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Introduction

Countless books have been written about the Lord's Prayer, most by people far more qualified than I. There is one reason that I prayerfully agreed to write this book: The Lord's Prayer has literally changed my life. I trust it can change yours too. If you want to learn how to pray, this is where you start. If you want to deepen your prayer life, the Lord's Prayer is where you begin again.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are given a glimpse into the very heart of God. In this prayer, spanning just a few verses of the gospel, Jesus teaches us *how to pray* by simultaneously teaching *what to pray (for)*. This is not the Lord simply teaching us what to say or how to say it. This is our Savior teaching us how to think, how to love, and how to receive God's love. Jesus is offering us a heart transplant. We have the opportunity to trade in our hard and wounded hearts for his compassionate and Sacred Heart.

The Lord's Prayer is simultaneously many things and one thing. It is the perfect prayer "from the perfect Pray-er."¹ It is adoration. It is petition. It is a reordering and reprioritizing so that we know what's most important. It is an invitation to a deeper relationship. It begs and celebrates God for his grace. It rejoices in the Father's fidelity. It promises eternity and offers hope to humanity. The Lord's Prayer expresses the totality of what it means to love and the summation of what it means to be a true child of God.

Jesus gave us these words after being asked about his own prayer life. The Master was always retreating—to the mountain, to the seashore, to the garden. Everywhere Christ traveled,

he had his favorite places of solitude for peace and conversation with the Father. For Jesus, prayer was never an obligation or daily ritual; prayer was his very breath. His personal prayer paved the way for what we now consider a communal one, and that is the point: The Lord’s Prayer is both private and public, both personal and ecclesial. It comes straight from the body of Christ for the body of Christ.

Why this “R” Father?

This book is not intended to be a deeply theological treatise on the Lord’s Prayer. This is not an exegetical study on the Scriptures. Consider it a reintroduction, a dusting off of a family heirloom, a quick spring cleaning for the soul. On the pages that follow, you’ll be immersed in the timeless wisdom offered in the Scriptures, Church writings, and the saints, and you’ll be able to draw some lessons from the humbling personal experiences of this saint-in-the-making.

I grew up as a cradle Catholic, vigilantly learning my prayers and reciting them with discipline. However, even as I got older, my devotion was rooted in ritual, not relationship. Prayer occupied a place in my schedule but not in my heart. I had no idea of the wisdom, peace, and power of the sacraments or prayer. The Church offered me Niagara Falls, but I saw only a leaking faucet. I had grown up physically and mentally, but spiritually I had remained a child.

It wasn’t until I was charged with the catechesis and spiritual upbringing of young people that I began to see how shallow my own prayer life truly was. Then I discovered that I could deepen my prayer life by turning to the prayer that Jesus taught us. By

meditating and reflecting on the Lord's Prayer, I've gained a newfound respect and deep-seated love for this prayer and all that it has shown me about our Father in heaven.

The Lord's Prayer is an invitation into a daily relationship. The fact is that if we go to bed underwhelmed by God's love, we weren't as present to him as he was to us that day. This prayer orders our priorities right from the beginning: God first, us second; worship before petition. If our prayer is only about petition (what we have to say), we lose the worship, the adoration, the thanksgiving, and the ability to discern what God is saying to us. In short, we lose the relationship.

Unfortunately, the one-way, shorthanded, and sporadic communication that exists in our social-networking culture can

Because the Lord's Prayer is so familiar to us, we risk reciting it instead of praying it.

deafen us spiritually. And because the Lord's Prayer is so familiar to us, we risk reciting it instead of praying it. My hope and prayer for you is that this book will help you develop a deeper, two-way relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as a renewed love and devotion for this prayer that Jesus taught us.

Is there a danger in reading this book? If you read it and rededicate yourself to this prayer, your life is going to change. Things might get better quickly. Things might get "worse" before they get better. The irresistible love of God is gentle, not forceful. He will come into your life in ways you are probably not expecting.

The only thing the devil wants less than for me to write this book is for you to read it. I offer that sentence in confidence, not because I believe my words to be so insightful and eloquent, but because I know the Lord’s Prayer to be powerful. The devil doesn’t want you anywhere near the Father or the prayer that leads you deeper into his heart. The evil one has our modern culture right where he wants it—untrusting, and feeling as if the only way to survive is by our own knowledge and know-how. Jesus Christ says differently.

As children, we were told that school is about the three “R”s: reading, writing and ’rithmetic. In this book we’re going to take a look at a series of “R”s too—fourteen, to be exact. We are going to take Jesus’ words, line by line, to see what we are really *praying* in the Lord’s Prayer. In contemplating each of these fourteen “R”s, you will be given ideas on how to respond to the Lord’s Prayer each day, so that it might come more to life in your life.

Now let us pray.

Mark Hart

CHAPTER ONE

“Our”

An Invitation into **RELATIONSHIP**

I vividly recall my Little League days: a dozen hyperactive young boys wearing plastic-mesh baseball caps with iron-on letters, scrambling around the dugout and infield in search of not a team win but individual glory (and eventually snow cones). I was a left-handed batter, which did not bode well for me.

In professional baseball, southpaws offer a team an advantage, a strategic tool that has game-changing implications. In the league of little boys, however, left-handed batters are a scourge. I quickly learned that pinpoint accuracy and prepubescent pitchers do not coincide. I got hit by the ball . . . a lot!

So bad was the pitching that my coach actually began encouraging me to “lean in” to the pitch rather than to swing at it. At least, he reasoned, I would get a walk. As the hitter involved in this equation, I disagreed.

“Lean in, Mark,” my coach would shout exuberantly, to my dismay. I would look at him quizzically, pretending not to understand why he would encourage such an act of self-mortification. All the more urgently, he would plead: “*Lean in, Mark! There’s no ‘I’ in team.*”

In those moments, my eleven-year-old conscience faced a challenging question, a social dilemma that only intensified in the years to come: Am I willing to sacrifice my body for the good of the many?

My answer then was “Nope!” I didn’t lean in. I got the hit and was later tagged out. It didn’t really matter. We were already down by ten runs and lost the game due to the mercy rule. “Our” team lost but “I” won. I got my snow cone—blueberry, if my memory serves me correctly.

Taking a step back before we move forward

When it comes to our modern world, one might say that the “I’s” have it. Look no further than Facebook or the aptly named MySpace. These online “communities” are rooted less in the “we” than they are in the “me.” Twitter is even more self-focused, aiming only at what we have to tell others about ourselves in 140 characters or less. Many of us prefer the video-game version of reality—a “Wii” with two distinct “i’s.” Ironically, while typing that sentence, I heard my iPhone ringing. Thank you, Lord; I’ll consider that a confirmation of my point.

Dietitians and trainers warn us about being out of shape, but modern culture is not in bad shape so much from what it consumes as from being so consumed with self. In the Little League of life, we’re more concerned about our own batting average than about doing what’s best for our team.

How, then, does this relate to this “R” Father? In order to truly understand the “our” in Our Father, we must look at the second word so that we can fully comprehend the first. These words are about **relationship**: the relationship between Father and child, yes, but more specifically, between God and his *children*.

Once we widen our scope beyond the first word—“our”—to the address, “Our Father,” we quickly see it in context, as an important series of points that our Lord makes. If God is the

Father, then we are *all* his children; we're all connected as brothers and sisters in the Lord's Prayer. The Our Father is not merely a private prayer between you and your God or between one child and his or her divine "Daddy." This is the prayer of a family, a prayer between God the Father and every one of his children. The Our Father is no longer just personal but also corporate; the prayer is intimate but also communal. In this way too, the Sacrifice of the Mass really mirrors the Lord's Prayer; it is both personal and communal in its focus and guides our worship back to the Father in one collective breath.

The bond is bigger than the building

Have you ever stopped to consider why there are over six billion people on one planet and not one person on six billion different planets? Couldn't God have done it that way too? Why put us all together on this spinning blue marble hurling through the solar system? Why force us to live and work together and get along? What is the Father trying to teach his children?

**We are more than creatures; we are children.
We are in this together.**

We are more than bodies; we are souls. We are more than creatures; we are children. We are in this together. We are one *creation* under God, indivisible. The fact is that all are created by God in his divine image (see Genesis 1:26-27). This truth cannot be overstated. God didn't just establish a **relationship** with us personally; he established and ordained us in **relationships** *with one another*.

If for no other reason (and there are plenty we’ll cover), this should be enough to lead us to Mass on Sundays. People who say, “I feel closer to God by going into nature and communing with a tree” ought to do that—at some *other point* during the 167 remaining hours each week. As for that hour on Sunday, the very least we can offer as a member of God’s family is to act like it.

The Church is more than a building. The body of Christ is made of living stones (1 Peter 2:4-5; see 1 Corinthians 12:27). Like Christ, the Church is both human and divine. The Church is human in that we are the people in need of redemption, members of God’s family who have all been touched by sin. The Church is also divine: It is the bride of Christ, perfect in teaching and guided by the Holy Spirit. The Church is the primary sacrament from which all others flow (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 774–76).

It’s in this Church, this body of believers, that grace and sin collide, that perfection kisses imperfection. In ancient times it was only at the Mass that master and servant were equals; even if for only a short time, love, peace, fellowship, and equality were

**It’s in this Church, this body of believers,
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extended to one another. Sunday worship knew no class system (Galatians 3:28); the only credentials necessary for admission were sin and an ardent desire for the new life available only in Christ (see Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:15).

It is as the Church, more perfectly than anywhere else in existence, that we acknowledge the “our” of our existence. Steeped

in a collective **relationship** as children of our one heavenly Father, we share a family name, an eternal bond, a universal kinship, and a divine heritage. There is a public persona to the body of Christ, which means that my actions and sins, no matter how seemingly private, affect and influence every one of my brothers and sisters. For that reason, Christ warns us of the need to seek personal holiness (Matthew 5:48), to love one another (John 13:34-35), and to watch out for one another (Romans 12:10-16; Ephesians 4:32; 1 Thessalonians 5:11). We are in this together.

Christ came not just to redeem us but to restore us to proper **relationship** with God *and with one another*. His healings of the leper (Matthew 8:2-4) or the woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:29-34) were not just about healing; they were about restoring the outcast to full community. His encounters with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) or the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42) were not merely to demonstrate the dignity he saw in women but also to broad the invitation to *everyone*, sinner and non-Jew alike, into a deeper, universal **relationship** with one another as the children of God, the body of Christ.

The law of love has two parts

We can never forget that the “Greatest Commandment” has two parts to it. It’s not merely to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (see Matthew 22:37-38); it includes a second (not secondary) command that reminds us of the **relationship**. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (22:39), we are told. If we *fail to see* God in our neighbor, much less love him, we have failed to love God himself (see 25:40). In this way, when we fail to love others, we are breaking the first commandment

to love God. How often do we confess that failure? Speaking for myself, I don’t view my neighbors in this light nearly enough.

In praying “Our” Father, we are praying not only *with* but also *for* our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus is giving us more than an invitation to a **relationship** with his Father in this catechesis on prayer. He’s giving us an introduction to our greater family—the true body of Christ—and an initiation into a new way of living.

This is yet another reason why a **relationship** with Mary and the saints is so necessary and invaluable in our own growth as Christians. Asking others to pray for us is a sign of humility and trust. Beseeking the intercessory prayer of the communion of saints—those brothers and sisters in the faith who have gone before us and finished the race (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Hebrews 12:2)—is the only way we can be in full and total **relationship** with the body of Christ. How shortsighted it would be of us as Christians to think that our full communion with the body of Christ would

True communion with Christ necessitates a relationship with all people.

stop with those who are still confined to their earthly, sinful existence. How small-minded it would be *not* to incorporate the souls of those who are far more fully alive than we are.

True communion with Christ necessitates a **relationship** with all people, believers and nonbelievers, whether past, present, or future; we are all inexorably linked by God. We are especially linked to the communion of saints by the upper room and the cross of Calvary. Mass is the greatest warm-up to becoming part

of the communion of saints, for at Mass we are worshipping alongside the saints and angels, seeking the grace we need to live lives of joyful abandonment to God as they did.

The equality of the relationship

Adam and Eve had it so good in Eden. All their needs were met. They had been given a priceless gift that could be neither bought nor earned: the gift of divine sonship. They were God's children.

What is even more amazing is that the gift of Adam and Eve's sonship cannot begin to compare to the sonship of God's eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus' sonship is infinitely more glorious than Adam's sonship for this very simple reason: Christ (the eternal Son) is God! Through our baptism this is now "our" sonship; we are brought into this divine sonship of Christ by Christ himself. This is where the "our" comes from when we address the Father.

Stop and consider what we are being taught about this **relationship** with God from the first word of the Lord's Prayer: Our heavenly Father has given us a gift even more powerful and glorious than the gift he gave Adam and Eve at the very beginning. God gave us himself—Jesus. And Jesus himself gives us to his Father.² We are declared and made divinely adopted sons and daughters of God (1 John 3:1). As the new Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22, 45), Christ rights our **relationship** again. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. Where Adam sinned, Jesus obeyed (Luke 22:42). Where Adam died in sin, Christ rose to life in glory (Romans 6:4). And the life that Adam lost in sin, the eternal Son has given us even more abundantly in love.

This love, given so freely (1 John 4:8, 19), reminds us of God's

divine identity, as well as our own eternal destiny as one family. Our family is imperfect, a mixed bag of holy and unholy; our family tree is a wide assortment of fruit (and nuts), with every branch proudly displaying fruit—the good, the bad, and the ugly. And through all this painful reality, God does not play favorites. God loves the atheist as much as the priest, the prostitute as much as the virgin, the drug dealer as much as the saint. Ponder that for a moment. God’s love is not fickle; God’s love is fatherly. God, as perfect unconditional Love, cannot put conditions on his love. God cannot pick a favorite son or daughter in his body (the body of Christ) anymore than you can pick a favorite cell in your physical body.

Responding to This Petition

Reviewing “our” viewpoint

If we do not see the culture of “I” from which we need to break free, we’ll never be a true Church, and the Mass (which is a liturgy, translated as a “public work”) will continue to be the private prayer of hundreds of individuals who just so happen to be gathered in one place. If we are not willing to reach out, literally and figuratively, and allow those worshipping around us to walk with us in our brokenness, then the whole point of the incarnation has been lost.

This **relationship** between you and God (through Christ) and between you and others is the foundation to the rest of the Lord’s Prayer. It is also the foundation of Christ’s Church and ought to be the foundation of our lives as Christians. We are baptized

into the family of the Holy Trinity (Matthew 28:19-20). He uses this family relationship, offered through our baptism, to invite others (the unbaptized) into his family. It's through this lens of family, this **relationship** with God and with one another, that we move deeper into the Lord's prayer and, more specifically, into our Father's heart.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Does an impartial look at your day or week reflect an "I-focused" or an "our-focused" approach to your life?
2. Does your time at church demonstrate a desire to grow in community—an awareness of and appreciation for the "our" of God's family—or a desire to remain in solitude and relative anonymity?
3. In your personal faith walk, which is more difficult: loving your neighbor or loving yourself?
4. What is one concrete thing you can do in the coming day or week to really reach out of your comfort zone (from the "I" to the "our") and acknowledge the presence of Christ in the people around you?