

“I especially appreciate how Lohfink reveals the Jewishness of the prayer. I’ll continue to say these words in traditional form at Mass, and in times of personal prayer, but I understand them better than ever before.”

—Jon M. Sweeney

Editor of *A Course in Christian Mysticism* by
Thomas Merton

“The Our Father is our prayer taught by our Lord himself. Gerhard Lohfink has brought forward the most comprehensive interpretation from his vast and timely biblical scholarship. I found this book to be an awakening.

“The Our Father is a deeper prayer than I have known. Lofink teaches a practice of eschatology. This reign of God at-work-now is most urgent in our times. This book is ideal for preachers and teachers in our Church.”

—Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

Author of *Renouncing Violence: Practice from the Monastic Tradition*

THE OUR FATHER

A New Reading

Gerhard Lohfink

Translated by Linda M. Maloney



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To my brother Norbert
in gratitude

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PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

Discussion of the correct translation and meaning of the sixth petition in the Our Father (“lead us not into temptation”) is unending, and it has taken on a new life in our time. It shows how important the Our Father is to many Christians. They want to understand it. They want to know what they are really praying for.

This book is intended to serve that need. I ask about the original meaning of the Lord’s Prayer because it is only when we are clear about what it meant in that time that we can apply it in our current situations.

I dedicate this little book to my brother Norbert: for good reasons! We have often talked about the right interpretation of the Our Father. On two occasions we have joined together to address conferences on our reading of it. In preparing for those conferences

I learned a great deal from my brother about the Old Testament background of the prayer, and that whole process has contributed to this book. It is a tiny token of gratitude for many mutual discussions.

I owe thanks also to my former student, Dr. Linda Maloney, who has applied her thorough knowledge of the state of the exegetical problem to the translation of the book. I hope it will help many people to enjoy praying the Our Father and to increase in their love for Jesus.

Gerhard Lohfink

1. The Curious Form of the Our Father

THE OUR FATHER is probably the prayer most often prayed throughout the world. But it is anything but a universal prayer. It is first of all and primarily a prayer for Jesus' disciples. Matthew places it at the center of the Sermon on the Mount—which is, as its introduction shows, addressed not only to the people in general but first and primarily to Jesus' disciples (cp. Matt 5:1-2). Luke makes it quite clear who the addressees are: in his gospel one of Jesus' disciples asks him:

“Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1)

But it is not only because of this information in Matthew and Luke that we know the Our Father as primarily a prayer for disciples. Its content shows that as well. This is clearest in the fourth petition, for

2 *The Our Father*

bread, which seems to reflect the bitter situation of day laborers in Palestine and with it the misery of all the hungry and needy of this world. In reality the request for bread comes from the specific situation of Jesus' disciples, which had to do with their duty to preach and proclaim, as we will see in the next chapter.

The Our Father is primarily a prayer for disciples. Every line is about disciples forgetting their own desires and plans for their lives and desiring only what God wills. In that sense it is a dangerous prayer for anyone who prays it.

Far too often the Our Father is misused: as prayer-stuffing, as a liturgical measure of time ("Pause for the length of an Our Father"), or as a penance after confession ("For your penance, say one Our Father and one Hail Mary").

People in the early church were still aware of how precious an Our Father is. Only at the completion of the catechumenate was it "handed over"; that is, candidates for baptism were first introduced to the Our Father shortly before their baptism. This was called the *traditio orationis*. After baptism they were then permitted, for the first time, to recite the Our Father in the festal Mass, together with the whole congregation. Just as catechumens were solemnly presented with the Creed, so also they solemnly received the Our Father.

For us, the Our Father has often become routine. It is worn out. Its words and phrases are as blurred as a foggy landscape. “Hallowed be your name,” “Your will be done”—it has all become vague. But on the lips of Jesus and in the ears of the disciples the Our Father had clear, sharply defined contours.

Now, to make those contours visible again, we will first say something about the form of the Our Father. The form of a text is never accidental. It is related to the subject, to what it is about. Here are five observations about the form of the Our Father:

1. The Our Father is pure petition.

It is universally accepted today and needs no further proof that the doxology “for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, now and forever” was only secondarily added to the Our Father. The oldest manuscripts do not yet contain a doxology. It probably comes from a time when the Our Father had become part of the eucharistic celebration. The original Our Father was nothing but petition.

Why didn’t Jesus teach his disciples a doxology, a prayer of praise? Or a prayer like the beginning of the Jewish Eighteen Benedictions, the *Tefillah*? The *Tefillah* opens with:

4 *The Our Father*

Blessed are you, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the great, mighty and revered God, the Most High God who bestows lovingkindnesses, the creator of all things, who remembers the good deeds of the patriarchs and in love will bring a redeemer to their children's children for his name's sake. O king, helper, savior and shield. Blessed are you, O Lord, the shield of Abraham.

So why did Jesus not teach his disciples a prayer that was at least framed by praise, as is Israel's daily prayer? There is only *one* plausible explanation: the urgent crisis and need of the people of God. The Our Father is like a cry, begging that God will intervene. Obviously, Jesus knew every kind of prayer, if only from the Psalter. He knew praise, thanksgiving, lament. But *this* prayer, the one he gave his disciples as their own proper prayer because it deals with the reign of God now breaking forth, is pure petition.

2. *The Our Father is a very short prayer.*

Even in translation it is very brief. By way of comparison, the Jewish *Tefillah* has more than 1,300 words in the translation cited above, whereas the Our Father (without the doxology) contains only fifty-five words

in English. The Semitic version was even shorter. Without doxology and conclusion, Luke's version (which is probably closer to the oldest form of the Our Father) contains only twenty-three words in a back-translation into Hebrew. Why so short? The answer is in Matthew 6:7-8, a Jesus saying that Matthew quotes immediately before the Our Father:

When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

3. The Our Father gets right to the point.

For comparison, let us look again at the beginning of the Eighteen Benedictions:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the great, mighty and revered God, the Most High God who bestows lovingkindnesses, the creator of all things, who remembers the good deeds of the patriarchs and in love will bring a redeemer to their children's children for his name's sake. O king, helper, savior and shield. Blessed are you, O Lord, the shield of Abraham.

That is a slow approach. The one praying is moved and sustained by the history of Israel. Something needs to be said about it first of all, at least by way of reference. Only then is there room for petitions. It probably suggests that it would be impolite to go charging through God's door with urgent requests. The distant background may even be an element of court ceremony. Before petitioners reached the king's throne room they would first be led through a number of anterooms. Then they had to walk the whole length of the throne room itself in order at last to arrive at the royal throne. They would prostrate themselves there. At a signal from a royal official they could speak, but still they had to be careful about choosing the proper address. Only after completing the long ritual could they finally present their petitions.

It would be worthwhile at this point to make a tour of ancient Near Eastern prayers, with their highly ritualized appeals to the deity who was being invoked on each occasion. Such a comparison would reveal all the more sharply the difference between them and the address to God in the Our Father, as well as in the Jewish tradition of prayer. Thus one of the Akkadian prayers of "raising the hands" begins:

God of Heaven and Earth, Firstborn of Anu,
Dispenser of Kingship, Chief Executive of the

Assembly of the Gods, Father of Gods and Men,
Granter of Agriculture, Lord of the Airspace . . .

One senses that the forms of address had to be precise; otherwise the god might not listen. And the titles are listed so that the particular god being addressed would really listen. It is not at all a simple matter to speak to him without making a mistake. Correct language and competence in praying are required. Above all, one must know the deity's proper name.

Nothing of the kind in the Our Father! *Abba*—that is the only address. It is familial. The communicative situation of the Our Father is not that of a king's court ceremonial but family intimacy—more precisely, that of Jesus' "new family." In a family, people speak to one another directly, without ceremony and without pretense. When things are right in the family, people speak to each other with profound mutual understanding.

That is why the Our Father gets to the point so directly and why it is so brief: it is a prayer for the new family of disciples. That is why it lacks even a hint of solemnity or a whisper of court ceremony.

Certainly that does not mean that all Jewish prayers are long and wordy. Judaism also has brief, concise prayer texts. For example, the Jewish *Kaddish*

can be compared to the Our Father. One early version reads:

Exalted and hallowed be God's great name in the world which God created, according to plan. May God's majesty be revealed in the days of our lifetime and in the life of all Israel—speedily, imminently, to which we say Amen. Blessed be God's great name to all eternity.

As we can see right away, this prayer agrees in many ways with the Our Father, not only formally but in its content. The first petition in the *Kaddish* is also for the hallowing of God's name, and the second asks for the coming of the reign of God. To that extent the proximity of the Our Father to the *Kaddish* leaps out at us immediately.

Still, we must also note the differences. The *Kaddish* is not pure petition. At least in the version given here it is combined with praise: "Blessed be God's great name to all eternity." It is possible that the praise was, in fact, the core and origin of this Jewish prayer (cp. Ps 113:2; Dan 2:20). And something else should be noted: in its original function the *Kaddish* was not a prayer that stood alone; it was a concluding formula, an ending. It was created for recitation at the end of the Scripture reading in synagogal worship. So it re-

mains true that the Our Father, as a prayer complete in itself, is highly unusual in its compactness.

4. *God's interest comes first.*

The Our Father is clearly divided into two parts. In Matthew's version each of the two sections contains three (or four) petitions. First there are three "thou" askings:

- (1) Hallowed be your name
- (2) Your kingdom come
- (3) Your will be done

Then (depending on how one counts them) follow three or four "we" petitions:

- (4) Give us today our daily bread
- (5) Forgive us our trespasses
- (6) Lead us not into temptation
- (7) but deliver us from evil

Thus the two-part division of the prayer is very clear. When the Our Father is translated back into Hebrew it becomes even more obvious because of its rhythm and rhyme. The first part is marked by the end-rhyme *-eka*; the second by the end-rhyme *-enu*.

The first part of the Our Father is concerned with the name, reign, and will of God. We could say it

is about God's concerns. The disciples' interests—concerning food, their sinfulness, the crisis of their temptations—only come into play in the second part. Thus the structure of the Our Father matches Jesus' admonition exactly: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33).

Those who make God's concerns entirely their own will find that God cares for them as well.

5. God acts through people.

Another observation, merely formal to begin with, is in order: the first three petitions are oddly constructed: "Hallowed be your name; your kingdom come; your will be done." We are so familiar with the phrasing of the Our Father that we no longer notice how unusual these constructions are. No one talks that way in real life. No one says: "May the hallway be swept. . . . May cleanliness come."

Ordinarily we talk in such a way that it is clear who is supposed to be acting, who is the active subject. We don't say, "May the hallway be swept," but "Please sweep the hallway!" Why doesn't the Our Father simply say "Father, hallow your name, bring your reign into being, accomplish what you will"? Many interpreters of the Our Father assert that the in-

directness of the construction is a matter of politeness. You don't talk to God so boldly. Besides, the word "God" is to be avoided, and that is accomplished through the so-called *passivum divinum*. "Hallowed be your name," for example, is a *passivum divinum*, an indirect expression ensuring that God is not addressed too baldly: thus not "God, hallow your name," but "Hallowed be your name."

But this politeness theory cannot apply, at least not to the Our Father, because as we have already seen, the Our Father avoids any kind of court ceremonial. It speaks in family terms, directly and without any fancy words. Besides, the second part of the Our Father is very direct:

Give us this day our daily bread!
Forgive us our trespasses!
Lead us not into temptation!
Deliver us from evil!

These expressions in the second half are, without exception, petitions addressed directly to God. So the Our Father has no hesitation about talking directly to God without beating around the bush. Then why the indirect constructions in the first three petitions?

There can be only *one* reason: the indirect constructions, above all the passive in the first petition,

leave the question of the active subject open. "Hallowed be your name." We can add "by you yourself," but just as well "by human beings." Both are possible; both are correct. And apparently Jesus intended that ambiguity. God is asked to hallow the divine name and bring the reign of God into being. God is to bring the divine will to fulfillment. That is first and most important. But at the same time the disciples are to hallow the name of God, and they too are to make space for the reign of God. They themselves are also to do the will of God.

So with the aid of language forms the first three petitions of the Our Father express a fundamental theological insight: God takes the initiative. God acts. Everything comes from God. And yet, because of the independence and freedom God wills for human beings, God can do nothing in the world unless there are people who are prepared to make God's will their own and thus make space for God to act.

For this reason there is a great deal of theology even in the *form* of the Our Father and thus, of course, in the seven petitions themselves. In the Our Father, Jesus summarized all that he wanted and hoped for.

11. A Paraphrase of the Our Father

NOW THAT WE HAVE REACHED the end of the book, let us go back to the beginning! We saw at least a sampling of the countless paraphrases of the Our Father—short ones and long ones, some true to the text and some that run beyond it, those that follow the meaning and those that change it, those that are reverent and those that are provocative. I am almost afraid to add still another paraphrase of the Our Father to all the rest.

Perhaps, though, it is appropriate to do so, because it makes sense to summarize the most important lines of interpretation described in this book. It makes sense to do so as briefly as possible. And it makes sense that the genre, namely, that of “petition,” not be abandoned. Of course, I also need to say as clearly as possible what the following paraphrase is *not*.

It is in no way a prayer that anyone should pray. That is not its purpose. It is simply intended to interpret the Our Father in the briefest possible form. It is an aid to understanding. Even those who pray the Our Father privately should pray it in its official form as given by the church.

My paraphrase also does not replace what has been said in the previous ten chapters. It became clear there that Jesus shaped the prayer for his disciples against the background of the theology of the great prophets, and even central texts of the Torah, especially the book of Exodus. A brief paraphrase can in no way place that whole background before our eyes. Only when we are clear about all that can we, perhaps, formulate our paraphrase as follows:

Father in heaven, we are your disciples, your community, your church. Together with Jesus, and listening to his words, we are permitted to speak to you as our father. *Abba*, dear Father!

Gather your scattered and strife-torn people. Make it to be the true people of God, so that your name may be honored before all the world. Give us the strength to gather a community in your