

THE 'OUR FATHER' CONSIDERED

BY ST CYPRIAN: BISHOP OF CARTHAGE

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[Among the many points that give interest beyond the ordinary to this commentary on the *Our Father*, the reader may like to know the following:

(a) The magnificent conception of the unity of the Church, of the faithful as constituting one body in Christ so closely knit together as to make isolated or solitary prayer out of the question. This is not a new nor original idea, but it is finely expressed here—St Cyprian was martyred in A.D. 258. (cf. No. viii.)

(b) Following on this, the strong emphasis on concord and peace. So emphatic indeed is St Cyprian as to be led into the strange assertion that not even martyrdom can wipe out the sin of schism. (n. xxiv.)

(c) Clear teaching on the value—the necessity even—of daily Holy Communion. (n. xviii.)

(d) The interesting eulogy on Abel as the first martyr, thereby initiating the Passion of Christ. (n. xxiv.)

(e) On the acknowledgement of sin as the prelude to the sense of it. This again is not new; St John (i: 1: 9) says the same thing, but it is often overlooked. (n. xxii.)

(f) The treatment of *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven* as a missionary prayer for the conversion of the infidels. (n. xvii.)

On the spiritual level St Cyprian anticipated the familiar slogan of the Railway Executive: *Send your luggage in advance and travel in comfort*. This is just what he urges (n. xx): by selling up his possessions and distributing the proceeds to the poor a man does not lose but sends forward all he has. When he gets to heaven, which, unencumbered, he will do all the easier, he will find awaiting him there the immense and real value of his jettisoned belongings.—D.D.]

PART I: INTRODUCTORY

(i) The Gospels are an authoritative source of divine teaching. They provide the foundations on which our hope rises, our faith grows strong. Our hearts are warmed by them, and our ways set

straight and salvation secured. If we listen to them in faith and humility they will lead us to eternal life. God had many a message to be announced by his servants the prophets and listened to by men: but the words of his Son must have deeper meaning far. Here is a message not delivered by a prophet's lips but by his own; no more a voice bidding men prepare for what was to come, but his own very self coming amongst us and showing us the way. Lost in the shadows of death, helpless, unseeing—such we were. Now Christ leads and guides us, and we set out upon the way of life.

(ii) With various admonitions and precepts our Lord in his wisdom led men forward towards salvation; and amongst these we find a form of prayer. First he brought them life, then he taught them to pray. He did this with the usual benevolence we meet with in all his actions. The more surely to be heard, we are to use in addressing the Father the very words of prayer taught us by his Son. Already he has spoken of the time when true adorers will adore the Father in spirit and in truth, and now he makes good that prediction. We have been redeemed by him, and come to know him as Spirit and Truth. Now, in the very manner he has handed down to us, in spirit and in truth we adore him. What holier prayer than that given us by Christ himself? In him the Holy Spirit is given to us. What prayer could ring truer in the Father's hearing than that which was first uttered by the Truth, his Son? To pray otherwise than as he taught us, to ignore his words would indeed be wrong. Does he not reproach those who *leave the commandments of God, and hold the tradition of men?* (Mark 7, 8.)

(iii) Let us, then, pray as the Master has taught us. How dear to God must be his own Son's prayer; how gracious the words which we have learnt from him; the Father will recognise them at once as his Son's. It is to the dweller in our own souls that our lips are to give utterance. He is the advocate with the Father for our sins (I John 2, 1) and, as we sinners crave forgiveness, it is in our advocate's own words. *Whatsoever you ask of the Father in my name, he has told us, he will give it to you* (John 16, 23). How could we pray more effectively in Christ's name than in using his own prayer?

(iv) We should remember, too, when we pray to give some attention to our outward behaviour. This should be unobtrusive

and quiet. We are standing before God, and should try to make sure that not only what we say but our manner also should be pleasing to him. A calm and modest demeanour is what suits best; shouting is apt to savour of vulgarity. Nor should we forget the Master's reminder about praying in secret, in our own rooms or in quiet, secluded places. This is a question of faith: we believe God to be everywhere present, and that nothing is done or said which he does not see or hear; that no spot is so hidden or lonely as not to be permeated by the plenitude of his glory. *Am I, think you, a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Shall a man be hid in secret places, and I not see him, saith the Lord? Do not I fill heaven and earth, saith the Lord? The eyes of the Lord in every place behold the good and the evil.* (Jerem. 23, 23-24; and Prov. 15, 3.)

Especially should this duty of restraint be borne in mind when we come together with the brethren and God's priest to offer the Holy Sacrifice. Words noisily uttered and without thought should find no place there, nor should tumultuous loquacity mark our petitions; rather should our prayers be made to God softly and diffidently. The longing in the heart is what God looks for, not the sound on the lips. He who reads men's thoughts needs no vociferous reminders: *I am he that searcheth the reins and the hearts. Why do you think evil in your hearts?* (Apoc. 2, 23; and Luke 5, 22.)

(v) In the First Book of Kings (1, 13) we read of Anna. She is a type of the Church at prayer, and illustrates perfectly all we have just been saying. How silently and modestly, from the deepest recesses of her soul did she pour forth her prayers to the Lord. Faith not sound made her demands ring out. Her speech was from the heart and hidden, not outward and audible. As she prayed like this she knew God would hear her; and because her prayer was so trusting, great was its reward. *Now Anna spoke in her heart and her lips merely moved; but her voice was not heard at all.* Scripture often mentions cases of such inward speech: *The things you say in your hearts be sorry for them* (Ps. 4, 5); and, from another angle: *Say you in your hearts: Thou oughtest to be adored O Lord* (Baruch; 6, 5).

(vi) Lastly, on this subject of prayer, we must not overlook that of the Publican. He and the Pharisee came into the Temple at the same moment, but he did not lift up his eyes in truculent fashion or insolently stretch forth his arms, but he struck his breast and acknowledged his sins and begged help from the God