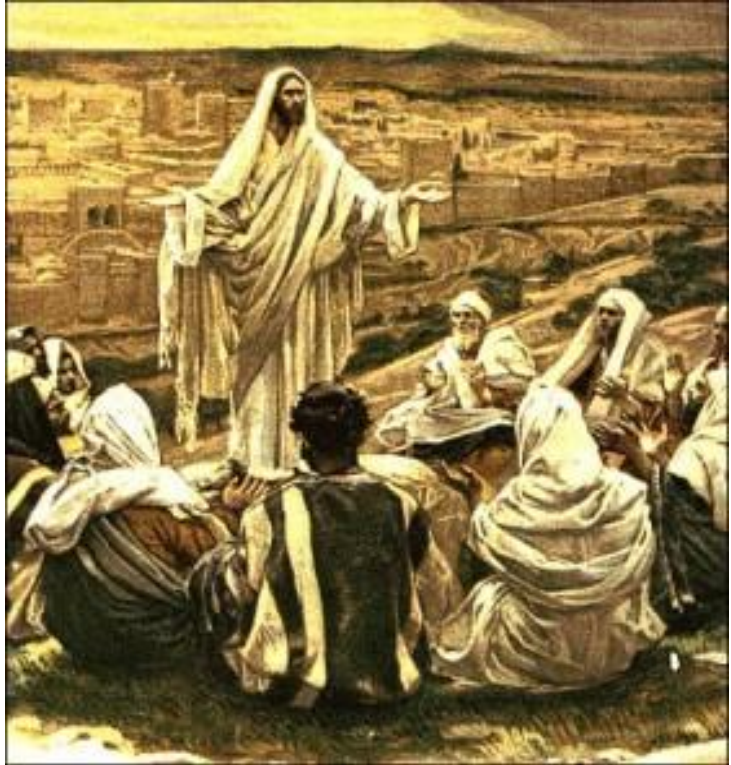


The Our Father: More than Words, it is a Structure for the Spiritual life.

Of all prayers, the Our Father is the best known. This is good but it also bespeaks a challenge. For when something is so well known we can say it mindlessly and miss its message. The Our Father is more than words to say. The words are surely precious for they are from the Lord but if the exact words were the only point then surely we would not have different wording in the Matthean and Lucan versions. Even more essential than the exact words is the teaching and message they convey about what our spiritual life should be.



I want to recommend for your consideration that the Our Father gives us more than words to say. It also gives us a structure for our prayer life, a basic plan for our spiritual life. There seem to be five basic elements set forth in the Lord's Prayer. I would like to set them forth in what follows after discussing the introduction to the Our Father.

In Matthew's Gospel the Lord gives the Our Father in the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount. He introduces it with these 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)

Multiplying words? It will be noted that when someone is a stranger we tend to multiply words. This is because we are nervous and so we chatter about the weather, dumb stuff etc. because we cannot bear the silence. But when we know someone well, even extended periods of silence are not uncommon or nerve-wracking. Further, we instinctively know when we have communicated effectively with those we know. We don't have to keep repeating our self. This is likely what Jesus had in mind. If God is a stranger we multiply words and doubt we have been understood. We can even be superstitious and think that certain incantations will unlock the Divine will. But when we are in living conscious contact with God we are at peace. We don't have to nervously chatter and be superstitious, thinking only many words and proper incantations will satisfy.

This does not mean we should not specifically make our needs known or not persist in prayer (which is different than chattering away). Persistence is elsewhere and consistently taught by Jesus as a norm for prayer: Lk 18:1ff; Lk 11:5ff; Mat 7:7.

It does not mean that prayers like the rosary are excluded either. But we must be clear that the repetition of the rosary is for our sake not God's. The rhythmic repetition of prayers can facilitate a peaceful atmosphere for prayer. The rosary is like the Gospel on a string where we systematically meditate on the truths of the Gospel. It provides a structure for us, as it were. But it is not to be recited for the purpose of "springing" something from a reluctant God by some form of magic or mechanistic means. It is we who need things like the rosary, not God.

More than Words – This insight is important for what follows because the Lord is not rejecting verbal prayer only to superimpose a new but briefer verbiage. The Our Father is not a new "incantation." It is rather the description of what ought to be going on in the mind and heart of one who prays. It is not as though Jesus is teaching, "Say only these exact words." The words are precious but here again Jesus is trying to illustrate a deeper reality in us. He is illustrating by these words what ought to be going on in us interiorly, in our mind and heart as we pray: Here is what the mind and heart of a person of prayer is like. The Lord's prayer suggests some basic qualities and dispositions of our spiritual life.

This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; 12 and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matt 6:7-13)

Here then is the five-fold description of the basic elements of the Spiritual Life:

1. **RELATE** – *Our Father who art in heaven* - Here begins true spirituality: Relate to the Father! Relate to him with family intimacy, affection, reverence and love. We are not praying the "the Deity" or the "Godhead." We are praying to our Father who loves us, who provides for us and who sent his only Son to die for us and save us. When Jesus lives his life in us and His Spirit dwells in us we begin to experience God as our Abba, (Father). As developed in other New Testament texts, the deeper Christian word *Abba* underlies the prayer. Abba is the family word for the more generic and formal word "father." When my Father was alive I did not call him "Father" I called him "Dad." This is really what the word Abba is getting at. It is the family word for Father. It indicates family ties, intimacy, close bonds. Why the word Abba is not used here in the Our Father is uncertain. St. Paul develops the theme here: *For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"* (Rom 8:15) and here: *And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*(Gal 4:6) The first element of the Spiritual life is to RELATE to God as to a Father who loves us and to experience him as Abba.

2. **REJOICE** – *hallowed by thy name!* The praise and love of God is the foundation of our lives. He is the giver of every good and perfect gift and to Him our praise is due.

Praise and thanksgiving make us people of hope and joy. It is for this that we were made: *We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of God's glory.* Our prayer life should feature much joyful praise. Take a psalm of praise and pray it joyfully. Take the Gloria of the Mass and pray it with gusto! Rejoice in God, praise his name. Give glory to him who rides above the clouds. This is a refreshing way to pray since we were made to praise God and when we do what we were made to do we experience a kind of satisfaction. The second element of the spiritual life is a life of vigorous praise: REJOICE!

3. RECEIVE (REFLECT) – *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* - At the heart of this petition is an openness to God's will, to his word of instruction, to his plan for us and for this world. When Jesus lives in us we hunger for God's word and strive to know his will and have it operative in our life. A basic component of the Spiritual life is receive the word and instruction of God so that his will might be manifest to us and we can obey. We ought to pray the Scriptures (*lectio divina*). We ought to study the faith through the Catechism or other means. These are ways that we become open to God's will that his Kingdom might be manifest in our lives. The Third element of the Spiritual life is an openness to to God's teachings through the Church and Scriptures: RECEIVE!

4. REQUEST – *Give us today our daily bread* - Intercessory prayer is at the heart of the Christian life. Allow bread in this case to be a symbol of all our needs. Our greatest need of course is to be fed by God and thus bread also points to the faithful reception of the Eucharist. Intercessory prayer is often diminished today by many. But take every opportunity to pray for others. When watching the news or reading the newspaper, pray the news. Much of the news contains many things for which to pray: victims of crime, disaster or war, the jobless, homeless and afflicted. Many are locked in sin and bad behavior, corruption, confusion, bad priorities and the like. Many are away from the sacraments and no longer seek their Eucharistic bread who is Christ. Pray, pray, pray. There are also good things we hear of and we should be grateful and ask that solutions be lasting. This intercessory prayer flows from our love and solidarity with others. We see the world with the compassion of Christ and pray. The fourth element of the spiritual life is to intercede for ourselves and others.

5. REPENT – *and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.* - Sin is understood at two levels here: 1: sin – (lowercase) our personal sins and trespasses, also referred to as our debts. 2. Sin (upper case) – referring to the whole climate of sin, the structures of sin that reinforce and underlie our own sins. Referred to here as evil. An essential element of our spiritual life is that we come to recognize the sins and deep drives of sins in our own life and beg deliverance from them as well as mercy. It is also true that we live in a sin soaked world were the powers and principalities of evil have great influence. We cannot fail to recognize this and pray that it's power will be curbed. Surely the rosary is a great tool in this regard as Our Lady has promised. Fasting and other forms or prayer are also helpful antidotes. But in the end we must pray for the Lord's grace and mercy to end evil

in our own lives and that the whole world. The Fifth element of the Spiritual life is to REPENT of evil.

So here then is a structure for our spiritual life contained in the Our Father. Some may use this a structure for daily prayer. Hence if they are going to spend 25 minutes praying they spend about five minutes on each aspect. Others may use this structure for an over all reference for their spiritual life in general. It does not follow that all five need to be done every day without fail, but it does bespeak basic elements that ought to be present in our spiritual life in a regular sort of way.

Here is the Our Father sung in Aramaic, the Language of Jesus:

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