospel passages and then returning to its succinct form enriches both the prayer and the passages.

But the companion character of this book with the four previous volumes can often be more specific. When we attend Sunday liturgies, there is always a gospel passage to ponder and we always communally pray the Lord's Prayer. The two are not side-by-side, but they co-inhabit the same liturgical event.

Above, we talked about the "speed praying" that is endemic to community settings. In those situations, we cannot give prolonged attention to the phrases of the prayer. In fact, as we will see, every praying of the Our Father can facilitate a slightly different consciousness and can suggest slightly different consequences. Given this fact, the Sunday gospel can become an aid in praying the communal Sunday Lord's Prayer.

The gospel text for the Sunday may gloss one of the phrases of the prayer. Therefore, when we come to pray the Lord's Prayer, we can bring the meaning of that specific gospel to our attention and speaking. The brevity of the prayer is enhanced through the extended ideas and stories of the gospel. The Lord's Prayer and the good news about the Lord can complement one another. The four volumes of *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels* and *To Dare the Our Father* go hand in hand.

## CHAPTER 1

# Praying Someone Else's Prayer: A Meditation Text

To state the obvious, the Lord's Prayer is first and foremost the *Lord's* Prayer. Since there are two renditions of the Lord's Prayer in the gospels, a longer one in Matthew (6:9-13), which became the standard, and a shorter one in Luke (11:2-4), scholars are quick to conclude that it is the Lord's Prayer as remembered and reformulated by the Christian tradition. That is most probably the case, but our concern is not with the important historical work of moving from the actual Jesus to the scriptural witness. Even if the minds of many had some contribution to the final forming of the prayer, its "otherness" remains.

Of course, if we are followers of Jesus, we have not hijacked his prayer. Nor has the prayer been arbitrarily imposed on us by overbearing authorities. In the gospels, Jesus wants his followers to pray it. In Matthew's account, Jesus instructs the listeners to the Sermon on the Mount among whom his disciples are the closest to him (Matt 5:1), "This is how you are

to pray" (Matt 6:9). In Luke's account, the disciples pressure Jesus to teach them to pray "just as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). He responds with his prayer.

So the prayer may be Jesus', but it is also meant for anyone who would learn from him. It is not our creation, yet the Christian tradition, following the example of Jesus in the gospels, encourages us to say it. Therefore, it falls into the category of an inherited prayer; and the fate of inherited prayers is that they are memorized.

## Memorization

Recently I was at a wedding reception where the minister was asked to say grace before meals. He began abruptly, "A man was being chased by a lion and came to a cliff. He had no way to escape and looked back to see the lion approaching. He decided to pray. Kneeling on the ground, he closed his eyes and prayed with all his heart. After a while, he opened his eyes. The lion was fifteen feet away. Much to his surprise, the lion was also kneeling and had his paws folded piously in prayer. The man strained to hear what the lion was saying. The words were familiar, especially to those assembled here tonight. The lion was saying . . . "

At this point the minister gestured for us to join in. Everyone prayed with gusto and without missing a beat. "Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ our Lord." With little or no difficulty, the group was able to draw this traditional prayer out of the bank of memory.

If we were socialized into a Christian denomination, and I count myself among those who were, we most likely learned its prayers. We were taught prayers to say when we awoke and before we slept, before and after we ate, and at key times during worship services and liturgies. There were also

special prayers—prayers of faith, hope, charity, contrition, praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and petition. Of course, at the center of all these Christian prayers is the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. In the Christian tradition there is no shortage of prayers, and no shortage of Christian teachers eager to drill them into the next generation and applaud young minds for perfect recitation.

Many of us learned these prayers at a young age when memory could be effectively imprinted. Consequently, they have stayed with us. Even if we have not said them in years, in the proper setting we will get the words right. We can chime in with "grace before meals" when the minister gives the signal.

However, even if we have mastered the words of a prayer, it often remains someone else's prayer. We may never quite get into it. It may never express the thoughts of our minds or the feelings of our hearts. We say it more out of conditioning than genuine insight. We may say "Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty, through Christ our Lord." But we say it without gratitude and feel free to grumble about the poor quality of the food. The same rote recitation can happen with the Our Father.

## Mystical Traditions

Mystical traditions are especially sensitive to this problem of saying inherited prayers without the corresponding interiority. In a classic Jewish story, "The Shepherd's Pipe," a villager does not take his son to synagogue services because the boy is too slow to learn the Hebrew prayers. Since he cannot learn the prayers, it is assumed he cannot worship. However, on the feast of the atonement the father brings him along. He is afraid if he leaves the boy alone, he will inadvertently eat and break the sacred fast. The father does not know that the boy has a shepherd's pipe hidden in the pocket of his jacket.

During the service the boy implores the father to let him play his pipe. The father refuses and finally grasps and tightly holds the pocket with the pipe. But the boy, driven by desire, wrests the pipe from his father's grip, puts it to his lips, and lets out a blast. The entire congregation is startled. The Baal Shem Tov, who is officiating at the service, tells the congregation that it was this spontaneous "blast from the pipe of the babe" that brought "all their prayers to the throne of God before the gates of heaven closed."[1]

One message of this simple yet profound tale is that genuine prayer comes from the center of one's being (symbolized by the shepherd's pipe). The boy does not know the inherited prayers. So he cannot use them. But he may sense that those who are using them are doing so ineffectively. The prayers are not reaching heaven because they are not coming from the center of the ones praying. There is a split between who they are and what they are saying. The problem is not the inherited Hebrew words themselves but the disjunction between these words and the interiority of the people saying them. The "blast from the pipe of the babe" is a unified action, bringing together inner awareness and outer expression.

One of Leo Tolstoy's mystical short stories illumines the same contrast between genuine spiritual expression and inherited prayers. A bishop, traveling by ship, is told that three hermits are living on a nearby island. He concludes that they are within his jurisdiction and, therefore, it is his duty to inspect their orthodoxy, so he persuades the captain of the ship to change course and put him ashore on the island. He finds the hermits and asks them if they are Christian. They wholeheartedly respond, "Yes!" He inquires how they pray and they tell him, "When we pray, we say, 'We are three. You are three. Have mercy on us.'" This unauthorized and perhaps heretical prayer horrifies the bishop. He quickly instructs them in the

Lord's Prayer, which he believes is the only proper way to pray if one is Christian. They do their best to learn the words, but they are not quick studies. Finally, the bishop returns to the ship satisfied he has done his duty.

Later that evening, while strolling on deck, the bishop sees a ball of light in the distance. As the ball of light draws closer to the ship, the bishop sees the three hermits are within it. They speak from within the sphere of light and tell the bishop they have forgotten some of the Lord's Prayer. They need him to reinstruct them. The bishop is jolted into a new level of awareness and awakened to the holiness of the hermits, a holiness that is more profound than the correct recitation of words. The humbled bishop merely says, "Go home and when you pray, say, 'You are three. We are three. Have mercy on us.'"[2]

Once again, genuine spiritual illumination is played off against memorized inherited prayer, in this case the central prayer of the Christian tradition. The hermits have found their own way of praying, and it obviously "works." They are enveloped in divine light, even though they cannot remember the Lord's Prayer that the bishop taught them. These two stories use conventional religiosity with its emphasis on correct formulas as a contrast to develop a more complete understanding of prayer. Prayer is not mere mouth material but the inner being of the human person in communion with God. Frederick Denison Maurice succinctly captured this tension: "The Paternoster [Our Father] . . . may be committed to memory quickly, but it is slowly learnt by heart."[3]

## Extemporaneous Praying

This spiritual sensitivity to the difference between reciting prayers and genuinely praying can be developed in different directions. Sometimes it shortsightedly becomes a way to

discredit the project of learning traditional prayers. If learning the prayers of someone else is prone to become mindless, why not move in another direction? People should pray out of their own hearts with their own words. In this way the words will always reflect the interiority of the one praying. Prayer will always be genuine and not the recitation of the words of another. The examples of the shepherd's pipe and the homegrown prayer of the hermits call us to follow the same original path.

This approach, however, has its own problems. We have many inner states, and the most panicky ones are the ones most prone to prayer. Our ego is always protecting and promoting itself, and prayer is one of its preferred strategies. We may feel the need to boast and sound like the Pharisee in the temple: "O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous" (Luke 18:11). Or we may be gripped by fear and pray, "Help, Lord!" Or we may feel grateful for our blessings and say, "Lord, thank you!" Or we may feel burdened by our circumstances and say, "Lord, why me?" Therefore, the problem is not that people do not pray. In fact, when a Gallup survey asked Americans about their spiritual practices in the last twenty-four hours, 67 percent of them said they had prayed. The problem is we are prayer machines, approaching God out of our ever-changing interior states. Free-floating prayer is just that—free-floating.

There is an indication St. Matthew knew this human tendency to pray out of whatever needful inner state presently possesses us. The Matthean Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 7:21). The "Lord, Lord" cries are the panicky outer expression of the sudden inner awareness of threat. In the same vein, he also criticizes an avalanche of words. "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father

knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt 6:7-8). It is going too far to say that we should not pray out of human need. But the tendency to engage in a garrulous recital of every physical and social want is definitely criticized.

In another passage, the Matthean Jesus develops this criticism:

> So do not worry and say, "What are we to eat?" or "What are we to drink?" or "What are we to wear?" All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. (Matt 6:31-33)

Our physical needs monopolize our awareness. We voice them to whoever will listen and whoever will help. There is a double danger when we bring our needs into prayer. First, we forget that God is an all-knowing care that does not need to be informed of our condition. Second, and more importantly, we do not seek first the kingdom. There simply is no room for kingdom consciousness and kingdom action. We are filled and consumed by need and petition. We cannot get beyond our urgent pleas, and the ultimate effect of their powerful hold on our consciousness is that the kingdom is in second place. Priorities have been lost.

## A Meditation Text

So inherited prayers can become mindless recitations and personal prayers can reflect ever-shifting states of egocentric anxiety or bliss. The first misses the richness of the Our Father and the second bypasses the Lord's Prayer for whatever is currently capturing attention. Is there a prayer practice between these two actual but basically lower-level prayer possibilities?

One way is to engage the Our Father as a meditation text. This assumes the prayer has a "higher" mind than the ones praying; and the practice of praying it is to transfer this more evolved mind into the minds of the ones praying. This demands deliberativeness, a disciplined attention that offsets the tendencies to mindless recitals. The prayer is memorized, but the negative effects of memorization are countered by a steady, inner attention. This mindfulness allows us to pray the words in a way that is in tune with their level of awareness, to pray them on their own terms, so to speak.

As a meditation text, the Our Father also provides a harness that is by no means a straitjacket. It charts channels for thoughts and feelings, and it encourages exploration. But it does not allow the mind to jump from thought to thought and feeling to feeling, turning each into prayer material. In this way the prayer quiets our incessant needs and opens for us to the reality that the gospels think is truly first, a first so inclusive that within it all our needs are strangely and surprisingly met.

Perhaps most importantly, when we engage the Our Father as a meditation text, we give it a chance to perform its purpose, the task for which it was designed. The Our Father is meant to pass on the mind of Christ by creating mental perceptions in the ones who pray it. For many reasons these perceptions are not easy to understand; and, for those same reasons and more, these perceptions are even harder to establish as permanent features of consciousness. However, their ultimate goal is not merely a changed mind. This changed mind is meant to see possibilities of action that previously it could not envision and to engage those actions and their consequences. This makes the Our Father a prayer of discipleship, and in order to achieve that purpose it has to become a transformative spiritual practice.