

Praying and Living the Our Father

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*Our Father, who aren't in heaven
How-do-you-know my name?*

The fact that young children often misquote the Our Father tells us the importance of this prayer. Children hear it so frequently at home, at liturgy, whenever their Christian family gathers for prayer that they begin to repeat it even before they understand its meaning, thus mixing up some of the words.

What a gift we have in this prayer to our loving God which Jesus himself left us! During this millennium year dedicated to God the Father, what better way to celebrate than to spend time and prayer deepening our awareness and appreciation of the Our Father.

(This article uses language and format geared to catechetical settings with children and youth in schools, catechetical programs, and youth ministry settings. However, most of the suggestions could also be used at home in family settings, in adult gatherings, during parish meetings, and for each person's individual prayer.)

Before we look at some suggestions for prayer and activities:

Some Background for the Catechist

- Three versions of the Our Father date from apostolic times. The shortest, and perhaps closest to Jesus' actual words, is found in Luke 11:1-14. Matthew's longer version (6:9-13) is the basis of the formula we pray today.

The first-century Didache, a work that has been called "the first catechism," adds "for yours are the power and the glory forever. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, another ancient document, inserts "the kingdom." This seems to be a direct reference to 1 Chronicles 29:11-13 – the praise of David at the dedication of the temple gifts. It is thought that the phrase was probably added by the early church as a faithful response during worship.

After Vatican II, Pope Paul VI, inspired by the *Apostolic Constitutions*, introduced the phrase into the Roman Missal, linking it with the recitation of the Our Father during liturgy.

- The Our Father can be said to sum up all that we believe and hope for. It consists of an address ("Our Father") and two sets of petitions. The first set focuses on the action of

God as Father and the coming of God's kingdom (praise before petitions). The second set of petitions focuses on our needs and fears as they are met by the action of God.

- For a wonderful explanation and interpretation of the Our Father, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2759 - 2865) before you begin this prayerful reflection and study with your young people.

Some Prayers, Reflections and Activities

- ◆ Discuss with the children/youth the importance of the Our Father; the frequency with which the Church prays it; the times we can pray it personally and communally. The Didache, an early church document, recommends that it be prayed three times a day.
- ◆ Reflect on the meaning of the Our Father through a guided meditation. For an example, see *Time with Jesus* by Thomas F. Catucci (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1993).
- ◆ Have the children/youth take a disposable camera and go on a month-long search (during their days at school, in their neighborhoods, with their families, etc.) to take pictures of situations which illustrate each line of the Our Father.
- ◆ Throughout our history, the Our Father has been put to music in various settings. Locate as many as you can. Use these to frequently sing the praying of the Our Father.
- ◆ Have the young people make an Our Father booklet. Devote a page to each phrase of the prayer. Taking a page a week (don't rush through it), the children can use drawings, paint, abstract art, poetry, symbols, prayerful reflections, newspaper stories, etc. to illustrate the meaning of each line.
- ◆ Pray the Our Father with gestures. Children and youth could design their own gestures or the catechist could teach a set of gestures. For an example, see *Ways to Pray with Children* by Barbara Ann Bretherton (Twenty-Third Publications, 1996). (You could also use American Sign Language, Native American signs or simple dance motions.
- ◆ Compare the two versions of the Our Father in Scripture: Luke 11:1-4 and Matthew 6:9-13.
- ◆ Read the Our Father in different Scripture translations. Are there differences? Do they help you deepen your understanding of the meaning of the prayer?
- ◆ Proclaim the Our Father to young children in a prayer service modeled on the Presentation of the Our Father to the RCIA catechumens. For an example, see

Celebrating Catholic Rites and Rituals in Religion Class by Kathy Chateau and Paula Miller (Twenty-Third Publications, 1998).

- ◆ Help the children to create napkin rings for each member of their families with the Our Father printed on them. (The prayer can be run off on mailing labels.)
- ◆ The Our Father is one thing which unites all Christians. Once in a while, before praying the prayer, invite the children to stop and recall that awesome fact: this prayer has been prayed – is being prayed – by millions of people.
- ◆ Design and make an Our Father quilt with each quilt block containing the words and illustration of one of the lines of the prayer.
- ◆ Have the children look up (or find themselves) and then reflect on various Scripture passages which deepen the message of each line of the Our Father:
 - Our Father: Isaiah 6:3
 - who art in heaven: Acts 17:28
 - Hallowed be thy name: Romans 14:11; 1 Cor 6:11
 - Thy Kingdom come: 11 Peter 3:13
 - Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: John 15:17; Rom 12:2; Mt 7:21
 - Give us this day our daily bread: Luke 12:29
 - Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us:
 - Luke 17:4
 - And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil: Eph 5:8-21
 - For thine is the Kingdom: Colossians 1:20; 1 Chronicles 29: 11-13
 - and the power: 1 Corinthians 1:25
 - and the glory for ever. Amen.: Revelation 4:8, 11)
- ◆ Using a musical setting of the Our Father, have the children/youth find slides which depict the meanings of each line of the prayer.
- ◆ Encourage the children to work together in small groups to write an extended version of the Our Father. (Each group might want to work on one phrase.) For instance:

Our Father...

- ... our God who loves us without measure
- ... our God who is Lover of Life
- ... Gentle Goodness
- ... Creator of all that is

Who art in heaven...

- ... who walks the earth with us
- ... who carries me when I fall
- ... who is with the sick, the poor, the dying, the suffering
- ... who is in Kosovo, Somalia, Rwanda, and Iraq

- ◆ St. Ignatius suggested to those who were searching to grow in prayer to pray the Our Father very slowly and silently in harmony with the pattern of deep, relaxed breathing. Pray only one word with each slow breath, letting the mind, heart and imagination dwell on that single word.
- ◆ St. Ignatius also suggested a second method: become relaxed and dwell on the first word of the Our Father, for as long as it is meaningful. Then, move on to the second word. (A young novice once asked Teresa of Avila, “Mother, what shall I do to become a contemplative?” Without missing a beat, Teresa responded, “Say the Our Father – but take an hour to say it.”) Lead the children/youth in a quiet prayer time which allows them the freedom and space to pray in this way.
- ◆ Create a bulletin board with newspaper or magazine articles which depict the various lines of the Our Father.
- ◆ Listed here are short prayers children might say to God. Can they match each to a line of the Our Father?
 - Help me to remember that everything is a gift from God.
 - Thank you, God, for the personal relationship I have with you.
 - Thank you, God, for always answering my prayers.
 - May everything I say honor God.
 - Thank you, God, for fresh starts.
 - Yes!
 - May everyone I meet know that I am a Christian.
 - Be with me in everything I do.
 - Help me do what You want me to do.
- ◆ In the Middle Ages, before the printing press, written material had to be hand-lettered. Very special manuscripts, such as Scripture passages, were often embellished with colorful designs. Invite the children to look through older copies of Bibles to find examples of these illuminated letters or manuscripts similar to those designed during the Middle Ages. Have the children letter the Our Father (or use calligraphy), decorating the first word of the prayer or the first letter of each new petition.
- ◆ Choose one petition of the Our Father. Invite the children/youth to write their own prayer, using that petition as their focus or theme.
- ◆ There is a building in the Holy Land which contains sixty large plaques, each one showing the Our Father in a different language. Invite the children/youth to learn the Our Father in another language.
- ◆ Create a jigsaw puzzle to help review the Our Father. (The simple words of this prayer outline the guidelines for life. Just as it is required to use all of the pieces to finish the puzzle, it is necessary to include all petitions to complete the model prayer.)

On a piece of copy paper, draw or trace pictures of Jesus praying or of praying hands. Use markers to add color. Glue the picture to a piece of poster board. On the poster board side, draw ten puzzle piece divisions with pencil. In each section print one line of the prayer. Cut apart the pieces. Each time the puzzle is put together, the children review the prayer. (Older children can make these puzzles for younger children.)

- ◆ What would God say to young people while they prayed the Our Father? Imagining and reflecting on this possibility can help concretize the challenging meanings of the prayer. For an example, see “If God Should Speak,” in *Worship Services for Youth* Groups by Jim Marian (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).
- ◆ St. Augustine said, “Run through all the holy prayers (in Scripture), and I do not think that you will find anything in them that is not contained and included in the Lord’s Prayer.” (CCC, #2763) Help the children to analyze the Our Father from this perspective: a most perfect prayer which is a summary of the whole Gospel. (The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also quotes Tertullian, the first of the Latin Fathers, describing the Our Father as “truly the summary of the whole Gospel.” #2761)
- ◆ Make a prayer cloth for your prayer table using fabric crayons. Write the lines of the Our Father around the edges of the prayer cloth.
- ◆ Help children to imagine as many ways as possible to live the Our Father in their daily lives. For example:

Give us this day our daily bread

Rely on God; don’t worry
Talk to God about the things we need
Always give thanks
Help those who are hungry

And forgive us our trespasses, as we ...

Pray the Act of Contrition
Ask for forgiveness
Forgive others
Don’t hold grudges

- ◆ Early Christian art often appeared in the form of triptychs, structures with three-hinged panels. The arch-shaped wooden sections were painted to depict a religious theme or Bible passage. Invite the children to create a triptych to help review the petitions of the Our Father. Cut a piece of posterboard in half, which will produce a rectangle approximately 10” x 14.” Place the rectangle horizontally and mark off three equal sections. Draw lines for each section, then press firmly over each line with a scissors blade. (This will allow the posterboard to bend easily.) Fold the left and right flaps over the center; then, at one time, cut the three sections into arches. On one side of the triptych, print the petitions relating to God – one per panel (Our

Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven). On the reverse side, letter the petitions relating to ourselves (Give us this day our daily bread; Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil). Fold the end panels slightly, so the triptych can stand up. It will be best to display the design so both sides can be seen.

- ◆ Invite the children to paraphrase the Our Father, putting each statement into their own words.
- ◆ Encourage the children to come up with a symbol to help them remember each line of the Our Father. For instance:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name:
the word G-O-D
Thy kingdom come: a crown
Thy will be done: a heart
Give us this day: a loaf of bread
And forgive us...: a cross
And lead us not ... a foot

These symbols could be made out of playdough or construction paper.

- ◆ Pray with the children/youth this reflection on the meaning of the Our Father (adapted from a reading - author unknown):

I cannot say Our, if my religion has no room for others and their needs.
I cannot say Father, if I do not demonstrate this relationship in my daily living.
I cannot say who art in heaven, if all my interests and concerns are in things and possessions.
I cannot say hallowed be thy name, if I, who is called by God's name, am not holy.
I cannot say thy kingdom come, if I act as though I am the center of the universe.
I cannot say thy will be done, if I am unwilling or resentful of having it in my life.
I cannot say on earth as it is in heaven, unless I am truly a person for others, willing to serve and help wherever it is needed.
I cannot say give us this day our daily bread, without doing my part to provide for the needs of all those around me.
I cannot say forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, if I continue to harbor a grudge against anyone.
I cannot say lead us not into temptation, if I deliberately choose to remain in a situation where I am likely to be tempted.
I cannot say deliver us from evil, if I am not prepared to back up my plea for God's help with constant prayer.
I cannot say thine is the kingdom, if I do not act as part of that kingdom – responsible, caring, and willing to serve.

I cannot say thine is the power, if I fear what my neighbors and friends may say or do.

I cannot say thine is the glory, if I am seeking my own glory first.

I cannot say forever, if I am too anxious about each day's worries and activities.

I cannot say Amen, unless I honestly say, "Cost what it may, this is my prayer."

Thinking about the young child's paraphrase of the beginning lines of the Our Father with which this article began:

Our Father, who aren't in heaven

How-do-you-know my name?

perhaps his interpretation is correct also: God isn't just "in heaven;" God is everywhere. And what a wonderful feeling: to be so convinced that God does know me by name!