

# THE LORD'S PRAYER

Rev. Patrick A. Rose

*“In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name”*  
(Matthew 6:9).

Everything in the Word is holy. Every single least part is filled with an infinity of Divine wisdom (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6620). Some parts of the Word, though, have a particular holiness. In the Old Testament the Ten Commandments are, for example, said to be “so holy that nothing could be holier” (*True Christian Religion* 283). They are said to be “a brief summary of the whole Word” (*True Christian Religion* 290). So, too, in the New Testament the Lord’s Prayer has a special significance, a special holiness. It is said that this prayer “comprehends all celestial and spiritual things” (*Spiritual Experiences* 1790). So great is the wisdom within the Lord’s prayer that it is said, “in the contents of this prayer there are more things than the universal heaven is capable of comprehending” (*Arcana Coelestia* 6619; see *Spiritual Experiences* 1790).

Now this really is an amazing statement. The Lord’s Prayer is so very brief. In one translation it is only sixty-seven words long. It is so short that even if we say it slowly, it takes less than a minute to recite. And yet, despite this, these relatively few words of the Lord’s Prayer contain within themselves more wisdom than heaven itself can contain. This is why the Lord’s Prayer is so very holy. It forms a summary, as it were, of the whole of the Lord’s Word. It is a focusing of all of the Lord’s wisdom into a few short words, words which therefore have more power than we could ever imagine.

This certainly is not the way this prayer appears on the surface. It seems simple, and does not appear to speak of anything complicated or involved. Indeed, if we consider the context in which the Lord instituted this prayer, it was given precisely because of its brevity and simplicity. The Lord’s Prayer is given twice, once in Matthew and once in Luke. In Luke the Lord is simply answering a disciple who asks, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). In Matthew, though, the Lord is talking about the hypocrites and the heathen, both of whom make a show of reciting long prayers—people who “think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). We are not to pray like this, the Lord said.

And so He then taught the words of His short prayer. Concerning this we read in *Apocalypse Explained* that, “As Divine worship itself consists primarily in life and not in prayers, the Lord said that in praying there should not be much speaking and repetition” (325:6). Now it does not follow that the Lord’s Prayer was given simply as a way of showing that prayer is relatively unimportant. Prayer might not be as important as the way we actually live, but it is still very important. Its importance, though, comes about because of its relationship to the life of religion.

Now to understand the role of prayer we must realize that it involves more than appears on the surface. When we pray, the appearance is that we are communicating something to the Lord. We talk to Him and ask Him for things. This is the way it appears. Obviously, though, this cannot be all that there is to prayer, for it would then be a meaningless exercise. Why tell the Lord what we want when He already knows our thoughts? Why try to communicate with Him when He already knows what

we have to say? And this is what the Lord points out in introducing His prayer: “Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him” (Matthew 6:8).

When we ask the Lord for something in prayer, we are not telling Him something He didn't previously know. He already knows what we need. Indeed, if our request be a worthy one, then He is the one who inspired us to ask for it! Prayer is thus, essentially, not so much a way for us to communicate our thoughts to the Lord as it is a way in which the Lord can communicate *with us*. He instructs us to pray, and inspires our prayers, in order that our minds might be opened to receive His influx. This is why the Lord wants us to pray to Him. He wants us to communicate with Him and to ask Him for spiritual life, not as a way of telling Him what we need, but as a way of opening our minds to what He already offers us. Without such an effort on our own part we would not receive and appropriate what the Lord gives us (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 376). So a person must make the effort to pray to the Lord as if of himself. What an individual contributes as he prays, though, is far less than what the Lord Himself does during this prayer.

This is why the long prayers of the hypocrites and of the heathen were ineffective. The idea that prayer depends primarily on what the person contributes to the process naturally leads to the idea that the longer the prayer, and the more effort the person puts into it, the more effective it will be. What a person does by praying, though, is open himself up to influx from the Lord. It is this influx which is important, not the length of the prayer. This is also why prayer that is separated from a life of actual good contributes nothing. Where there is nothing of good in the person's heart, then there is nothing into which the Lord can flow. Prayer then becomes nothing more than the saying of words, words which are empty and devoid of spiritual life. The prayer may be long, but it is exceedingly shallow.

If, however, someone is sincerely endeavoring to live a life of good, if he is making the effort to put away what is evil and wicked, then the words of his prayers are by no means empty but become vessels into which the Lord Himself can flow. And because the person's prayer is only an invitation for the Lord's influx, such a prayer need not be long. It has depth instead of length. This is the case with all the prayers of a good person. When such a person prays to the Lord in his own words—something that also must be done, for to do so is useful, good, and indeed necessary—his prayers tend not to be long and involved, but simple, direct, and sincere instead. His prayers have depth, for they proceed from the heart. But of all the prayers a person might use, the Lord's Prayer has the greatest depth of all. It has greater depth than any other prayer.

And so, given that we are sincerely trying to follow the Lord by obeying His commandments, we get down on our knees, or at least bow our heads. We turn our thoughts to the Lord, and we talk to Him, talk to Him in our own words. And then, after this, we begin to recite the words of His prayer. What is it that then happens? The fact of the matter is that we ourselves may not be aware of much happening at all. We may feel that all we have done is say our prayers, and that is that. Something has happened though.

When prayer is spoken of in the Word it is said to signify “revelation,” because in sincere prayer there is an opening of the interiors of the mind, with an influx received into the thought or the perception. In ways we may not be aware of, the Lord has changed the way we think about and look at things. Our perspective has changed. We have received revelation. It is not the same as what we learn from reading *written* revelation. We are not given new truths. We are, however, given a new perspective on those truths that we already have. It is said that if a person “prays from love and faith, and for only heavenly and spiritual things, there then comes forth in the prayer something like a revelation (which is manifested in the affection of him that prays) as to hope, consolation, or a certain

inward joy” (*Arcana Coelestia* 2535). Sometimes we sense this hope, consolation or joy. At other times we may not. But, still, through our saying His prayer, the Lord has indeed changed us, changed us from within.

Now we have spoken of how the Lord’s Prayer, although it is short and apparently simple, contains more than all the heavens themselves could comprehend. It contains “all celestial and spiritual things” (*Spiritual Experiences* 1790). But where, exactly, are these things to be found? Certainly they are not hidden behind the ink on the printed page? Nor are they hidden within the sounds of the words. These things are within the mind, within the ideas which enter the mind as the Lord’s Prayer is recited.

Now the mind, and the ideas it contains, are far more complex than appears on the surface. On the surface, one idea or thought in our minds might appear very simple. Contained within it on a deeper level, though, are far more things than we could imagine. Take the beginning words of the prayer: “Our Father.” As we say these words we usually quickly pass on to the rest of the prayer. We have, perhaps, only a very brief, seemingly vague, idea in our mind: the Lord is our Father. But within this simple idea of “Father” are contained countless associations and feelings. It serves as an anchor, a base, for all kinds of other ideas and affections. Beyond our awareness, deep within the mind, these affections, thoughts and perceptions are brought into play. And in these deeper regions of our mind, associations with countless spirits and angels are formed.

The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church talks of ideas being transformed as they ascend upward. For example, the natural idea of bread, “our daily bread,” is associated with all kinds of thoughts and feelings relating to nourishment, energy, enrichment—all that is good. And the angels who are with us when we pray are then keenly aware, not of natural food, but of the way in which all that is good constantly comes from the Lord alone. This is how correspondence works—natural ideas unfold as they ascend, presenting spiritual ideas before the angels and, indeed, before the deeper degrees of our own minds as well. Truth from the Lord flows down, filling natural ideas from within, filling them with a myriad spiritual truths.

All this is happening as we say the Lord’s Prayer. Quite beyond our conscious awareness, all kinds of heavenly associations are brought into play. We proceed quickly from word to word as we say the prayer. We may not even fully concentrate on each idea. Nevertheless, at each point, instantly, the interior degrees of our minds are affected and changed as we are brought into communication with one heavenly society after another. It is a miracle, and it is something the Lord brings about every time we say His prayer.

And as the Lord does this, as He changes us through the saying of His prayer, He does so in perfect accommodation to our state. Each time we say the prayer, therefore, it affects us in a different way, for we are in a different state. We indeed say the same words each time, but the effect upon us is always different, with infinite variety (see *Arcana Coelestia* 6476).

If we are in a selfish state, the effect will tend to be minimal. Suppose, for example, we are in a state of spiritual pride, a state in which we are thinking more of what *we* can do than of what the Lord can accomplish. We then draw to ourselves spirits who have a similar sense of pride in themselves. Such spirits, it is said, distract a person from his prayers. They make it almost impossible for him to concentrate (see *Spiritual Experiences* 3000). When we think primarily of ourselves rather than of the Lord, our spiritual associations are such that the Lord can give us very little through His prayer.

On the other hand, when our minds are more open, when we focus our hearts and minds upon the Lord and His power, then the influx we receive from Him is far greater. And this opening up of the heart to the Lord is far more important than the degree to which we concentrate on each individual word of the prayer. When little children say the Lord's prayer, for example, their ideas may be very simple, but there is often a fuller and more wonderful influx into their little minds, minds which are wide open, than there is into the minds of adults, minds which may be more sophisticated but may also resist the Lord's influx (see *Spiritual Experiences* 2435). A similar thing is said of very simple adults, who, in their simplicity, can be open to influx from the Lord (see *Spiritual Experiences* 3531).

Now this does not mean that the Lord prefers us to be ignorant. What it shows, though, is that it is far better to approach the Lord with an open heart, and to simply say His prayer, than to try to fill each word of the prayer with meaning from our own thoughts. We should be conscious of what we are saying. A rote recitation of the words is meaningless, but it is also said that the "ideas are more filled by the Lord while a person does not particularly attend to them or does not aim himself to fill them" (*Spiritual Experiences* 1826). It is far better to simply say the prayer from the heart than to try to fill each word with our own ideas, and so involve our own propriums (*ibid.*). The Lord Himself will fill and give meaning to the words as He leads us, with infinite variety according to our changing states.

There is a wonderful variety in the way the Lord leads us. Nevertheless, the goal to which He leads us through this prayer never changes. It is the Lord's Prayer. It opens by focusing our minds upon the Lord. He is "our Father." And throughout the course of the prayer, this idea continues and is added to. Because He is our Heavenly Father, the source of all love and all life, His name—that is, everything that is from Him—is to be "hallowed," regarded with holiness. Then He can rule our hearts and minds. His kingdom can come. And so in each phrase this focus upon the Lord is developed and strengthened in our minds. The Lord's Prayer is said to be like "a column that grows larger from top to bottom" (*Arcana Coelestia* 8864:4). Inmost things are added to, successively, and as this happens throughout the prayer, this inmost idea—the Lord as our Father—continues to reign universally.

The Lord's Prayer turns our minds to the Lord in a wonderful way. The life of religion comes first; prayer without life is empty. But so, too, is life without prayer. During the course of life we can so easily forget about the Lord. Therefore, we need to turn to Him constantly. This is why we say His prayer every day, so that He can gradually direct our minds toward Himself. Indeed, there are enough passages which speak of prayer morning and evening to lead us to believe that each day should open and then close with this prayer of the Lord. Our day begins with Him, it looks toward Him, and it closes with Him. Our lives are thus enveloped by His presence. This is the miracle of the Lord's Prayer. It has great power, the power to bring us into the presence of the Lord Himself.

This is why the Lord instituted His prayer—that He might turn us to Himself, encompass us with His presence, hold us in His arms, and fill us, from the very depths of our souls and minds, with the sacred blessings of His Divine love and wisdom. "Our Father, who art in the heavens, hallowed be Thy name."

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 5:6-21; Matthew 6:1-15; *Arcana Coelestia* 6619

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