

St Cyprian of Carthage on the Lord's Prayer

["Lord, teach us how to pray." That is the question that prompted the Lord to teach us how to pray to the Father. This is a reflection on that prayer by St Cyprian of Carthage. Cyprian lived at a time of persecution by the Roman empire. Carthage is in North Africa, it was a Roman province, near where St Augustine was born (Thegaste) and near where he died (Hippo) a century later. His writings talk to us from a past millennium and tell of a church which is familiar to us and at the same time still developing. Some things that they asked are the same. How do we pray? What should we ask for? What is important in my life? Is there a purpose to my life? These questions are still with us. St Cyprian uses the Lord's Prayer as a platform to help with these questions. Amazingly we have been able to split the atom, fly to the moon and back, invent Velcro, yet these questions are still with us today., It is wisdom which comes to us from the past. [my notes are in brackets]

Above all, he who preaches peace and unity did not want us to pray by ourselves in private or for ourselves alone. We do not say "My Father, who art in heaven," nor "Give me this day my daily bread." It is not for himself alone that each person asks to be forgiven, not to be led into temptation or to be delivered from evil. Rather, we pray in public as a community, and not for one individual but for all. For the people of God are all one.

God is then the teacher of harmony, peace and unity, and desires each of us to pray for all men, even as he bore all men in himself alone. The three young men shut up in the furnace of fire observed this rule of prayer [see *Daniel 3*]. United in the bond of the Spirit they uttered together the same prayer. The witness of holy Scripture describes this incident for us, so that we might imitate them in our prayer. *Then all three began to sing in unison, blessing God.* Even though Christ had not yet taught them to pray, nevertheless, they spoke as with one voice. [This prayer form Daniel is the canticle in Sunday Morning Prayer Week I]

It is for this reason that their prayer was persuasive and efficacious. For their simple and spiritual prayer of peace merited the presence of the Lord. So too, after the ascension we find the apostles and the disciples praying together in this way. Scripture relates: *They all joined together in continuous prayer, with the women including Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.* They all joined together in continuous prayer. The urgency and the unity of their prayer declares that *God, who fashions a bond of unity among those who live in his home,* will admit into his divine home for all eternity only those who pray in unity. [the importance of being in community was apparent from the very earliest times in the Church — so much for "I'm spiritual but not religious"]

My dear friends, the Lord's Prayer contains many great mysteries of our faith. In these few words there is great spiritual strength, for this summary of divine teaching contains all of our prayers and petitions. And so, the Lord commands us: *Pray then like this: Our Father, who art in heaven.*

We are new men; we have been reborn and restored to God by his grace. We have already begun to be his sons and we can say "Father." John reminds us of this: *He came to his own home, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who received him, who believe in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.* Profess your belief that you are sons of God by giving thanks. Call upon God who is your Father in heaven.

How merciful the Lord is to us, how kind and richly compassionate! He wished us to repeat this prayer in God's sight, to call the Lord our Father and, as Christ is God's Son, be called in turn sons of God! None of us would ever have dared to utter this name unless he himself had allowed us to pray in this way. And therefore, dear friends, we should bear in mind and realize that when we call God our Father we ought also to act like sons. If we are pleased to call him Father, let him in turn be pleased to call us sons.

We should live like the temples of God we are, so that it can be seen that God lives in us. No act of ours should be unworthy of the spirit. Now that we have begun to live in heaven and in spirit, all our thoughts and actions should be heavenly and spiritual; for, as the Lord God himself has said: *Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be despised.* And the blessed Apostle wrote in his letter: *You are not your own; you were bought with a great price. So glorify and bear God in your body.*

We go on to say, *May your name be hallowed.* It is not that we think to make God holy by our prayers; rather we are asking God that his name may be made holy in us. Indeed, how could God be made holy, he who is the source of holiness? Still, because he himself said: *Be holy, for I am holy,* we pray and beseech him that we who have been hallowed in baptism may persevere in what we have begun. And we pray for this every day, for we have need of daily sanctification; sinning every day, we cleanse our faults again and again by constant sanctification.

The apostle Paul instructs us in these words concerning the sanctification which God's loving kindness confers on us: *Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such indeed you were. But you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.* We were sanctified, he says, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. Hence we make our prayer that this sanctification may remain in us. But further, our Lord who is also our judge warns those who have been cured and brought back to life by him to sin no more lest something worse happen to them. Thus we offer constant prayers and beg night and day that this sanctification and new life which is ours by God's favor may be preserved by his protection.

The prayer continues: *Your kingdom come*. We pray that God's kingdom will become present for us in the same way that we ask for his name to be hallowed among us. For when does God not reign, when could there be in him a beginning of what always was and what will never cease to be? What we pray for is that the kingdom promised to us by God will come, the kingdom won by Christ's blood and passion. Then we who formerly were slaves in this world will reign from now on under the dominion of Christ, in accordance with his promise: *Come, O blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom which was prepared for you from the foundation of the world*.

However, my dear friends, it could also be that the kingdom of God whose coming we daily wish for is Christ himself, since it is his coming that we long for. He is our resurrection, since we rise again in him; so too he can be thought of as the kingdom of God because we are to reign in him. And it is good that we pray for God's kingdom; for though it is a heavenly kingdom, it is also an earthly one. But those who have already renounced the world are made greater by holding positions of authority in that kingdom.

After this we add: *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*; we pray not that God should do his will, but that we may carry out his will. How could anyone prevent the Lord from doing what he wills? But in our prayer we ask that God's will be done in us, because the devil throws up obstacles to prevent our mind and our conduct from obeying God in all things. So if his will is to be done in us we have need of his will, that is, his help and protection. No one can be strong by his own strength or secure save by God's mercy and forgiveness. Even the Lord, to show the weakness of the human nature which he bore, said: *Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*, and then, by way of giving example to his disciples that they should do God's will and not their own, he added: *Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*.

All Christ did, all he taught, was the will of God. Humility in our daily lives, an unwavering faith, a moral sense of modesty in conversion, justice in acts, mercy in deed, discipline, refusal to harm others, a readiness to suffer harm, peaceableness with our brothers, a wholehearted love of the Lord, loving in him what is of the Father, fearing him because he is God, preferring nothing to him who preferred nothing to us, clinging tenaciously to his love, standing by his cross with loyalty and courage whenever there is any conflict involving his honor and his name, manifesting in our speech the constancy of our profession and under torture confidence for the fight, and in dying the endurance for which we will be crowned—this is what it means to wish to be a coheir with Christ, to keep God's command; this is what it means to do the will of the Father.

[St Cyprian lived at a time when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire in the 3rd century. When he talks about torture and martyrdom it is something which is a reality for him and his flock. Just as 25 Coptic Christians who were beheaded in Libya in 2015 by Muslim radicals. Cyprian himself was martyred. We have our own "white martyrdom" as opposed to "red martyrdom" that is bloodless martyrdom by the penance we take upon ourselves, by our

efforts in evangelization, by our prayer life, by service to our community. By offering our daily troubles and afflictions as well as our small triumphs and consolations to the Lord we can share in the life of the saints and martyrs in a small but significant way.]

As the Lord's Prayer continues, we ask: *Give us this day our daily bread.* We can understand this petition in a spiritual and in a literal sense. For in the divine plan both senses may help toward our salvation. For Christ is the bread of life; this bread does not belong to everyone, but is ours alone. When we say, our Father, we understand that he is the father of those who know him and believe in him. In the same way we speak of our daily bread, because Christ is the bread of those who touch his body.

Now, we who live in Christ and receive his eucharist, the food of salvation, ask for this bread to be given us every day. Otherwise we may be forced to abstain from this communion because of some serious sin. In this way we shall be separated from the body of Christ, as he taught us in the words: *I am the bread of life which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats my bread will live for ever and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.* Christ is saying, then, that anyone who eats his bread will live for ever. Clearly they possess life who approach his body and share in the Eucharistic communion. For this reason we should be apprehensive and pray that no one has to abstain from this communion, lest he be separated from the body of Christ and be far from salvation. Christ has warned of this: *If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood you will have no life in you.* We pray for our daily bread, Christ, to be given to us. With his help, we who live and abide in him will never be separated from his body and his grace.

[The sacrament of penance was not in the same form as today. We have it very easy, yet we do not take advantage of it as often as we should. The problem is that society at large has changed what they consider sin. Nobody wants to be told they are in sin. All kids get trophies even if they loose. Social sin is worse than personal sin, according to current thought. Consider this, if most people are dishonest with each other, does that not make society worse? If two people cannot be sincere with each other, does not that affect how they interact with others and make society worse? Isn't personal integrity and respect for the other's dignity the basis of social integrity? "Let your yes be yes and your no be no (Mt 5:37)." Our personal integrity has to be intact if society is to be intact like a cog in a machine. That's why personal sins must be attended to and social evils will dissipate. If we all respected each other on a personal level there would be no racism. classism, our any other evil-ism. These are only symptoms the underlying disease is rejection of God in our lives. We each should be responsible personally for the wrongs that we commit. In St Cyprian's time a grave sin could only be forgiven by the Bishop. Some thought that the gravest sin was to deny the faith and turn the holy books to the pagans ("traditore" to transfer the books to the pagans, where we get the word "traitor"). So to apostatize was the greatest sin, along with adultery, fornication, slander, murder and the like. Some did apostatize in devious ways: they paid for a "libelus" a paper that certified they

sacrificed to idols when they really had not (we get our word “libel” from that). Or they actually did sacrifice to idols. They then repented and some who suffered did not want them back. St Cyprian held that the Lord gave St Peter and the Apostles, hence the Pope and the Bishops, the power to forgive sins (Mt 16:19). The penitents would be shut out from the Church after the Gospel and the homily. The Deacon would announce, “Catechumens, Penitents, Energumens out! Close the doors!” Only the worthy could participate in the sacred mysteries of the Eucharist. After Mass the penitents would sit outside and beg the faithful, “Pray for me, brother. Pray for me, sister.” Usually they were given communion on their death bed! St. Cyprian saw a persecution coming and he called in all the penitents and gave them communion for strength to face their trials to come. We have it so easy!]

After this we ask pardon for our sins, in the words: *and forgive us our trespasses*. The gift of bread is followed by a prayer for forgiveness. To be reminded that we are sinners and forced to ask forgiveness for our faults is prudent and sound. Even while we are asking God’s forgiveness, our hearts are aware of our state! This command to pray daily for our sins reminds us that we commit sin every day. No one should complacently think himself innocent, lest his pride lead to further sin. Such is the warning that John gives us in his letter: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins*. His letter includes both points, that we should beg for forgiveness for our sins, and that we receive pardon when we do. He calls the Lord faithful, because he remains loyal to his promise, by forgiving us our sins. He both taught us to pray for our sins and our faults, and also promised to show us a father’s mercy and forgiveness.

[Here follows a different translation to finish off the Treatise on The Lord’s Prayer, that is, Treatise Number 4, which can be found in the New Advent web site. I have been asked about the Holy Father’s changing the words “lead us not into temptation” I looked it up in the Greek and “lead us not into temptation” or “submit us not to the test” — same thing—that is the Gospel. I would not presume to change the words of the Gospel so I will continue to say the Lords Prayer as my parents taught me, albeit in Spanish “let us not fall into temptation”. In Latin “ne nos inducas in temptationem” (do not ‘induce’ ‘lead’ us into temptation). Can the Lord lead us into temptation? He’s God. He can do what ever He wants! I suggest reading the Book of Job.]

Moreover, the Lord of necessity admonishes us to say in [prayer](#), “*And lead us not into [temptation](#).*” In which words it is shown that the adversary can do nothing against us except God shall have previously permitted it; so that all our [fear](#), and devotion, and [obedience](#) may be turned towards [God](#), since in our [temptations](#) nothing is permitted to [evil](#) unless power is given from Him.

Now power is given against us in two modes: either for punishment when we [sin](#), or for [glory](#) when we are [proved](#)... But when we ask that we may not come into [temptation](#), we are reminded of our infirmity and weakness in that we thus ask, lest any should insolently vaunt himself, lest any should proudly and arrogantly assume anything to himself, lest any should take to himself the [glory](#) either of confession or of suffering as his own, when the Lord Himself, teaching humility, said, Watch and [pray](#), that you enter not into [temptation](#); the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak; [Mark 14:38](#) so that while a [humble](#) and submissive confession comes first, and all is attributed to [God](#), whatever is sought for suppliantly with [fear](#) and [honour](#) of [God](#), may be granted by His own loving-kindness.

27. After all these things, in the conclusion of the [prayer](#) comes a brief clause, which shortly and comprehensively sums up all our petitions and our [prayers](#). For we conclude by saying, *"But deliver us from [evil](#),"* comprehending all adverse things which the enemy attempts against us in this world, from which there may be a faithful and sure protection if God deliver us, if He afford His help to us who [pray](#) for and implore it. And when we say, Deliver us from [evil](#), there remains nothing further which ought to be asked. When we have once asked for God's protection against [evil](#), and have obtained it, then against everything which the [devil](#) and the world work against us we stand secure and safe. For what [fear](#) is there in this life, to the man whose guardian in this life is God?