

Day 42

Petitions of the Our Father



For Personal Reflection & Prayer

- What situation of hunger in the world most concerns me and moves me right now? What have I done to help?
- There is hunger for meaning and hope in the world today. Recall a person or circumstance that helped you find meaning or recover hope at a key moment in your own life.

Take these considerations to the Lord in prayer, asking for light and strength.

Offer a prayer inspired by the words of Scripture:

*Man does not live on bread alone
But on every word that comes
From the mouth of God*

Deuteronomy 8:3

Pope Benedict XVI on the Meaning of Our Daily Bread

Give us this day our daily bread. “Daily” renders the Greek word *epiousios*. Referring to this word, one of the great masters of the Greek language — the theologian Origen (d. ca. 254) — says that it does not occur anywhere else in Greek, but that it was coined by the Evangelists. Since Origen’s time, it is true, an instance of this word has been found in a papyrus dating from the fifth century after Christ. But this one example alone is insufficient to give us any certainty about the meaning of this word, which is at any rate very unusual and rare. We have to depend on etymologies and the study of the context.



Today there are two principal interpretations. One maintains that the word means “what is necessary for existence”. On this reading, the petition would run as follows: Give us today the bread that we need in order to live. The other interpretation maintains that the correct translation is “bread for the future”, for the following day. But the petition to receive tomorrow’s bread today does not seem to make sense when looked at in the light of the disciple’s existence. The reference to the future would make more sense if the object of the petition were the bread that really does belong to the future: the true manna of God. In that case, it would be an eschatological petition, the petition for an anticipation of the world to come, asking the Lord to give already “today” the future bread, the bread of the new world — Himself. On such a reading, the petition would acquire an eschatological meaning. Some ancient translations hint in this direction. An example is Saint Jerome’s Vulgate, which translates the mysterious word *epiousios* as *supersubstantialis* (i.e., super-substantial), thereby pointing to the new, higher “substance” that the Lord gives us in the Holy Sacrament as the true bread of our life.

The fact is that the Fathers of the Church were practically unanimous in understanding the fourth petition of the Our Father as a Eucharistic petition; in this sense the Our Father figures in the Mass liturgy as a Eucharistic table-prayer (i.e., “grace”). This does not remove the straightforward earthly sense of the disciples’ petition that we have just shown to be the text’s immediate meaning. The Fathers consider different dimensions of the saying that begins as a petition for today’s bread for the poor, but insofar as it directs our gaze to the Father in heaven who feeds us, it recalls the wandering People of God, who were fed by God Himself. Read in the light of Jesus’ great discourse on the bread of life, the miracle of the manna naturally points beyond itself to the new world in which the Logos — the eternal Word of God — will be our bread, the food of the eternal wedding banquet.

Is it legitimate to think in such dimensions, or is that a false “theologizing” of a word intended only in a straightforwardly earthly sense? There is a fear of such theologizing today, which is not totally unfounded, but neither should it be overstated. I think that in interpreting the petition for bread, it is necessary to keep in mind the larger context of Jesus’ words and deeds, a context in which essential elements of human life play a major role: water, bread, and, as a sign of the festive character and beauty of the world, the vine and wine. The theme of bread has an important place in Jesus’ message — from the temptation in the desert and the multiplication of the loaves right up to the Last Supper.



The great discourse on the bread of life in John 6 discloses the full spectrum of meaning of this theme. It begins with the hunger of the people who have been listening to Jesus and whom He does not send away without food, that is to say, the “necessary bread” that we require in order to live. But Jesus does not allow us to stop there and reduce man’s needs to bread, to biological and material necessities. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4; Deut 8:3). The miraculously multiplied bread harks back to the miracle of manna in the desert and at the same time points beyond itself: to the fact that man’s real food is the Logos, the eternal Word, the eternal meaning, from which we come and toward which our life is directed. If this initial transcendence of the physical realm *prima facie* tells us no more than what philosophy has found and is still capable of discovering, there is nevertheless a further transcendence to consider: The eternal Logos does not concretely become bread for man until He has “taken flesh” and speaks to us in human words.

This is followed by the third, absolutely essential, transcendence, which nevertheless proves scandalous to the people of Capernaum: The incarnate Lord gives Himself to us in the Sacrament, and in that way the eternal Word for the first time becomes fully manna, the gift of the bread of the future given to us already today. Then, however, the Lord brings everything together once more: This extreme “becoming-corporeal” is actually the real “becoming-spiritual”: “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail” (Jn 6:63).

Are we to suppose that Jesus excluded from the petition for bread everything that He tells us about bread and everything that He wants to give us as bread? When we consider Jesus’ message in its entirety, then it is impossible to expunge the Eucharistic dimension from the fourth petition of the Our Father. True, the earthly nitty-gritty of the petition for daily bread for everyone is essential. But this petition also helps us to transcend the purely material and to request already now what is to come “tomorrow”, the new bread. And when we pray for “tomorrow’s” bread today, we are reminded to live already today from tomorrow, from the love of God, which calls us all to be responsible for one another.

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