

Coming to Our Father with Open Hands

The pastoral theme proposed to pilgrims by the Bishop of Lourdes in 2011 is "With Saint Bernadette, Praying the Our Father." In this article, Johan Bergström-Allen, T.O.C., Director of the British Province of Carmelites Pilgrimage to Lourdes, reflects on what that prayer means to him.

When Our Lady and Saint Bernadette Soubirous met at the Grotto in Lourdes in 1858, the two women prayed together. After making the Sign of the Cross, they prayed the Rosary, which begins with the *Our Father*.

The Bishop of Lourdes has chosen as the pastoral theme for 2011 "With Bernadette, praying the *Our Father*", which gives us plenty to reflect on. The *Our Father* or *Lord's Prayer* is something we say at every Mass, and is familiar even to people who don't regularly attend Church. It has become so familiar that perhaps we overlook some really interesting questions about the prayer. For example, why do we ask God's name to be sanctified if God is the source of all holiness? Why do we say that the Father is in heaven when we believe God is everywhere? How could God lead us into temptation? Why do our Protestant sisters and brothers add some words at the end? Why is the *Our Father* mentioned in only two of the four Gospel accounts, and why is it slightly different in *Matthew* and *Luke*?

I'm not going to consider these questions here, but if you're interested – and how can we not be interested in the way of praying that Jesus himself taught us? – there are lots of good resources available. The October 2010 edition of *Lourdes Magazine* is entirely given over to the *Our Father*. The Sanctuary website (www.lourdes-france.com) has a reflection sheet on the topic. The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a whole section devoted to the *Our Father*. And as a Carmelite I can't omit to mention that St. Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) has a lot to say about the *Our Father* in her classic text *The Way of Perfection*.

What I want to share with you instead is a personal experience of praying the *Our Father* in Lourdes.

The first time I went to Lourdes, as a teenager in 1992, I took part in the International Mass in the underground basilica. In those days there were no TV screens in the "Pie X" subtitled what was being said, and I was stuck behind a pillar without a clear view of the altar. I felt sorry for the old lady on a stretcher next to me who presumably could see and hear even less than I could. Mass was being celebrated in different languages, and everyone around me was of a different nationality, including the lady on the stretcher. I felt a little out of my depth, particularly when everyone started singing something in Latin. I vaguely knew that it was the *Our Father* (or *Pater Noster* in Latin), but I wasn't certain of the words and tried mouthing along to the music. The prayer which had been so familiar all my life seemed foreign to me then.

Suddenly, I felt someone taking my hand. The lady on the stretcher had reached out and gripped my palm. Looking around, I saw that many others in the basilica had joined hands, and instinctively I reached out for the hand of the person on the other side of me. In that moment I went from feeling like a stranger, to someone who belonged. I belonged not only with the people around me,

but with everyone in Lourdes that day, and with everyone praying the *Our Father* in different languages around the world. I realised that the power of the *Our Father* wasn't only in the words themselves – amazing though they are – but in the effect that God's Spirit has on us when we say that prayer.

The next Mass I went to on that first pilgrimage was in French, and I expected that everyone would join hands again at the *Our Father*. Instead, most people stood with their hands open in front of them. I'd never noticed anyone doing that during Mass in England, except for the priest, and I put it down to simple cultural difference.

Years later, as a student, I spent some time studying in Rome, and I noticed that in Italy, too, people prayed the *Our Father* with their hands open, but I still didn't understand why. On the usual tour of Roman sites I visited the catacombs. In an underground chapel (much smaller than the underground basilica!) there was an ancient fresco of a Christian woman raising her hands in prayer. The tour guide – an enthusiastic old gent, full of spirit – explained that this depicted the "orans" position, which was the usual posture for prayer in the early Church. I remember his words to this day: "This is how we Christians are invited to pray. There are times for looking downwards in sadness or shame, but most of the time we should look to heaven with confidence and trust, opening our hands and our hearts to God the Father. He will give us everything we need, most importantly his love. Open your hands to God and to one another!"



The "orans" gesture shown in a fresco at the Roman catacombs.

Ever since that day I have tried to pray the *Our Father* – whether in Mass or elsewhere – with my hands open. For me that simple gesture symbolises a bond with the early Christians, and a desire on my part to come to God empty-handed. I want to accept whatever, and whoever, he will put into my hands. It is a gesture of vulnerability, and availability.

In Lourdes not everyone can pray with their bodies in this way. Some hands cannot open in the physical sense. But for those whose bodies will allow, especially for volunteer helpers who are perhaps too tired to speak, gestures sometimes become the only way we can express our prayer. Bodily gestures – making the Sign of the Cross, touching the rock of the Grotto, opening our hands – can sometimes express our longing for *Our Father* when words are beyond us.

"Thy Kingdom come."