

Simply Pray: 'But they're not my own words!'

One objection some Christians have to using any pre-existing text for prayer—even words of the Bible—is that those words are not their own. In some cases, this objection springs from the words of Jesus in Mt 6.7: 'And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen *do*. For they think that they will be heard for their many words' (NKJV). Some translations use 'babbling' for 'vain repetitions' and those who use these translations may dismiss using any set form as 'vain repetition', simply because the speaker is repeating words that are written down somewhere.

Another objection is more generic: that any use of a set form, even a Biblical text, in prayer is invalid because the words used are not original or not spontaneous. It often isn't clear whether those who advance this objection are more concerned about originality or spontaneity but I'll address both issues, to the extent they're separable.

Spontaneity has its uses and its purpose: if you bump into someone in the street, sending an armful of packages flying, an apology then and there is going to be more appreciated than a handwritten letter that arrives two weeks later. The spontaneous response, however, is more likely to be some version of 'Sorry!' than anything else—and 'Sorry!' is scarcely original. Spontaneity and originality are not the same and while there can be no doubt spontaneity can sometimes be important, it's far from clear that there's any premium on originality in prayer.

I had a colleague who told his sons, 'The three most important things you'll ever need to say are "Please", "Thank You" and "I'm sorry"'. Notice that none of these expressions is original. One could add others of the same kind, like 'Excuse me', 'Congratulations', or 'I love you'.

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'Please' can soften what might be essentially a command into something that at least sounds less imperious: it oils the wheels of social interaction and does this even though it is never original. As for 'Thank you', how often has someone complained that you said it, even though it, too, is merely a stock phrase? Has anyone ever objected when you said 'I love you', even though this must be one of the most cliché phrases in human history? And even 'Congratulations' offered when, deep down, you really wished you'd been the one getting the job, the prize or having the newborn is generally appreciated by the person you say it to. The point is to offer the words at the right moment, for the right reason, not to compose sonnets to impress your listener.

Originality can be a sign of greatness in some spheres, but prayer is not an exercise in demonstrating your greatness. Whether you thought up the words you use or not,

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the real issue is whether you mean them, whether they express something that really lies in your mind and in your heart and the sheer fact that you have remembered to offer them. If you really are sorry, then 'I'm sorry' says that as well as any other words you could use. What's true of our lives together as human beings is also true of life with God, which is what prayer is.

And that's a crucial point that people sometimes seem to forget about prayer: what prayer is, what defines prayer, is that it is either words human beings use to speak to God; or the space in which human beings wait, in order to listen to God; or the silence which allows the 'saying' of what cannot be expressed in words; or the silence of simply resting in God's presence. Any beauty or eloquence in the words used in prayer could only be impressive to other human beings. That not only means eloquence doesn't matter at all in personal prayer—God knows what's in your heart, no matter what words you use. It also means that when you pray aloud in front of others, 'eloquence' can miss the mark.

For a start, people who pray aloud 'spontaneously' often in practice fall into well-worn ruts. These can be a matter of verbal tics (repeated use of 'just' for example, 'Lord, just send your healing . . . Just . . . Just'). Or it can mean repeatedly praying for one favourite set of concerns. One intercessor in a parish I was once part of prayed for people with one particular disease every single time it was her turn to lead: this one disease, never any other. She didn't seem to realise that by relentlessly mentioning only one ailment, she was giving the impression that other ravaging diseases weren't as important, maybe not important at all. Her instinctive concern for something dear to her own heart gave the impression of callousness towards those affected by anything else. People who have social or political agendas often make the same mistake—and risk actually inspiring antagonism to their beloved cause in their hearers, who tire of one pet issue being pushed over and over again.

Whether you are praying alone and in private, or whether you are offering prayer aloud with others, make your first concern to remember that everything you say is addressed to God, as if Jesus were sitting right next to you and you were talking straight to him. Keeping this actual presence in mind may help you to avoid one common fault in those who offer public intercessions, namely lecturing. Never lose sight of the fact you are addressing God, the Omniscient. You do not need to tell God the details of what is going on in the world, as if you are some sort of personal news service for the Almighty. Nor is there reason to suppose that your fellow Christians are more ignorant of the latest natural disaster, accident or war than you are. We name concerns to hold them up before God, not as a round-about way of publicising information, and certainly not to remind God of what's going on around us.

Make your second priority to remember that whatever particular concerns lie especially on your heart, you are called as a Christian to intercede for a whole world of pain and need. Make a point of trying, once a day, to think of some person, some group, some cause that is remote from *your* immediate surroundings and community and your habitual concerns

and commend that person, group or concern into the hands of the Holy Spirit, pleading that all may be done that the Spirit knows best to do.

Now let's look at the other sort of objection to using set words for prayer: that this is the 'mindless babbling' or 'vain repetition' that Jesus warned against. By 'babbling' it's highly unlikely Jesus meant 'using set words'. The synagogue worship of his time would have used set prayers. The daily life of Jews in his time, as now, was full of set formulae, such as the Sh'ma (Deut 6.4-9). Jesus never once

condemned using set forms, and certainly not the words of scripture. In fact, when his followers asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them a set form, the Our Father or Lord's Prayer. Do Christians ever rattle this off without really thinking about the significance of each and every word?

Yes—just as people say 'Please' and 'Thank

you' on autopilot sometimes. Those considerations don't invalidate set prayers or stock phrases; they merely serve to remind us that we should keep our minds focused on what we are saying and lift up our hearts as we pray.

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Watch a parent with a small child when the child is given a gift, small or large. How often have you heard the parent prompt 'What do you say?' and the child replies 'Thank you'. You could say the parent is merely telling the child to trot out a meaningless set formula but you could also say the parent is teaching the child the virtue of gratitude by small steps. First we learn to say 'Thank you' when we're nudged to do so, but by and by, we learn how much we depend on the kindness and generosity of others in our daily lives and how important it is to express gratitude for these.

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The fact is, most Christians simply do not have the gift of flowing, original eloquence every morning, noon, evening and bedtime, as well as all the hours in between, every day, year in and year out. Most Christians find it easier to remember to pray for their own family and friends than anyone else. Most Christians find supplication (prayer for oneself) and intercession (prayer for others) easier to remember than the other main forms of prayer: confession, thanksgiving, adoration or praise, and contemplation.

It's better that you confess your sins using a set form, than that you never get around to remembering your failures before God at all. It's better that you use a generic prayer of thanksgiving, such as a psalm (Ps 34.1-10, 92.1-5 95.1-7, to name just a few possibilities) than that you never thank God for what he has given you and all humankind, rather than

your prayer's consisting solely of always asking for something or other. It's better to praise God using a canticle like the ancient hymns, the Gloria in Excelsis or the Te Deum, or a psalm of praise, such as Pss 100, 145 or 150, than for your prayer life to be devoid of praise for the One who

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loved you into being and gives you breath in every moment just because you can't think up original encomiums on the spot every day. It's better to use the words of others to pray than to aspire to pure contemplation if you never seem to get around to contemplative prayer.

Set forms provide the Christian with a place to begin and fine places to rest, but they can also be used as prompts to remind you of your specific failings or the specific things you have to be thankful for. The use of set forms doesn't quash freely offered prayer and in fact can in fact prime the pump of

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spontaneous and original prayer. We learn to pray, for the most part, by 'overhearing' the prayers of others, whether when they pray aloud or whether we read their words in books, such as collections of prayers or liturgical forms or the psalms.

As for praise, in my experience very few Christians, when praying aloud in front of others, will include this type of prayer in what they say. That leads me to suspect it's largely absent from their personal prayer, as well. Surely it's better to use the words of the Psalms or canticles like the Te Deum to praise God than never to praise God at all.

Finally, if prayer is only valid when the words are 'our own', what would it mean for words to qualify as 'our own'? If the only words that are our 'own' are those which bear no resemblance to any sequence of words ever uttered until now, what hope does any of us have of saying *anything* sincere?

What are your own or my own words? They're the words we use—that's all. 'I love you' are as much my words as anything I've written in this post, even though I didn't invent 'I love you' and even though I didn't crib this post from anyone else. Do you have to be sincere? In prayer, for sure: you can't fool God. But there's no reason you can't *sincerely* pray words written by someone else. Sincerity and originality are not the same thing. Words of prayer are your own when they express what you want to offer to God, perhaps most especially when you can't find words adequate to what's in your heart.

The important thing is *that* you pray: that before God, you confess your failings, acknowledge your concerns for this world of pain and uncertainty, give thanks for all God's gifts and praise the blessed Trinity for all that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are:

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glimpsed and known by you but more than you could ever imagine. The *words* barely matter. What matters is that you turn your heart and mind to the Father of Lights, the Pioneer of our salvation, the Giver of Life. That's all prayer is: the turning of your whole self to the Trinity, even if only for a fleeting moment, snatched in the midst of a busy day, in whatever words you have to hand. The important thing is that you pray, throughout your days.