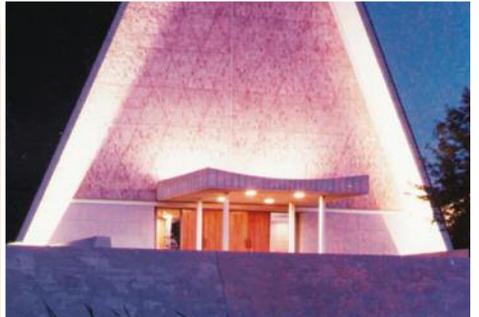
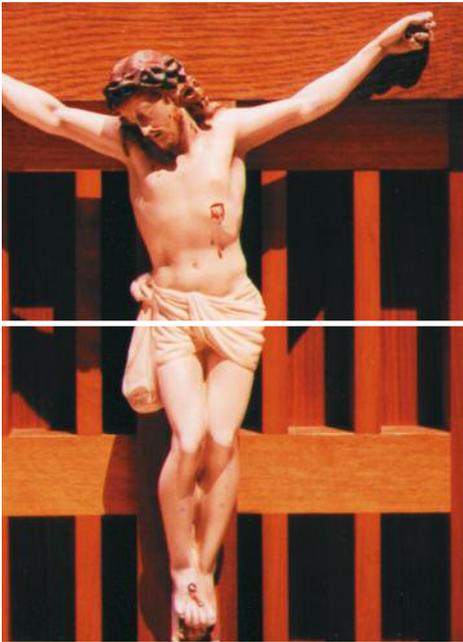


For the

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Introduction — The *Our Father* Rooted in Our Baptism into Christ

We should not take it for granted, that we have been given the privilege of coming to God in prayer. Nor should we take it lightly, that He has given us the very words with which to approach Him. Certainly, we should not presume that such prayer is our own prerogative or a matter of personal choice. Rather, it is a gift of divine grace, that God is our dear Father, that we are His dear children, and that He has given us both the invitation and the means to come boldly before Him. All of this in and through Christ, and given to us in the waters of our Baptism.

From the earliest days of the Church, the *Our Father* — along with the *Apostles' Creed* — has had a special relationship to the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Catechumens in the early church would receive and learn these two Chief Parts of the Christian faith during Lent; then, at their Baptism during the Great Vigil of Easter, they would confess the Creed as they were immersed in the water, and afterwards (on the basis of their Baptism) they would pray the *Our Father* for the first time ... together with the Church.

To be sure, it is only by our Baptism into Christ, “the Son of God”, that we, too, are given the blessed privilege of approaching the Lord God Almighty as “Our Father” ... just as dear children ask their dear fathers here on earth (but thankfully, with even more confidence than we have in our human fathers).

I. The *Our Father* as the Prayer of the Church Catholic

Because we pray to our Father in virtue of our Baptism into Christ, the Lord's Prayer (like all Christian prayer, properly understood) is never “private” prayer; there is no such thing as a “private Christian” or “private Christianity.” Even when we take it to the Lord in prayer in the solitude of our own homes, we do so as members of the Body of Christ, as members of His Church of all times and places. It is always our Father, and never simply my Father.

The use of the *Our Father*, in particular, along with other standard prayers (such as Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers), is an important confession of this catholicity of the Church and of our connection to it. Because the *Our Father* is part of our common language as Christians, this is a special language we all speak

His tender grace and mercy toward us. Each and every prayer that we bring to Him, therefore, presupposes and depends upon His forgiveness. And in this confession of our own sin, in our reliance upon the mercy and free forgiveness of our gracious Lord, we for our part must “heartily forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.”

In much the same way, we pray the *Our Father* as a matter of discipline, because it lifts our hearts and minds above and beyond our own selfish cares and concerns to pray for the whole Church, for all who are the baptized children of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever they may be in His vast Kingdom. For all that we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, we pray not only for ourselves, but for all who call upon God as their Father (and for all whom He would call to be His children).

II. The *Our Father* as THE All-Encompassing Prayer

Along these same lines, the *Our Father* is an all-encompassing prayer. It includes (along with forgiveness) everything we need for this body and life, and for the life eternal; nothing is excluded. There is no situation or circumstance for which the *Our Father* is not most ideally suited; nothing we might face which is not addressed in these seven Petitions.

Whenever we find ourselves at a loss for words (and St. Paul tells us that we do not even know how to pray as we should [Rom 8:26]), we find our recourse and take refuge in this Prayer taught by our Lord Christ Himself. And even though our hearts and minds are never as pious or as focused as they should be, we can know for a certainty that our lips are here guided by the words of God Himself; and that the Holy Spirit is thus praying with us . . . and so also for us . . . in our sinful weakness.

When we pray and intercede for others, as well — for our family and friends, for the Church, for those who are sick, etc. — then again the *Lord's Prayer* is always most appropriate, a prayer for all seasons, as it were.

Certainly, we should never feel that we have nothing to say, nor worry that we aren't being “creative” or “clever” enough. “When you pray,” says Jesus our Lord, “do so in this manner” (St. Matt 6:7, 9), “Our Father, Who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name ... “

“Lord, Remember us in Your Kingdom, and

as fellow citizens of our Father's Kingdom. For the words we use — even before we begin to “understand” them (in part intellectually — the words God has spoken and given for us to repeat are words that every Christian has received and speaks, a confession of the one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph 4:4–5).

The catholicity of the *Our Father* is demonstrated in the special importance attached to the Fifth Petition (“forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”), which Jesus reiterates in His teaching of the *Our Father* (Matt. 6:14–15). Since we pray in communion with the entire Church — in the unity of Christ Jesus — our relationship with others (especially our fellow Christians) is an integral part of our prayer. And, as Christians, that relationship is defined by forgiveness.

We come before the Lord in prayer with repentance and a humble recognition of our own sins; for we know that of ourselves we are unworthy to stand in His presence, and that we do so only by

Accordingly, the Lutheran Church has always included the *Our Father* in every single one of her liturgies — great and small alike, both short and long. And Dr. Luther recommends in his Small Catechism that we include the *Our Father* in our daily prayers ... in the morning when we rise, and in the evening when we go to bed, and both before and after every meal ...

In short, as the children of God, we do as St. Paul writes, crying out, “Abba! Father!” to our Father in heaven (Rom 8:15). “Abba,” as some of you might know, was the Jewish equivalent of “Daddy,” or the infant cooing of “Dadda.” Thus, in following Luther's advice (praying the *Our Father* at least eight times a day), we might properly think of ourselves as tiny infants learning to speak, babbling, “Dadda, Dadda, Dadda,” over and over throughout our day, with the grateful affection of children for the very dear Father who loves and cares for us.

In praying this dear prayer with our own children, in turn, and teaching them to pray in this way, we are passing on more than just a single prayer. We teach them how to speak the Word of God with

the language of faith. And we teach them the most basic pattern of worship.

II. The *Our Father* as Divine Service and Worship

The fact of the matter is, that the *Our Father* embodies the entire scope of Divine Service and Christian worship in a nutshell. It is the gracious Word of Christ to us, His work and His gift. This precious thing is not of our own fabrication or design, nor is it anything that we could have thought or imagined. Like all Divine Service, it comes to us from God. And when we pray in this manner, it does not cease to be His Word and His work in us. Not that our praying is the Gospel or a means of grace; but the words themselves, with which the Lord has opened our lips to call upon His Name, these are indeed a gift of pure Gospel and grace.

Our praying of the *Our Father*, on the other hand, is a genuine good work of faith, a sacrifice of repentance and thanksgiving, and an act of worship in Spirit and Truth (that is to say, the worship of the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit, by means of His Word of Truth).

How appropriate, therefore, and how richly multifaceted the *Our Father* is in its use within the Lutheran Liturgy. In Matins and Vespers, it is part of that daily (morning and evening) sacrifice of prayer that rises before the Lord as the holy incense of faith (Ps 141:2). In the Service of the Word, it is the summary and conclusion of any and all other prayers, encompassing all for which

the Lord would have us pray. Prior to the Words of Institution in the Divine Service, it is a “Eucharistic” sacrifice (of thanksgiving), offered in grateful anticipation of the words and gifts of Christ Himself about to be received.

And where it is used, according to the most ancient practice of the Church Catholic, immediately prior to the distribution of the Holy Communion, the *Our Father* serves as our petition, that He would (by His Word and Spirit) lead us to recognize the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine, and that He would grant us to receive this Bread of Life and this Cup of Salvation with thanksgiving, in true faith, and to our abundant blessing. It is indeed, as well, a confession that He does all these things (and more).

Conclusion — Command, Promise, and Need

As Luther reminds us several times over in his *Small Catechism*, God answers our petitions “even without our prayer.” Just as He has promised, “Before you call, I will answer; and while you are yet speaking, I will act.” (Is 65:24) Thus, everything we pray for in the *Our Father* (which includes all that we need for our bodies and souls) is already granted freely and by grace alone in Christ Jesus.

Our prayer is not a button or a cord that we push or pull for service from the Lord, as though He were a household servant instead of our dear Father in heaven; as though He were not already (even without our prayer) daily and richly providing us with all good things ... solely out of Fatherly, Divine goodness and mercy, with-

out any merit or worthiness in us. Just as He gives daily bread to all people, even to the wicked, and causes His sun to shine and His rain to fall on both the evil and the good. But we pray that He would grant us grace to see His Fatherly hand in all things, and to cling by faith to Him alone, trusting not in ourselves but in Christ and His mercy.

But ultimately, we pray the *Our Father* — and we do so with confident faith in Christ — because He Himself has commanded us to pray in this way, and He has promised to hear us.

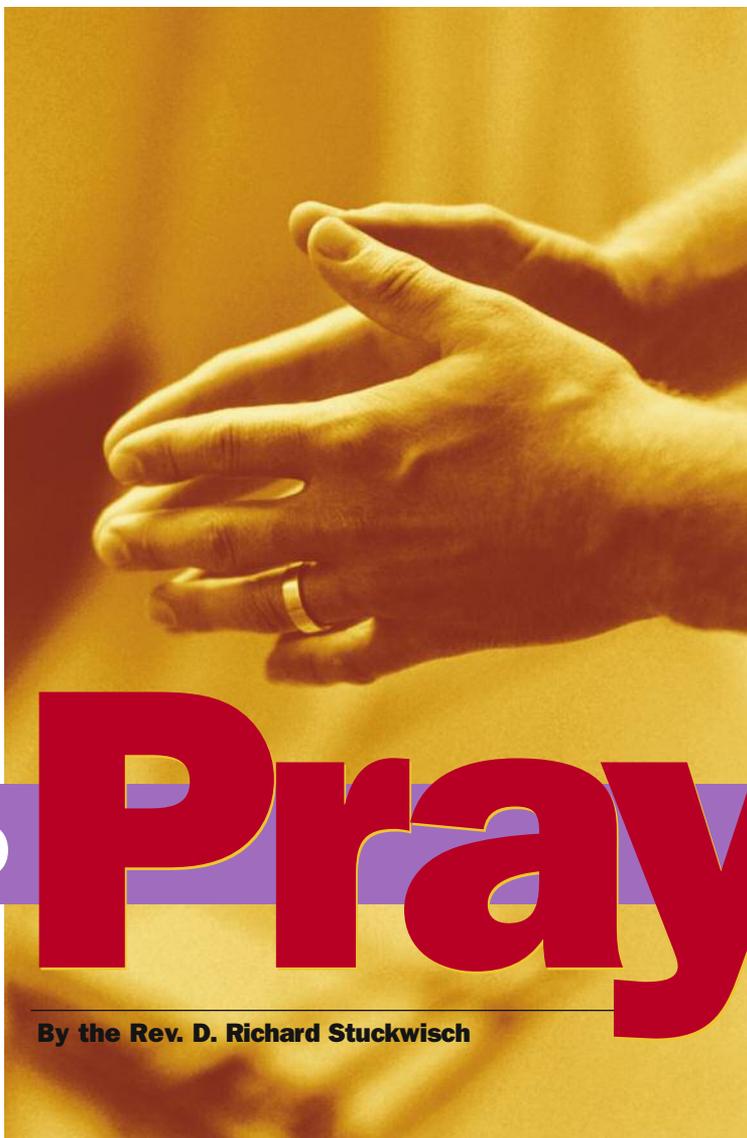
We come to Him in prayer, in this respect, in much the same way that we go to church and receive the Holy Sacrament: not because we “feel” like it (but especially

when we do not); not because we thereby do some great “favor” for the Lord; and certainly not because we are somehow worthy of ourselves to stand before Him. But simply because He has commanded us to do so ...

because He has promised to be with us and to bless us ... and because we need His gracious mercy and forgiveness every day of our lives.

Thanks be to God that we have it without measure in His Son—our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him alone be all honor and glory and praise, both now and forever. Amen.

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Teach us to

Pray”
...

By the Rev. D. Richard Stuckwisch