

## On Rote Repetition: A Response to the Scoffer

A favorite whipping boy of the enlightened enthusiasts among us has for a long time been the use of rote repetition in prayer and the liturgy. Those poor Catholics (and others like them, such as the Lutherans), all they ever do is say the same old prayers all the time. Just “Lord, have mercy,” or some such prayer, over and over and over again. But they don’t think about what they are praying, they just rattle those words thoughtlessly off the tongue. We would not hesitate to admit that some rote repetition is probably used by some people somewhere who never give thought to what they are saying, but it is far more important to note that rote repetition is in the lives of many an extremely valuable tool of learning and of meditation. So while for some, rote repetition is an entirely fruitless waste of time, for others, it is a necessary aid to Christian meditation. But how might we reply to the scoffer and his worry about repetition as mindless chatter? Let us deal first with the greater reason to consider a salutary use of rote ritual: it is because Christ has Himself so directed His Church. The scoffers’ scorn must be directed at Christ Himself before it is directed at the liturgy of the Church. The most common rote ritual prayer in use in the Church today, and, for that matter, in all her history, is the Our Father. Who could gainsay the fact that of all the prayers repeated over and over and over again, this one must rank on top of the list? Indeed, the scoffer could find a great target for his scoffing by considering the way Christians just keep on repeating and repeating these same words all the time. But against what is he really scoffing? Or, more to the point, against whom? This is, after all, the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer the Lord Jesus gave us.

But the scoffer might well (as some have done) direct our attention to the words of Jesus in St. Matthew’s gospel which serve as a preface to His giving of this prayer in 6:7-13. First He said, “When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do,” which would seem to support the scoff, until one considers the words following: “For they think that they will be heard for their many words.” Thus “vain” has to do not with “repetition,” but with the thought that by repetition one can gain a hearing. The abuse of the rosary does come to mind here, but not without the thought that it could as easily have a salutary use, depending on one’s state of mind. But more to the point, I have heard many a scoffer chide rote prayers while at the same time preferring himself to run on endlessly with the words of his vain musing, with the rather transparent assumption that his sincerity will surely be better demonstrated to God if he can sustain the monologue for an extended period of time. To whom, then, does Jesus’ warning best apply?

The scoffers also like to refer to Jesus’ words immediately preceding the Our Father: “Pray like this,” He says, “Our Father,” etc. (Matthew 6:9). The key word, they say, is the word like. This word has even led Blessed Martin Luther to see the Our Father as a pattern for all Christian prayer, and to compose prayers quite intentionally according to the pattern found there. Therefore, the scoffer can maintain that the Lord’s Prayer was not really meant to be repeated by rote, as it is, over and over, but rather, to be a pattern and nothing more.

We could refer by way of reply to the overwhelmingly unbroken and monolithic practice of the Church catholic over her centuries of existence to incorporate the Our Father in virtually every order of service and prayer office one can find, but this might (at least to a scoffer) beg the question: so what? Laying aside the rather patent arrogance such talk belies (against all the churches of all time one really wishes to prate?), we could also reply by way of the Our Father as it is found in St. Luke 11:2. The Lucan version of Jesus' preface is more direct than the Matthean: "When you pray, say, Our Father," etc. Here we find a simple and refreshing command: say this, which ought to lay to rest the prattle of scoffers against rote ritual. For according to these unmistakable terms it is Jesus Himself who here is the One ultimately responsible for the Church's rote ritual. Thus the Church's unbroken record of prominent usage of the Our Father is first of all a mark of her obedience to her Master. Conversely, any scoffing against rote just because it is rote is first of all a mark of disobedience to the Same.

There is latent truth in the charge that rote ritual will yield wandering minds. That is not a charge against it, but on the contrary another point in its favor. Following is the reason this is so.

What marks the difference is frame of mind. The mind set one brings to prayer or worship is of critical importance for worship. If someone approaches prayer begrudgingly, prayer will not do him much good at all. This is especially true of prayers repeated by rote. Here will be found, rather, an opportunity to scoff, or at least to let the mind wander to other matters. It is no doubt due to the awareness of such wandering of minds that contemporary worship-planners choose to construct the prayers of the Church in such a way as to snatch the attention of these minds, to bring them back to the task at hand. Creativity then becomes a great asset, for the more one can invent new ways to catch attention, the more success one ought to expect. Underlying this approach is a view that wandering minds are primarily the responsibility of the liturgist, the pastor. This implication fails to note the true nature of the problem of the perennial wandering mind. Wandering minds—particularly minds which often fall victim to wandering—are the fruit of a failure to acknowledge the benefit of ritual prayer. Those who approach the ritual with even an implicit scorn for such things—thinking, for instance, this rote stuff won't really do me any good—will not be inclined toward paying attention. We already said this; why say it again?, etc. When worship planners fail to take such implicit scorn into account, they miss the true nature of the problem at hand.

Could it be that such scorn is actually an aversion to the very idea that one must direct his attention to words other than his own? One who puffs, Why say this again? is in essence complaining that his mind wants something new to receive, something else. Is this the creative part of the mind, then? For to create something is to experience something new, something completely else. Without disparaging creativity altogether—for there is surely a season for everything—it can hardly be denied that creating one's own words or thoughts is necessarily opposed to receiving someone else's words or thoughts. Therefore when the matter at hand is the Word of God and the importance and command of Christ to meditate thereon (Search the Scriptures, John 5:39), creativity is quite out of place. We might even suggest that it was this mischievous desire for creativity that led to consumption of the forbidden fruit in Eden (as if to say, "We want something new!"). At least it can be deduced that scorn of repetition, when seen here, has no real object other

than the Word of God. It is, in short, disobedience to the Sabbath commandment, with its attendant implication that we gladly hear and learn the Word of God.

Now we can get at the reason the employment of rote ritual in worship is a point in its favor, even in connection with the wandering of minds. In addition to the dominical command, rote repetition is a great divider: it helps to separate the sheep from the goats. The fact that rote ritual is the bane of some and the blessing of others is not unrelated to the fact that rote ritual results in the wandering of minds. For in the first place, when the mind of the contemptuous wanders, it will produce the closing of his mind; conversely, when the mind of the diligent wanders, this will produce a self-chiding, and hence a greater desire to concentrate. In fact, such a one who puts forth the consequent effort to concentrate will quickly find that he has no difficulty doing so, by virtue of the fact that much rote repetition is going on, and he already knows what to expect. This whole process is not unlike the reason Jesus gave for preaching in parables:

Because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand . . . For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (Matthew 13:14-15).

Why did Jesus preach in parables, if He knew that some people were already dull of hearing? His approach contains both grace and judgment: grace for those who do hear, and implicit judgment against others who refuse, as if He would say, This message is not for you, then. So His parables served as a beginning of the separation of the faithful from the hypocrites. For it was only those who asked, What does this mean? who were told.

So also does rote repetition serve to separate the faithful from the hypocrites, and in a way to expose the hypocrisy of the latter: I'll say it once, but don't make me listen two or three times in a row! Oh? And why not? Because you did not really rejoice in it the first time?

We find therefore another critical reason for keeping the liturgy, latent in the very complaints of those who wish to throw it out. Liturgical worship—which in fact is called liturgical precisely because it employs set (rote!) forms and orders, using in repetitive patterns portions of the Word of God, keeping patterns handed down through the tradition of the Church—tends automatically to weed out the scoffers. Of course, God wants everyone, including scoffers, to be saved, but He also knows—as should we—that no scoffer who persists in his scoffing at the Word of God can be saved. Jesus' approach to such as these was to let them alone (Matthew 15:14), and on the other hand to say, "Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (Luke 11:28). So it is reasonable to suppose that the liturgy has been employed throughout the history of the people of God in part for this very reason: it is helpful to the faithful and it hinders the hypocrites.

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