

# Did Jesus actually give us the Lord's Prayer?

**D**ear Father Kerper: I have three questions about the Lord's Prayer. First, can we be sure that Jesus actually wrote it? I've read somewhere that the Church made it up after he died. Second, isn't it very misleading to call God "Father" all the time? God is bigger than any single image and "Father" seems too narrow. Third, why does the version at Mass keep very old-fashioned words like "thy" and "hallowed"? They seem so out of place.

Thank you for your questions. Because almost every Christian knows the Our Father by heart and because we say it so frequently, we may eventually find it stale, boring, and even obsolete. And so probing questions like yours, which force us to take a critical look at the Our Father, can actually deepen our understanding of this simple yet glorious prayer.

## JESUS AS THE SOURCE

Some people instantly dismiss Jesus as the real author of the Our Father because the New Testament contains two versions: the long one in Saint Matthew (6:9-13) and the short one in Saint Luke (11:2-4). Pope Benedict frankly admitted this in his beautiful book, *Jesus of Nazareth* (2007). He made this crucial comment: "The discussion of which text is more original is not superfluous, but neither is it the main issue. In both versions we are praying with Jesus." (pg. 133)

Here, as always, we must remember

that when Jesus preached he never had stenographers on hand who were writing down every word precisely. Rather, his disciples listened to him very carefully and soon repeated his words to others. Constant repetition over time produced a collection of very reliable memories of his shorter sayings and longer statements, such as the Our Father, which is the only prayer he left to us intact. Eventually, the Gospel writers transformed these "oral traditions" into texts, which are very reliable, though certainly not as precise as a court reporter's transcript today.

In defense of the Lord's "authorship" of the Our Father, I cite John P. Meier, a highly rigorous, careful, and immensely knowledgeable Scripture scholar. In volume 4 of his massive *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Father Meier stated that there is "a fairly secure judgment that some primitive form of the Lord's Prayer goes back to Jesus." (p.71, note 78)

In light of this scholarly assessment, we can safely reaffirm what Pope

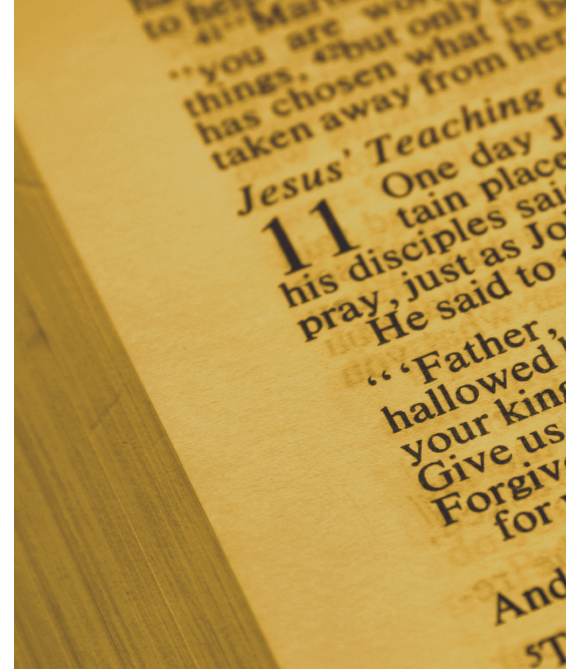
Benedict said so succinctly and beautifully: "We are praying with Jesus." Think of what happens: Whenever we say the Our Father we have within our mouths and minds the *essential* prayer uttered by the Lord. For this reason the priest at Mass always introduces the Lord's Prayer by saying, "We dare to say." With wonder and awe we allow the Son's prayer to flow through us to the Father.

## GOD AS FATHER

I fully agree with you that "Father" is a "narrow" image of God. After all, God is neither male nor female, has no physical dimensions, and can never be adequately portrayed.

However, the Our Father's most marvelous element is precisely the Lord's command to address God as Father – not Creator, not Lord, not Friend, not even "God." Here, unfortunately, we run into a problem with translation. Jesus spoke Aramaic. With just one exception, he always addressed God as "Abba," the term used by children when speaking to their fathers. In English, the equivalent word would be "Daddy" or some other informal term. The Greek text uses the word "Pater," which our translation renders as "Father." The problem, of course, is that our familiar translation cannot convey the astounding and very touching intimacy that exists between the Father/Abba and the Son.

To remedy this linguistic deficiency, we must always strive to hear the "Abba/





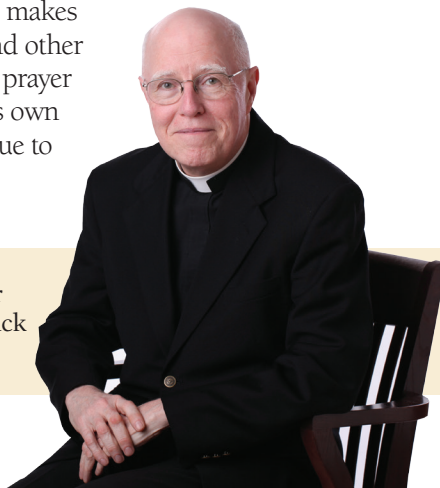
Daddy” underneath “Father/Pater.” This is absolutely crucial for only then can we realize the “miracle” of the Our Father: Jesus has *graciously permitted* us to speak to his Father in *exactly* the same way he does. Moreover, this is not about mere words. Rather, the privilege of praying the Our Father powerfully reminds us of an essential truth: we are indeed the adopted sons and daughters of God who enter into a deeply intimate relationship with the Father of Jesus, who joins himself to us. The “our” of the Our Father signifies our union with the Son, not just our fellow believers.

As to calling God “Our Mother,” we must remember that when we pray the Lord’s Prayer we must become fully united with Christ. As such we must enter into his actual experience as it truly is. This includes his “parentage” – Jesus has one true father, who is God, and a one true mother, who is Mary. We have the same “spiritual parentage.” By replacing father with mother, creator, or some other gender-free term we distort the intimate relationship between father and son, which we share, and revert to something much inferior to what the Lord offers.

### OLD-FASHIONED LANGUAGE

Though Mass text translations tend to change over time, the Our Father has been left untouched for many years. Strange words like “hallowed” for “make holy” and “trespasses” for “sins” have been left alone for the sake of stable familiarity, which makes it possible for Catholics and other Christians to pray the one prayer that comes from the Lord’s own mouth. And so, we continue to “dare to say...Our Father.”

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