

BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY
IN ST. JEROME'S
"OUR PRAYER" (1)

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1. *[c. 9V] In nomine patris et filii et spiritui sancti. Amen*
In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
2. *Pater noster. Ave Maria. Credo in Deum. Salve Regina.*
Our Father. Hail, Mary. I believe in God. Hail, Holy Queen.
3. Our sweet Father Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that in your infinite goodness, you reform Christendom to the holiness of your apostles.
4. *Exaudi nos domine quoniam benigna est misericordia tua et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuorum respice nos. Domine Jesu Christe fili Dei vivi, Miserere nobis (sic dicitur ter).*
Hear us, Lord, because you are gracious and merciful, and according to the greatness of your kindness, look upon us.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on us (say it three times).
5. *In viam pacis, caritatis, prosperitatis dirigat me (defendat me) potentia Dei patris et sapientia filii et virtus spiritus sancti et ipsa gloriosa virgo maria. Et angelus Raphael, qui fuit semper cum Tobia, sic sit mecum in omni loco et via. O bone Iesu, o bone Iesu, o bone Iesu, amor meus et Deus meus, in te confide non erubescam.*
May the power of God the Father, the wisdom of the Son, the virtue of the Holy Spirit, and the glorious Virgin Mary, guide and defend me on the way toward peace, love and prosperity. And the angel Raphael, who was always with Tobias, be always with me everywhere I am and everywhere I go.
O good Jesus, o good Jesus, o good Jesus, my love and my God, I trust in you so that I will be not confounded.
6. Here follows the recommendation to implore for true trust in the Lord.

Let us have confidence in our gracious Lord and have true hope in Him alone because those who hope in him will never be confounded, but will be firmly established upon the solid rock. In order to obtain such a divine grace, let us invoke the Mother of all graces by saying: Hail Mary.
7. Let us also thank our Lord God and heavenly Father for all the gifts He has bestowed and continues to bestow on us. Let us pray that in the future He may help us I all our spiritual and material needs: Our Father.

8. Let us again invoke the Blessed Virgin that She may pray to Her delightful Son for all of us, so that He may grant us to be humble and meek of heart, to love His divine Majesty above all things and our neighbor as ourselves, and that He may uproot our vices, increase our virtues, and give us His holy peace: Hail Mary. May God grant you peace (*et datur pax inter patres*) (peace may be exchanged among the fathers).
9. Let us also pray to God for His most perfect Church in heaven, that is, for the Blessed so that their joy may grow; for the perfect Church on earth, that is, for those who are in His grace so that He may increase their virtues and graces and preserve them in their observance of the commandments; for the imperfect Church, that is, the sinners so that He may grant to them the conversion of life and the remission of sins; for the atoning Church, so that [c. 11r] He may free them from torments and grant them eternal glory; for those who will become His Church, that is those who are infidel now and in the future so that He may grant them the light of faith. And after having said a “Our Father” and a “Hail Mary”, let us ask these things to the Lord in our minds.
10. Then a “Hail Mary” for Monsignor Cardinal of Chieti, for Father Cajetan and his Congregation; for the Capuchin Fathers; for Fr. Paul and his companions; for Mother Andrea and Mother Arcangela, for Sister Bonaventura, for Madonna Elisabeth Capello and Madonna Cecilia. Then a “Hail Mary” for all our Fathers Priests both those who are present and those who are absent, and those who are about to join us in these holy institutions; for all the stewards and all the brothers who are entrusted to their service, so that the Lord may grant them perfect charity, deep humility, and patience for the sake of His Majesty [c 11v].
11. Then for all the benefactors of all the institutions, for the procurators, for those who work in the house, for those who go shopping, and for all those who give their help, advice, favors to all these institutions: Hail Mary.
12. Then for ... [follows a white half page]
13. Then for those who rely on our prayers, for those who pray to God for us, and for those to whom we owe praying, for our friends and our enemies, for our deceased faithful, especially our parents, our brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and even for our Father Sir Jerome, and all our brothers of the Company, and all the deceased of these pious institutions: Hail Mary.
14. Then, let us raise our mind to God and pray that because of His mercy He may answer our poor prayers, may He make up for all our mistakes since He is the beginning, the means, the end and the fulfillment of every good: pray in this way or in others as the Lord may inspire you. Then, we may continue to mentally pray for the space of a “Miserere”.... Vocal Prayer. Then, we may continue: Let all of us humble before our heavenly Father as prodigal sons who have squandered every spiritual and material good by living in a bad way. Therefore, let us ask for

His mercy by saying: Mercy, grant us your mercy, Son of the living God: *Deus propicius esto mihi peccatori. In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.* O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. In the name of the father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

15. Then the priest says a prayer as the Lord may inspire him. At the end, we shall say three "Our Father" and three "Hail Mary" in a low voice, with arms crossed so to recall the three nails by which He wanted to be crucified so that He may grant us the grace to despise this world and ourselves. Let us pray for the Church so that He may reform Her to the early status of Holy Church, He may make peace and harmony among all the Christian leaders, so that united in holy peace may they march against infidels and heretics in order that they may convert and come under the yoke of the Holy Catholic Church. Then, we say a "Our Father" and a "Hail Mary" in secret for the honor and glory of all the Saints, the angels and archangels, especially those who guard us, so that they protect us from every temptation of [13r] the world, flesh and demon; so that may present all our lukewarm prayers before our Lord God and pray Him that He may hear us, as well as defend us from every backbiting and rash judgment, and lead us in truth on His holy way.

The end (2)

The analysis of this document shows a series of facts and data which reveal St. Jerome's reaction to prayer on one hand, and to his concrete time on the other. His soul rich of spiritual and intellectual intensity must surely reflect in his prayer. We know for sure that the text reproduced above is his, wanted by him for himself and his own, with some brief addition, needed because "his own" have kept praying for him.

The annotations which follow are meant to highlight the elements of biblical spirituality that are assumed in the text in a various ways and that allow for now to ascertain two series of facts:

- a) St. Jerome, as all the giants of prayer, was nourished both directly and indirectly, almost as a natural breathing, by Scripture; direct and indirect quotations, remembrance, the way of proceeding show how the Scripture's text is always kept present, at least at his spirit if not at his eyes;
- b) A specialist could analyze the prayer under another reflex, today considered a need: the popular religiosity. St. Jerome's text is in fact also a cultural fact that includes some themes (biblical substance of Revelation), some models (the culture of his land and his time) and an institution (the text forged in that given form); and it is fact that produces culture at least inside the Institutions founded by him.

1. The invocation to the Holy Trinity wants to put everything under the divine Name. Christian prayer can start in different ways, among which in the West the most common and become unfortunately almost mechanic, is the sign of the cross. In the East, for example among the Byzantines, prayer starts by blessing the divine Name, or the "Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," or by invoking the Holy Spirit,

guide of the prayer of the baptized. The theme of the Christian stretched out to the Trinity runs through all “Our Prayer” as a motif of evidence and support.

2. As in every prayer of the Christian East and in many of the West, it follows the “Our Father,” because everything may be under the title of our Only God, the common Father, the Lord of love and grace. For us, usually, the “Our Father” is placed as a conclusion of community prayers. But for St. Jerome, the “Our Father” has a particular resonance because in his sensitivity of Saint of charity, God appears to him especially as “Father of the orphans and judge of the widows” (cf. Ps 67 [68]) because Father of Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of Father’s love (cf. Col 1:13). For this reason, the heart of the Saint, constitute by Providence as father of all the orphans and the abandoned one he has met, and as patron of those after him, vibrates of love and joy.

“Our Father” recurs in “Our Prayer” also in # 7, as a final clause; 9, before the the “Our Father, “ and as a doxological conclusion for the world of the angels and saints, by asking their intercession.

In the meantime, here at # 2, the “Our Father” is followed by the “Hail Mary,” the sweet prayer to the Mother of God, that together with the “Our Father” and the “Glory to the Father” has been for centuries the prayer of the Christian people, kept far away from the great prayer of the Church because of the language (the East in this has not been better...). The “Hail Mary” recurs again in # 6 as final clause; 8, before the formula of the fraternal peace; 9, together with the “Our Father,” before the mental supplication to the Lord; 10, at the beginning of the intercession for the benefactors, and toward the center for the fathers and the brothers of the family of the Saint; 11, for the benefactors as a final clause; 13, as final clause in the intercession for the living and deceased; 15, for 3 times together with the “Our Father” immediately after the spontaneous initial prayer, and once at the doxological conclusion for the world of the angels and saints, soliciting their intercession (see above, about the “Our Father”).

The “Creed” that follows in the initial context of the prayer wants to be a renewed affirmation of the Christian faith lived for the Church and in the Church; the Saint has been a faithful man of the Church, for which has worked and lived tirelessly; the daily repetition of the Faith Symbolum, that is Baptismal, served also to reformulate continuously one’s faith and baptismal promises in a kind of “catechesis” (literally: “re-echoing”) of the Mystery occurred “for us men and for our salvation.”

The “Holy Queen” concludes the first clause, as an antiphon that places Christian life under the protection and intercession of the Mother of God, in hope for eternal life, and by living where Providence establishes that every man and all men accomplish their destiny.

3. The formula that follows is without doubt very strange for many ears: Our sweet Father Lord Jesus Christ. The strange thing is to call Christ, who is “Son of God” by definition, with the appellative “Father.” In reality, in the messianic prophecies of Isaiah’s “Booklet of Immanuel” (chapter 7-9) the One who has to be born, the Child, is foretold also as “eternal Father” (Is 9:5), King and Father of his people in a word, the universal “Savior.” For those who pay attention to the Midnight Mass of Christmas, first reading (Is 9:2-7, text of Vulgata; 1-7, Hebrew text), and know how to consider the whole of the work of Christ the savior, the oddity is overcome. Not only. St. Jerome, in is

invocation to Christ as “Father,” had been preceded by St. Francis, who used habitually in his devotion to the Lord. It is a formula of intense personal devotion: Christ is “felt” also as Father, or better, He is the faithful image of the father in the midst of men. The title “Lord,” then, points to the fullness of divinity and sovereignty of Christ.

We pray to you for your infinite goodness: the biblical vocabulary is quite rich when it has to describe the divine “bounty”: mercy, visceral mercy, tenderness, grace, benignity, justice that means always charity, “philanthropy.” St Paul frequently uses this terminology. Now, we well know that Christ is the divine Goodness of the Father that He carries it in Himself and mediates it on behalf of the Father. Such Goodness has its infinite Source in the Father. It is operated by the Father and is communicated to us through the Son from the Holy Spirit.

The formula per se is a supplication. Since the beginning, St. Jerome makes ask that Christ “reform Christendom.” We do not know to pray like this even though today in the Church we are living a deep “reformation,” that is centered more on structures than in the depth of our existence. The same General Council of the Somascans is actualizing the adjustment to the needs of the Church spoken by the Council that means obedience and depth and courage in visions. Our text precisely asks that “reformation,” that is to return to the pristine and always valid form, see to it that Christendom may return to the status of holiness that has been destined by the divine Council, and this holiness is only of the Church of the Apostles. In other words, this prayer formula, that as we have seen starts from St. Paul and reaches through St. Francis all the times of the Church and of the Family of the Saint, expresses clearly that the holiness to be lived is the one of the Apostles, in a word, the one of the Church of the Resurrection and Pentecost. This is the only and unique model of holiness because derives from the only Holy God, according to the precious liturgical formulae of “Holy Holy Holy,” or, as the Syriac East explicates “Holy is the Holy Spirit,” or also, as in the Byzantine rite, “Unique is the Holy, unique is the Lord: Jesus Christ for the glory of God the Father. Amen.” Anyway, they are always formulae directly biblical, from the Old to the New Testament.

The holiness of the time of the Apostles of the Lord! We know from the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great, who sketches the life of St. Benedict, that at Montecassino died a child, son of a farmer of that place. The desperate father went up to the sacred mountain, to the Monastery of the holy Patriarch, and placed him on the steps of the door of the monastery, and begged St. Benedict to raise him up. But he answered: “And how can I do it? This kind of miracles belongs only to the holiness of the Apostles” which is the source of the holiness for the whole Church. Then he obeyed to the love of that father. But in this emblematic episode, as well as in St. Jerome’s prayer, we found the sharp as well as austere sense of the great Tradition of the Church of East and West, and together the awareness of the continuity of the tradition of holiness of Christ’s Apostles in their Church. Dispensators of holiness to the people of God, in the fullness of the divine mandate and of the consequent fullness of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles again govern the Church through their successors, the Bishops with the presbytery college, through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Mysteries. From there, it springs the holiness of the Church. There must go back the Church that wants to reform herself, docile to the Spirit and faithful to the following of her Master and Lord.

That the “saints” are only the Apostles, and from them those who are in communion with them, we gather it without any doubt for example from the letters of St.

Paul. In 1 and 2 Corinthians he refers the gifts of the Holy Spirit belonging to the Churches of God founded by him outside Judea only to the Saints of Jerusalem, the Apostles. We can see for example 2Cor 8-9, especially 8:14-15; 9:6-15.

4. “Our Prayer” was written part in Latin, as we can see it, and part in Italian (Venetian of Veneto). We know also that it was translated entirely in Latin so that the learnt Fathers could recite it correctly in that language.

This paragraph starts by taking the Psalm 68 (69):17, with some variations: Hear us a Lord because you are gracious and merciful and according to the big amount of your kindness look upon us.

The variations are in the pronoun “us” while the biblical text has “me.” The Psalm asks, as individual Supplication, that the Lord may take into account the only “moral of His Covenant,” the “mercy,” that constitutes an inexhaustible and always renewed “big amount.” He has to show a Face of favor and bounty towards men, especially because they do not have any right. St. Paul will severely remind the Christians in Rome that sin has always abounded a lot, but with an openness of joy and hope he also points out that there the divine grace-mercy is more abundant (cf. Rom 5:20). Thus the Lord “hear” and “look” with redeeming favor upon the children He loves.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God” is a composite invocation. The “Lord Jesus Christ” is in many contexts of the New Testament, and we cannot point out a passage more than another. On the contrary, we can identify with certainty the “Son of the Living God,” who in the Gospel can be found in Mt 16:16-18, in the manifestation and Peter’s messianic profession of faith at Cesarea Filippi on behalf of the twelve. On this faith, which is our faith itself, Christ in a difficult moment of his life, (from there He moves toward the cross), can found his Church and entrust her to Peter’s guidance with his brothers in ministry. This manifestation of irreversible faith “is not dictated by blood and flesh,” but by Christ’s Father himself who gives the Spirit. Thus, Peter’s answer can become the Twelve’s answer, the Church’s answer along the centuries, the answer of the Church’s Saints, the answer of the Christian faithful.

To this Lord we ask to show us the divine mercy. “Divine,” because we forget that usually this name and the corresponding verb “to have mercy,” in the Bible are reserved to God and only subordinately to men who, since they have received this gift from the Father, must immediately share it with their brothers.

The ternary repetition of the prayer indicates the “litany” form, repeating and insistent, that is very efficient as a dynamic of the one who prays.

5. The “way of the peace” is a quotation from the Benedictus of Zechariah (Lk 1:68-79). The priest Zechariah with a berakah, the typical benediction of the Old Testament prayer, exalts the divine mercy that has visited his people with incredible and unexpected facts, and has made “memorial” of his holy Covenant, that now He is accomplishing in its final stage. The “Benedictus”, thus, is similar to the “Magnificat” for the two facts connected: the coming into history of the Baptist, precursor and prophet, and of Christ, Son of God. With it, Zechariah wants to prophetically set the messianic community, the one which expects everything from his Lord and that now will receive new life, on the “way of peace”, the biblical shalom, eirene in Greek, that means fullness of peace and salvation.

The theme of the “way,” however, acquires special importance in St. Jerome because his apostolate was carried out rightly and mainly along the street and squares and towns and villages, always on the go, as if in a continuous “exodus of peace” and salvation, by gathering children, orphans, youth, sick, abandoned and marginalized, poor and dying; for them he found providential care, for all of them he sacrificed every bit of his existence.

If for example we read the “List of the poor of Christ at the Bersaglio Hospital,” in Venice, founded during the famine of Venice in 1527 with the cooperation of St. Jerome and directed by him together with other administrators, we can find in the note of July 3, 1528, a silent list of 103 names, almost all of them from the Veneto region and environs, the majority of whom are men, but also with many women, especially from the fat Milan, and then strangers, any way, everybody who was in need. They are names without a face and history, without tomb and memories of their dear ones. But they are names and faces and stories and memories which have burden the heart of St. Jerome, along his “way of peace,” of the universal and personalized charity. These are the poor, the orphans, the widows, the foreigners along the “way” of St. Jerome, the category of people Scripture enjoins to love above all, everywhere they are found. (3)

The “way of peace” that is also “of love and prosperity,” and therefore, it is the great theme of Exodus, Pascal Exodus. The Saint understood very well, and he demonstrated it with his existence, that the Church never must be seated, but always on the way, and must proceed always on the way, carrying out a continuous Exodus of peace and charity and prosperity which has to spread around along the streets all over the world. The concept of “peace” contains also the other two terms, as a goal that the Lord points out and establishes for his people.

The supplication that follows is deep, biblical, splendid, and asks with terms taken from the Scripture guide and defense to the Only Unity that is Holy Trinity. The “vocative” of the prayer is addressed thus to the *power of God the Father*, that is the merciful omnipotence of the Source of Life; to the *Wisdom of the Son*, the divine Wisdom that because of love has come in the midst of men, has lived with them “pitching his tents” among them, has cured, healed, gathered, fed, instructed, exhorted, consoled them, and then has introduced them anew at the presence of the Father as a new people; to the *virtue of the Holy Spirit*, the divine Power, irresistible operative presence that with Christ, on mandate of the Father, spreads around among men saving them, and after the divine Ascension uses the Church in order to continue his mission.

The *glorious Virgin Mary* is an old and prestigious title of the Mother of God, used especially in the liturgy by both the Churches of East and West. Mary is invested by the divine Glory of the Spirit that shines over the Church, and this manifestation leads the Church to honor the Mother her God and Lord, by entering in communion with her. The Glory of Mary is glory for the Church, for Israel and for the men.

Since St. Jerome Miani, his “company” and the Church herself he is exhorting have to “make exodus,” the prayer now is addressed also to the “angels,” the messengers of God, the ones who have accompanied the exodus of people of God or of his members. The Angels today are not treated well by a certain Catholic criticism that follows the tendency of the old Protestant culture, the one that the good Protestants are trying to get rid of. In the Bible the Angels are mediation forms of the divine Presence that acts in the world of men. Or better, the Angel of God promised by the Lord to Israel in the Exodus is

a metaphor that indicates the divine Name in a discreet way without using the divine Name, the Lord Himself: "Here, I send an angel before you (Israel) so that he may guide you in the journey toward the place I established" (Ex 23:20).

Here St. Jerome makes recite a formula with a rime, in order to memorize it, to ask the company of the angel Raphael, the generous protector, guide and guardian of the young Tobias in his long and tiresome journey. Tobias was an exiled and a poor. Raphael has to accompany "in any place and journey" anyone who may invoke him in exile and in journey. The anamnesis of Tobias reminds those who pray that the old works of salvation are always currently carried out even today by the Lord.

For three times follows the invocation "O good Jesus." In his historical life Jesus has explicitly and annoyingly refused the appellative "good," retorting to the young rich man: "Why do you call me 'good'? Nobody is good but God alone!" (Mk 10:18). Jesus wanted to lead everything to the Father, every good, every glory, every tile, every prayer. However, after the redemption of the cross and resurrection with the gift of the Spirit to the Church, we, baptized in his death and resurrection, have obtained the right to call the Father as Abba, and the Son as Good, in the unity with Father and the Spirit, the unique God of goodness. Another Saint, Philippe Neri, would use as a dear ejaculatory the Tuscan invocation "Good Jesus." To Christ we have to refer the divine goodness (as we said it above) which always abundantly brims over men: how can we understand but through goodness those who have consecrated their life in every moment and together with the brothers?

Jesus, the Good one, is invoked therefore as the only love and God. The formula is Biblical. For example, Ps 17 (18), which is a royal Psalm, starts like this (vv 2-3):

I love you, O Lord, my strength,
O Lord, my rock, my fortress, my liberator,
My God, my rock on which I take refuge,
My shield, my horn of salvation, my refuge!

The Psalmist here claims for himself the only good he may recognize on earth, the Lord, in whom he has placed all his hope and trust. But in this way, and only in this way, he has everything. He does not lack anything (cfr Ps 62 (63); 15 (16); 72 (73)).

The end of the # 5 finally is taken from the Ps 24 (25), 2a, the Psalm of Advent, which asks the Lord that the total faith be also permanent divine assistance and perennial faithfulness of the servant of the Lord, and at the end of life be not "confusion," that is ruin.

6. The text here announces a petition in order to obtain trust. We need to note how. The time of the Saint since too many centuries knew the old custom of celebrating the liturgy of the Church in a language not understood by the people. The people would listen to the Gospel in Latin, chant in Latin maiming it brutally, that is, populace was mute and deaf in Latin. The priest would celebrate in Latin but not always he understood the all the difficult formulae of the Roman-Gallican-Germanic liturgy.

Moreover, during the Mass Canon, the priest would pronounce in Latin the great intercession prayer of the Church for the universal needs of the living and dead faithful, before and after the consecration. The populace, who did not understand anything, had to fall back on other formula in their spoken language in order to pray for the same needs. So we can say that soon Italy as well as other Christian countries knew prayer formulae

in vulgar, both translated or paraphrased from liturgical texts, composed by both pious priests and laypeople (4). The Christian instinct of prayer would go thus where the provident liturgical reform was not yet even thought about, if not completely opposed.

In our text we have at # 6 a great universal prayer, with numerous and various intentions, about the current and urgent situation of Christian life, community, people, and benefactors. We have like a series of concentric circles with rays that practically reach the all world.

The first petition is therefore trust. The vocabulary of confidence is one of faith, and since “faith is a love answer to God who calls and to the brothers,” is also the one of charity, total love, abandon to God and the brothers to be served. We know how much confidence St. Jerome had, because he prayed for it: he who got rid of his patrimony and he had no income of any kind, always was able men and means to take care of those who were in need. Therefore, divine trust must be asked as a particular gift, before, during and after every aspect of Christian life.

Trust means to entrust and have hope: again is from the Ps 24 (25) quoted above. Trust exercised thus is well placed because the Lord is benign in His showing to men. This makes the faithful trustful “stable, founded on solid rock.” We can recognize in this explicit quotation the famous end of the Sermon of the Mountain both in Matthew (7:24-27) and Luke (6:49), which form a certain asymmetric parallelism. This Sermon, properly called the Magna Charta of the Christians, Matthew and Luke, but the latter in a more concise way (30 verses against three chapters in Matthew), states what the Lord proclaims and asks of us: an overturned logic in regard to the flat and obtuse logic “of the world.” It is a divine logic that sweeps away the malice and stupidity of men prisoners of themselves, and that makes always overcome malice with good, and therefore it is “alienating.” We need to urgently rescue this adjective so feared by the modern Christians before the “criticism,” as when they hear or read that, for example, Christendom is alienating from life. On the contrary. Christendom is the only force and hope that remain for an authentic liberation that finally may “alienate” from the logic of sin, violence, lie, materialism which crash the person. Only this “alienation” therefore saves: “If anyone hits you on one cheek, let him hit the other too... if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well... give to everyone who asks, give and do not ask for it back... do for others just what you want them to do for you... if you love only the people who love you, why should you receive a blessing? Even sinners love those who love them. .. And if you lend only to those from whom you hope to get it back, why should you receive a blessing? Love your enemies and do good to them; lend and expect nothing back. You will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High God, for He is good to ungrateful and the wicked (Lk 6: 29-36).

Here it is to be founded on the rock: do not call “Lord, Lord,” but let us build on rock, firmly, where the house never falls (cfr Lk 6: 46-49).

Let us note now the variation in the prayer of the faithful, to which we usually respond in a litanic way with the Kyrie eleison or equivalent formulae. Here we have to address Mary, greeted with the title of “Mother of Graces.”