

## **Pater Noster (Matthew 6:9-13) As a Paradigm for Ecumenical Commitment among Christians in Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** *Overt self-alienation characterises wilful disunity existing among Christians, particularly in Nigeria. Evidence of this is obvious in the number of Christian sects springing up daily. Each has its own interpretation of the message of Christ's Good News, thereby generating diversified and conflicting views on Christian belief. This paper argues that the Pater Noster (The Lord's Prayer), a common Christian prayer, is a paradigm for ecumenical commitment. It studies the Matthean version of this prayer in conjunction with its other traditions in the New Testament and the Didache. In the Pater Noster we find the reason for ecumenical endeavour for which Jesus prayed and which should be a concern of all Christians.*

**Keywords:** *The Lord's Prayer, Gospel according to Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4, Christians in Nigeria, Ecumenism*

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### **I. Introduction**

Sporadic sprouting of Christian sects, disintegrating from the already existing varied ecclesial bodies and most appallingly also from the Catholic Church, has been an age-long concern of all genuine Christians who understand the message of Jesus' Good News and know how desirous he was about the unity of all his followers. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, of Vatican II begins with these words: "The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council, Christ the Lord founded only one Church and one Church only" [1]. Since the promulgation of this decree till now, the Catholic Church has renewed her ecumenical commitment in many ways and her efforts have not been fruitless. However, more need to be done because the disunity among Christians assumes new form in every era. In our contemporary time, it is unrestrained off-shoot of sects and subjective interpretation of the Word of God.

The present situation of Christians calls for an urgent attention because the more the sects germinate and spread, the more the message of the Gospel of Jesus is diluted and degenerates into many forms of syncretism. It is almost impossible in some parts of the world, particularly in our country, to produce a synopsis of what all the sects believe in as they profess their faith in one Lord Jesus Christ. The translation and interpretation of the Bible, which should be the common deposit of Christian faith, instigates more confusion than any other aspects of our lives as Christians.

Disunity among Christians is a clear manifestation of Christians' failure to actualize Jesus' earnest wish for their unity. It is also a sign of counter witnessing by Christ's followers, for true conversion to Christian tenets is greatly marred by the actions of Christians who should be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). More importantly, disunity among those who profess Christ shows that the fundamental feature of Christians is greatly affected. Unity should fundamentally characterise the members of the Church, because "The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Spirit" [1]. Disunity among Christians makes the Church lose her dignified identity as God's only flock commissioned to preach the Good News to the end of the world (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts of the Apostles 1:8).

Meditating and praying the Lord's Prayer, early Christians were able to perceive in it a summary of the Good News of Jesus, the summary of the whole Gospel, according to Tertullian, who was among the first exponents of this Prayer. Pater Noster was widely known such that the two Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Luke, preserve it in their accounts of the earthly ministry of Jesus. Both Gospels inserted it in Jesus' systematic instruction given to his disciples. An important early Christian rule of life, the Didache, also included it among the distinctive Christian rule of life. It is the common Christian Prayer; in fact, a common heritage that every Christian denomination accepts and employs in liturgical services. It is "a summary or model of our own prayer, both corporate and private" [2].

The two intertwined dimensions of prayer, vertical and horizontal, proffer an intrinsic criterion for evaluating human religious status. In all the varied aspects of prayer, our relationship with God manifests itself invariably in positive interaction with other human beings. Ecumenical spirit, which ought to be translated into sincere ecumenical commitment, is necessary for genuine Christian identity. It is an earnest wish of Jesus when he prayed for the unity of all his followers (John 17:20-24). This unity bears its matrix from that relationship

that Jesus has with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' earthly ministry and at the request of his disciples, he taught them a prayer which is also a format of every prayer and Christian life, the Lord's Prayer. Its two traditions in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 have so much in common, notwithstanding the variations that are attributable to each of the Evangelist's theological thrust. This paper studies the Pater Noster with the intention to elicit and elucidate its ecumenical dimension as it pertains to the Church in Nigeria.

## **II. Ecumenical Commitment**

The ideal united Church depicted in the Acts of the Apostles 4:32-37 was certainly far from mere creative utopia of Luke's imagination. Jesus' early disciples lived and shared together not only their possessions, but most importantly their personal encounter with and experience of Jesus. They believed in him and were united by their common treasure which was their faith in Jesus. This was their distinguishing mark that impelled unbelieving onlookers to tag them "Christians" (Acts of the Apostles 11:26), differentiating them from others, especially the Jewish population [3] from which many of them originated. Their faith in Jesus made them Christ-like, for they modelled their lives on the life and teaching of Jesus in such a way that they made deep impression on those around them and were able to attract more followers into their Christian group. Jesus was their *raison d'être* and their unifying factor.

A possible objection that one can raise about the difficulty of Christians of today living like the early followers of Jesus in Luke's account is that at that early stage of the nascent Christianity, the number was not as numerous as what we have today. They were counting in hundreds and thousands, but today the number has significantly increased. This notwithstanding, the unifying link remains the same for Christ does not change. He remains the living axis holding all that believe in him. Therefore, the primordial unity that existed among his first group of followers is still possible as long as they continue to go by his name in their common appellation, Christian; if by this name Christians profess their faith in his person and teaching. On the nominal level this unity is incontrovertible for we all bear the same name, Christians, a name expressing our faith and affiliation. In fact, any ecumenical commitment ought to begin from our profound reflection on this common identity.

If ecumenism, often described as Church unity, is a movement promoting unity among different Christian Churches and groups, ecumenical commitment should be a priority of all Christians on the basis of our common heritage, our faith in Jesus Christ. It was Jesus' earnest wish: "that they may be one" (John 17:21). This most desired unity is, according to Jesus' prayerful wish, intrinsic to the core of all Christian belief. We believe in one undivided God, who is three Persons in one God. The Triune God we believe in is unity by nature. Thus, disunity among Christians vitiates the existence of our religion and propels us into seeking ways of resolving our differences in order to be able to profess Jesus and fulfil the mission mandate he gave when he said "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Christians will be able to accomplish this if they have unity of purpose.

## **III. In Search Of An Ecumenical Paradigm In Pater Noster**

### **3.1 The Texts of Pater Noster**

The Lord's Prayer, as it is generally known and prayed by Christians, follows the version found in the Gospel according to Matthew 6:9-13. The Greek text of this prayer with its layout in this Synoptic Gospel reads as follows:

Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois;  
hagiasthētō to onoma sou;  
elthetō hē basileia sou;  
genēthētō to thelēma sou,  
hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs;  
ton arton hēmōn ton epiouision dos hēmin sēmeron;  
kai aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn,  
hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn;  
kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon,  
alla rusai hēmas apo tou ponērou.

In the Gospel according to Luke, one finds a seemingly shorter form of this prayer inserted in a context different from Matthew. Luke's (11:2-4) version of the Lord's Prayer in its original language is:

Pater, hagiasthētō to onoma sou;  
elthetō hē basileia sou;  
ton arton hēmōn ton epiouision didou hēmin to  
kath'hēmeran;  
kai aphes hēmin tas hamartias hēmōn,  
kai gar autoi aphiomen panti opheilonti hēmin;

kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon.

Furthermore, this prayer is recorded in an ancient Christian document called Didache. This is “an early work on Christian discipline, known also as the Teaching of the (Lord through the Twelve) Apostles (to the Nations)” [4]. It is also described as “a first-century Christian manual probably composed in Syria-Palestine” [5]. The text of the Lord’s Prayer together with its introductory statement and the instruction on the daily frequency of the prayer as it is found in the Didache is:

**Didache 8:2-3** <sup>2</sup> Neither pray as the hypocrites; but as the Lord commanded in His Gospel, thus pray: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us today our daily (needful) bread, and forgive us our debt as we also forgive our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (or, evil); for Thine is the power and the glory for ever. <sup>3</sup> Thrice in the day thus pray.

The version in the Didache follows closely the Matthean text, with the exception of the doxology at the end which could be explained as the liturgical adaption of this prayer. This doxology is reminiscent of the content of 1 Chronicles 29:11 “Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all”.

Luke’s version is relatively shorter. Following the principle of *lectio brevior praestat longiori* (shorter reading is preferred to the longer), there is the tendency to consider the shorter version of the Lord’s prayer in Luke as the original or the earliest form of this prayer which Matthew expanded according to his theological thrust [6][7][8]. Besides following the exegetical principle of *lectio brevior praestat longiori* (shorter reading is preferred to the longer), it is also possible to see the two versions of this prayer as having varied geographical provenances; each community learned and preserved the prayer as they were received from those who transmitted them. It is instructive that the Church preserves in her liturgy, as it is evident from the Didache, the Matthean version of the Lord’s Prayer. The Church’s preference of Matthew’s version can be inferred from the distinctive orientations of the two versions, particularly as it pertains to Matthew’s communitarian perspective.

### 3.2 Comparing the Versions of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew and Luke

Matthew	Luke
Initial Invocation	Initial Invocation
Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois;	Pater,
Petitions	Petitions
1. hagiasthētō to onoma sou;	1. hagiasthētō to onoma sou;
2. elthetō hē basileia sou;	2. elthetō hē basileia sou;
3. genēthētō to thelēma sou, hōs en ouranō kai epī gēs;	3. ton arton hēmōn ton epiouision didou hēmin to kath’hēmeran;
4. ton arton hēmōn ton epiouision dos hēmin sēmeron;	4. kai aphes hēmin tas hamartias hēmōn, kai gar autoi aphiomēn panti opheilonti hēmin;
5. kai aphes hēmin ta opheilēmata hēmōn, hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois opheiletais hēmōn;	5. kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon.
6. kai mē eisenegkēs hēmas eis peirasmon,	
7. alla rusai hēmas apo tou ponērou.	

In point of fact, there are remarkable differences between the two versions even where the points of convergence are obvious and one expects some conformity. The structure of the Prayer in the two versions is the same. It is bipartite: initial invocation and series of petitions. First in the list of the variants in the two versions is their initial or opening vocative. In Luke, this is simply “Father” in contrast to Matthew’s addition of the first person plural possessive pronoun, “Our Father”. Matthew also adds an apposition, “who is in the heaven” to this vocative. The meaning and significance of these peculiarities in Matthew will be explained below when we analyse closely this Prayer according to Matthew.

Apart from the variation in the initial vocative, the number and the contents of the petitions in the two Gospels differ significantly. There are seven petitions in Matthew; while Luke has five. In some of the petitions, the two versions agree verbatim, especially the first and second petitions on the holiness of God’s name and the coming of his Kingdom respectively. The third petition in Matthew, “on the will of God”, is absent in Luke. It is worth noting that the number seven is frequent in the Gospel according to Matthew: the Genealogy is 7 x 7 generations (1:17); seven beatitudes (Matthew 5); seven parables (Matthew 13); forgiveness not seven but seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22); seven diatribes against the Pharisees (Matthew 23); finally, the entire Gospel of Matthew has seven sections.

In Matthew, the fourth petition which is the third in Luke, on the gift of daily sustenance, also differs. Although both of them use the same verb *didōmi* “to give” in the imperative mood, the tense in each is different. While Matthew uses aorist imperative, Luke has present imperative, which is iterative [9]. Yet another

difference in this petition is in the temporal adverb; in Matthew it is *sēmeron* “today”; Luke has *kath’hēmeran* “every day” or “daily” and it agrees with the iterative sense of the accompanying imperative.

The petition on the forgiveness of offenses, which is the fifth in Matthew and fourth in Luke varies also in the two versions. In Matthew the offenses are called *opheilemata*, from *opheilema* “debt”, “what is owed”, “one’s due”; Luke has *hamartias* from *hamartia* “sin”. Each of the Evangelists includes a condition for the forgiveness of human offenses against the Father; however, the syntax differs. The verb to forgive *aphiēmi* is construed as aorist indicative in Matthew, *aphēkamen* expressing a definite past action; Luke has present indicative *aphiomen*. Finally, the seventh petition in Matthew on deliverance from evil is again omitted in Luke.

From this brief survey of the differences in the two versions, one observes that there is more in Matthew than mere expansion of the shorter form of this prayer in Luke. Additions and some deliberate changes in the tenses and choice of words could point to the Evangelist’s theological thrust, which could have been motivated also by the life situation of his audience. We shall dwell more on this in our quest for its ecumenical significance. The contexts of the Lord’s Prayer in these two Gospels convey a lot on how each Evangelist understood and appropriated the Prayer in their writings and teaching.

### **3.3 The Contexts of the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospels**

The Lord’s Prayer is found at different contexts in Matthew, Luke, and in the early Christian manual, the *Didache*. The general structure of the Gospel according to Matthew alternates narrative and discourse [10]. In Matthew, the Prayer is inserted in the first part of the Gospel and the discourse section of this part, called Sermon on the Mount, according to the information given in Matthew 5:1; Jesus went up to the Mount, sat down, his disciples joined him and he gave them a very long teaching that covers chapters five to seven. In fact, the concluding words at the end of the discourse relay how the people felt as they listened to this extraordinary teaching: “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes (Matthew 7:28-29). The Lord’s Prayer was one of the astounding teachings they heard from him. It was different from what they were used to hearing from their scribes, for Jesus spoke with authority. In Chapter 6, which is the immediate context of the Prayer, Jesus taught them about the three great acts of holiness: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. His disciples already knew about this triad; Jesus’ new way of presenting them made a lot of differences, for he spoke with authority and with newness in his teaching. The section on prayer starts from 6:5; prayer, according to Jesus, does not entail empty outward manifestations as the Pharisees did. Again, genuine prayer does not require many words as the Gentiles did; the Father already knows what we need before we ask him. The Lord’s Prayer comes immediately after all these explanations. Jesus gave it to his followers as a model of their prayer. Actually, the introductory words in v. 9 elucidate the nature and function of the Prayer when Jesus instructed them: “Pray then in this way.” In other words, he gave them the Prayer as the distinguishing mark of their prayer life; all followers of Jesus should pray in this way. It is part of the global teaching on Christian life.

In the Gospel according to Luke, the Lord’s Prayer is a response to the request of one of the disciples who asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Before this request, the narrator intimates that it was after Jesus had finished his own prayer in a certain place, not mentioned in the narrative. His followers must have watched him in prayer and attracted to how he prayed and they wanted him to teach them as John (the Baptizer) taught his disciples (Luke 11:1-2). After the Lord’s Prayer, there is series of instructions on prayer. First, Jesus used a parable to illustrate perseverance in prayer (Luke 6:5-8). In chapter 18:1-8 a similar parable teaches importunacy in prayer. Still in chapter 6 after the Lord’s Prayer and the parable, Jesus explained the parable with more captivating imagery: if earthly fathers rightly give their children what they ask, the heavenly Father does not deny us of our request. What we need to do is to ask, search, knock, and persevere in our request. It has been observed that the theme of prayer is a prominent one in the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles [11]. In fact, it is one of the themes they have in common and that justify the unity of the two volume work. Both Jesus and his disciples prayed before important events (Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; Acts 1:24; 6:6). The context of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke is different from what we have seen in Matthew. Luke inserts it in his general theme on prayer and significantly as a request of one of the disciples on behalf of the others.

The presence of the Lord’s Prayer in *Didache* is an evidence of the common use of this prayer by the nascent Church, and the doxology at the end of the version we have in *Didache* and in some manuscripts of the same prayer in the Gospel according to Matthew shows also its liturgical importance among early Christians. The prayer was widely accepted and used in communal functions. As an instruction to Christians on many aspects of their lives, the Lord’s Prayer as presented in the *Didache* is inserted in the context of instructions on Christian prayer as distinct from that of their Jewish counterpart who were called in the introductory part of the Prayer as hypocrites: “Neither pray as the hypocrites; but as the Lord commanded in His Gospel”. It appears that this prefix before the Prayer was meant to give Christians their distinctive identity different from the adherents of Judaism. Matthew 6:5-8 has similar subtle critique on the mode of prayer of these hypocrites: “And whenever

you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward". The Lord's Prayer was meant to replace their tefilla "prayer", which they prayed three times a day. It is instructive to note that the Didache also stipulates the same three times for the Lord's Prayer. "It is the Jewish prayer ritual which is rejected here and it seems that this message is directed first of all at Christian converts of gentile provenance. The Lord's Prayer is imposed on Christians with the purpose of replacing the recitation of the tefilla said by the 'hypocrites'" [5]. It is important to note from the context of the Lord's Prayer in the Didache that at the time of the early Christians, this Prayer was a distinguishing mark of all the adherents of the new faith in Jesus Christ. As a distinguishing mark, it invariably united them together for everyone identified himself or herself to its contents; it was their way of life.

Some Jewish background of the Lord's Prayer is often observed in the doxology, called Kaddish, which the Jews "recited with congregational responses at the close of individual sections of the public service and at the conclusion of the service itself" [12]. There are four types of Kaddish prayed in Aramaic and they are characterised by "an abundance of praise and glorification of God and an expression of hope for the speedy establishment of His kingdom on earth" [12]. The first one resembles the phrases in the Lord's Prayer:

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will. May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire house of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen [12].

It has also been noted that the Jewish Tefillah, the Eighteen Benedictions, also has much in common with the words in the Lord's Prayer. For instance, the sixth benediction reads, "Forgive us, our Father; for we have sinned against thee; blot out our transgression from before thine eyes. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who forgivest much" [13]. This is akin to the petition on forgiveness stated in Matt 6:12a and its parallel in Luke 11:4a. This sixth benediction and its New Testament corresponding phrases presuppose collective sin of humankind. The people pray for the sin we all commit as a group. Actually, as we are going to see in our close reading of the Lord's Prayer below, many of the words and phrases have their Old Testament and Judaic background.

### **3.4 Hermeneutic of Matthew's Pater Noster**

Pater Noster in all its forms and versions takes the communal life of all followers of Christ as an indisputable fact and recommends liturgical setting as its natural milieu. Again, the Prayer, as part of the instructions given to Jesus' disciples in Matthew, Luke and Didache, intrinsically advocates unity of all Christians. This is because, it is essentially rule of life for all who believe in Jesus. Some have also indicated close affinity between the Lord's Prayer and Jesus' Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17, where he also prayed in a special way for Christian unity: "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). Delineating the overtones of the Lord's Prayer in John 17, Okure pointed out that "Unity among the disciples is a mark of the coming of God's reign, which will receive its consummation in the inseparable union between Jesus and his disciples in heaven" [14]. This makes a strong connection between the second petition of the Lord's Prayer *elthetō hē basileia sou* "your kingdom come" and Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17:21. A closer reading of the whole prayer will further reveal its inherent message for ecumenical commitment.

#### **3.4.1 Structure of Pater Noster according to Matthew 6:9-13**

The New Revised Standard Version translates the original Greek as follows:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

In the Roman Missal and other Catholic liturgical books we have the following translation (note the punctuations) and layout of the text:

Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

The Latin parallel of this, according to the same Roman Missal and Catholic Liturgical books, reflects closely the English version:

Pater noster, qui es in caelis:  
sanctificetur nomen tuum;

adveniat regnum tuum; fiat voluntas tua, sicut in cælo et in terra.  
Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie;  
et dimitte nobis debita nostra,  
sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris;  
et ne nos inducas in tentationem;  
sed libera nos a malo.

The Vulgate offers a version that slightly varies from the one used in Catholic liturgy:

Pater noster qui in caelis es  
sanctificetur nomen tuum  
veniat regnum tuum fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra  
panem nostrum supersubstantialem da nobis hodie  
et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimisimus debitoribus nostris  
et ne inducas nos in temptationem  
sed libera nos a malo

An outstanding variant in the Vulgate is the translation of the Greek *epiousion* with *supersubstantialem* which literally means, “the bread above the substance” – a reference to the Holy Eucharist [10]. Saint Jerome introduced this term in his translation of Matthew and in his other commentaries; in the same Prayer in Luke he used *quotidianus* just as in Old Latin version of the Bible. The translation of the rare word *epiousion* has generated many suggestions. A full discussion on this is often provided in many critical commentaries on the Gospels [15]. The version we have in Catholic Liturgy follows closely the original Greek text with some interpretative translation, especially in the use of *Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie* for the fourth petition. Our analysis of the Pater Noster below follows the Greek text.

The layout of the Lord’s Prayer in its original, with punctuations, shows that it is just one sentence separated by semicolons and commas. English translations of the New Revised Standard Version and Catholic liturgical books divide this one-sentence Greek text into two. The first full stop is at the end of the third petition, that is, on the doing of God’s will in heaven and on earth. This, one thinks, can help us in discovering the major units of the Prayer. There is first the initial invocation, “Our Father” which is followed immediately by an apposition, “who art in heaven”. The rest of the Prayer is divided into two major parts: 1-3 petitions and 4-7 petitions. Each of these has a common factor that determines their being taken together. The first part (1-3 petitions) is about the Father: his name, will and kingdom; while the second part is about the petitioners: daily sustenance, forgiveness of sins, temptation and deliverance from evil. In other words, it first looks outward before inward.

### **3.4.2 Close Reading**

The structure of Pater Noster discussed above calls to mind similar structure of many of Psalms of individual and communal lament where the psalmists do not focus only on their life situations but also praise God and include expressions of protestations of confidence in God. Our close reading of Pater Noster, with the aim of discovering its intrinsic message on ecumenical commitment, follows these two parts, but first we consider the message encoded in its initial invocation.

#### **3.4.2.1 Initial Invocation**

The initial invocation in the original text reads, *Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois* “Our Father who art in heaven”. It should be noted that the plural form of heaven in this text reflects the Old Testament use of plural for heaven *šamayim*. The Septuagint translates this with singular. In the New Testament both singular and plural occur with no difference in meaning. The possessive first person pronoun *hēmōn*, which is not in the version we find in Luke, and similar pronouns in the rest of the prayer indicate the communal use of this prayer. It is not meant to be a prayer for one’s personal needs or personal praise of God. In fact it sets the tone of this prayer. Being part of the specific instructions on discipleship, this initial invocation stresses the common Father of all Christ’s followers. “For this reason, in spite of the divisions among Christians, this prayer to ‘our’ Father remains our common patrimony an urgent summons for all the baptized. In communion by faith in Christ and by Baptism, they ought to join in Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his disciples” [16]. When we call God our Father, this “reminds us that we are God’s sons and daughters together in Christ, not as isolated individuals” [17].

We all have the same Father, tender like a good earthly father. When spoken in the common language at the time of Jesus, which he must have used in teaching this prayer, Pater in the Prayer translates the Aramaic *’abbā’*; it is a common intimate word for father, expressing that filial love between a father and son. The phrase “in heaven” points to the transcendence of God who is addressed in the prayer with a common familiar expression, *’abbā’*. His transcendence goes with his might, for he is able to provide all the needs of her children.

The Father that the disciples of Jesus have in common is very near and at the same time transcendent for he is all powerful. Frequent appellation of God as found in the Gospel according to Matthew is *ho patēr ho ouranos* “heavenly Father” (cf. Matt 6:14, 26, 32; 15:13; 18:35; 23:9). He is heavenly, that is transcendent; and he is also immanent, for he is *’abbā’*. This prepares the matrix of the rest of the petition, especially those in the second part of the Prayer.

### **3.4.2.2 Part I of the Lord’s Prayer – On the Father**

Common to all the three petitions in this first part is the use of the third person singular in asking God to accomplish some actions. The petitions all revolve on the person of the Father: his name, kingdom and will.

#### **First Petition: The Holiness of God’s,**

Name Basing on the Jewish background of the Gospel according to Matthew, he undoubtedly used the term ‘name’ with its sense in Hebrew. Name represents a person, his nature and attributes [18]. God’s name is not different from his person (cf. Deut 28:58; 2 Sam 6:2; Jer 7:11; Amos 9:12; Mal 1:6; Isa 29:23; Ezek 36:22-23; John 12:28; 17:6). If God’s name is the same as the person of God himself, and God by nature is holy, what does it imply to pray that God’s name be made holy, be set apart or hallowed? The verb used in this context is *hagiazō* “make holy”, “sanctify”, “consecrate”, “dedicate”, “purify”. The imperative used is aorist passive and it has been recognized as divine passive [19]. The action of the sanctification of God’s name is to be done by God himself. This still begs the question: why should God himself hallow his name, which is already holy by nature? The petition is both praise of the holiness of God and thanksgiving for what this name has wrought in human history. God will see to it that his name remains holy.

This prayer, however, has been taught in such a way that it becomes the wish of Christian Community, the disciples of Jesus. It is the wish of Christians that God’s name be sanctified, be vindicated. This is at the heart of the earthly mission of Jesus and to be continued by his followers. Already in the Old Testament the people were required to be holy as their God is holy (Lev 11:45; Matt 5:48; 1 Pet 1:15-16; 1 John 3:3). As a community prayer and common wish, Christ’s followers have ethical duties in this; first to preserve that holiness of God which he gratuitously shares with human beings when he created us in his image and likeness. “He who prays it must of course even now act to bring about the realization of God’s will within his own sphere of influence” [13]. Christians are called to life of holiness, to be like God, to live lives that make God visible to the world [20]. This they do by following the teachings of Jesus, of which the Lord’s Prayer is a well-calculated summary. Holiness of life is our common vocation as Christians and the point of departure for every ecumenical commitment. “When believers sanctify the name of God, they form here on earth a community of worship that joins the heavenly court in crying out ‘holy, holy, holy’ in unceasing liturgical worship” [21]. The next petition has a close affinity with this first one. “The name of God refers to God’s own innermost nature. The Kingdom of God refers to his activity. Since his innermost nature find expression in his activity, it is appropriate for the petition concerning God’s name to precede the petition concerning the Kingdom” [22].

#### **Second Petition: The Kingdom of God,**

This second petition is also in the version of the Lord’s Prayer in the Gospel according to Luke and in the Didache. *Basileia*, “kingship”, “kingdom” or “reign” is a common theme in the New Testament. Jesus came to establish it on earth. He prepared the disciples for its reception, especially in his teaching. Jesus illustrated its feature with parables recorded solely in the Synoptic Gospels. It is already with us in the person of Jesus, in his Church, in the Sacrament of his real presence. However, it has also eschatological perspective; it looks to the future, when God’s reign will be fully realised. “Your Kingdom come” is a prayer for God himself to come and achieve his end for creating the world” [23]. As in the preceding petition, in this second one Christian Community, in wishing that God’s reign be fully realised, praises him whose kingdom is already established in his Word Incarnate, and looks to the future when there will be no more signs and symbols. In Revelation 22:20 we find a liturgical expression that points to Christian longing for the Kingdom in the phrase, *Maranatha* “Come Lord Jesus!”

Christians have the duty of working for the growth of God’s reign on earth while they wait and desire for the time when all will recognise God as their Lord and Master. They “have to distinguish between the growth of the Reign of God and the progress of the culture and society in which they are involved” [16; no. 2820]. In praying for the coming of God’s Kingdom, all Christian have a common course in this world; it is to work for the growth of God’s Kingdom on earth. In other words, they are to continue the mission inaugurated by Jesus. Christians will be able to achieve this if they are united. This is implied in Jesus’ Prayer: if Christ’s followers are one, his mission will be credible to prospective believers in him (John 17:21).

### **Third Petition: The Will of God,**

The third petition is related to the second. Some see it as another way of expressing the second petition, for “to do God’s will means in practice to let his Kingdom, that is already present, rule one’s life” [22]. This might explain why it is not represented in the version of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke. However, the author of the Gospel according to Matthew and the community behind its composition had a reason for this apparent duplication. The same phrase, “thy will be done” was Jesus’ prayer during the last hours of his life on earth. When he was praying at Gethsemane (Matt 26:42), knowing the excruciating death facing him, he prayed that God’s will be done.

Jesus came to do God’s will (Hebrew 10:7) and he did it throughout his life (John 8:29). Christians are those who are like Christ in their daily lives. If the Lord’s Prayer is the summary of the Gospel, it is appropriate that the petition for the will of God be done on earth be a significant part of this prayer. Jesus taught his disciples by his words and deeds. He did the will of God and taught them to pray that this will be done on earth. “In the biblical tradition God’s will is usually accomplished through his people” [13]. Those who are in the Kingdom of heaven are those who do the will of God: “Not everyone who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). In praying that God’s will be done, Christians desire to enter the Kingdom, the Reign of God. This petition in the version of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew and in the Didache is not, therefore, superfluous; it expatiates on the preceding petition and elucidates its ethical dimension. To do God’s will is a common vocation of all followers of Jesus; this vocation is summarised as “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34; 1 John 3:4; Luke 10:25-37). We pray that we be schooled to desire that God’s will be done in our lives [20]. This petition in the Lord’s Prayer invariably binds all Christians to ecumenical commitment for where there is love; there is unity and common purpose.

The three petitions in the first part of the Lord’s Prayer have vertical orientation; they are centred on God: his name, kingdom and will. They are interrelated; vindication of his holy name points to the coming of his kingdom; a prerequisite for entering the kingdom is to accomplish his will on earth. Those who enter his kingdom are those who do his will. These three are the basis for the four petitions in the second part of the Prayer.

### **3.4.2.3 Part Two of the Lord’s Prayer: Human Petitions**

The petitions in this second part of the Lord’s Prayer have a common characteristic: they are all on human needs. They are petitions on the things human beings need in this world. They are directed to “Our Father who art in heaven”, the God whose transcendence spurs his children to address him with the word of intimacy, ‘abba’ “father”. Christians as a body have the privilege of calling God by this term of love. Whenever we use it we remind ourselves of our unity for we have a common loving Father.

### **Fourth Petition: Our Daily Bread**

In the fourth petition Christians, trusting in the loving Father, ask for their daily bread, food, sustenance in this life. It is an expression of trust in God whom we believe does not leave us alone without fatherly care. In the explanation that follows this prayer in Luke, Jesus encourages his disciples to ask God, who is not only magnanimous but supplies us according to our correct request, for our needs: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13).

Just like in all the petitions in this second part of the Lord’s Prayer, the request is not personal but collective. We ask God for our common need; in this case it is for our sustenance in life as a group. In fact, communality strongly characterizes the Lord’s Prayer. Hence, “Give us our daily bread” is a prayer that obliterates all forms of egocentricity. No one prays for himself or herself only but for common interest. It calls to mind the practice of the early Christians as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). The ‘us’ in the fourth petition in our Prayer recognizes God as the Father of all men and we pray to him for them all, in solidarity with their needs and suffering [16; no. 2829]. When we collectively ask God for our needs, we avow sharing our material and spiritual goods. It is a tangible mark of unity of purpose even in our diversity; for rich and poor as we are, we are able to instill in all a sense of belonging to the family under one paternity.

Christian petition for God’s sustenance asks not for one day but daily, according to the mostly accepted interpretative translation of epiousios, which occurs only here in the New Testament. Its adverbial temporal sense heightens the prayer and its ethical implication. It recognizes God’s continual protection of his people who depend on him for daily survival. He is Our Father who art in heaven; for he is near and transcendent. Thus, he



knows our needs as our Father and being all powerful, he can provide us daily with what we need. On the part of human responsibility, our sharing and caring for one another should be part of our life, that is, daily, just as we hope and ask our Father for continual sustenance.

#### **Fifth Petition: On the Forgiveness of Sin**

In the fifth petition we ask for the forgiveness of our sin and with a condition: as we forgive others their sins against us. It is the only petition that is immediately explained after the Lord's Prayer: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Although the verb used in the second part of this petition is aorist, *aphēkamen*, "we forgave", and presupposes that we have already forgiven others in the past before we ask God to forgive us, it also has present connotation, "we forgive". What our liturgical books translate as trespasses is "debts" according to Matthew's Greek term *opheilēmata*. Sin makes us God's debtors; we owe him the good we should have done. Similarly, in our dealings with fellow human beings, when we offend one another, we neglect to fulfill our moral obligations towards them. "Implicit in the Lord's Prayer is the fundamental obligation to recognize the need of God's forgiveness" [13]. The prayer presupposes at least two fundamental realities in human life. First, it is recognition of the fact that we are all sinners. This first reality is, therefore, the sinful nature of all human beings. "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Second is that we sin against God and we also offend one another. The two components of this second reality are interrelated; sin against our fellow human being is also against God, just like their antonym, love of God and of neighbour, is inseparable. At the background of this second reality is the confraternity of all who recognise God as 'abbā'.

"Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father and of men to one another" [16; no. 2844]. When God forgives us, he sanctifies thereby making us worthy to remain his worthy children. But we have to forgive others; that is, to dispose ourselves for God's forgiveness and worship (cf. Matthew 5:23-26). In forgiving others, we fulfill the divine command to love one another. Our forgiving others should not have limit. If we expect God to forgive us each time we sin, we should be ready to forgive others unlimitedly. We should forgive "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). We are God-like when we forgive others. In this petition we desire to be like God not only on individual basis but essentially as a community of believers in God. Christians, in praying the Lord's Prayer, reflect on the spiritual needs, the salvation of all Christians. We have in this petition a sublime collective desire for our true identity as Christians.

#### **Sixth Petition: On Temptation**

"... and lead us not into temptation" is the sixth petition. It is the only petition that is negatively stated: lead us not... The Greek verb used in this petition is *eispherō* which means "to bring or lead in". It occurs again with this meaning in Luke 5:18; 11:4; Acts of the Apostles 17:20; I Timothy 6:7; Hebrew 13:11; it also means "to drag in" as in Luke 12:11. God does not tempt his Children (James 1:13). Thus the petition does not imply that there is possibility of human beings being led into temptation by God, for human beings create their own temptation themselves. "But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:14-15). In the sixth petition Christians as a family pray against this inclination to sin; they ask God to prevent them from desire that leads to sin.

There is some correlation between this petition and the fifth one. The present petition prays against prelude to sin, desire that is not checked by good discernment, the testing that everyone experiences in life. It is about individual and collective consciences [24]. We pray not to succumb to it; the petition is on constant vigilance in our life. "The petition is not a request that he or she who prays may be spared temptation but that God will help him or her to overcome it" [22]. Like other petitions in the Lord's Prayer, the present petition makes the prayer a collective concern of all Christians. We all pray for our common need, vigilance in our vocation as Christians. We have the duty to help others not to derail from this vocation. The next and final petition seems a further explanation of the sixth petition.

#### **Seventh Petition: Deliver us from Evil**

The seventh petition is found in Jesus' Priestly prayer when he said: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). As long as we are in the world, our enemy and God's, the devil, constantly threatens to sever us from God, thus leading us to eternal damnation. He is our common enemy, and we pray in common against his intrigues in human history. He is called the deceiver (John 8:44), the primordial deceiver (Gen 3); through him sin and death entered into the world. Jesus defeated him by his death on the cross and resurrection. The seventh petition already anticipates Jesus' saving death. The Father delivered us from the grips of the evil one through the saving death of his Son. "In this

petition, we are asking that God does not allow us to take the path that leads to sin. We are praying to avoid the near occasion of sin" [17].

The evil we pray against exhibits itself in different forms today: war, sickness, poverty, willful oppression and exploitation of the voiceless. Christians should have all these in mind when they pray as a family to the loving Father: "Deliver us from evil". This prayer calls for responsibility on the part of all Christians. Praying for deliverance from evil, we should not be perpetrators of that against which we pray. Evil thrives in disunity; it is more disastrous when it is seen among Christians. This is because, as a divided family we cannot unite and fight our common enemy. God works through human beings in putting aright the evil machinations of the Evil One.

#### **IV. Principles Of Ecumenical Commitment In Pater Noster**

Salient points on ecumenical commitment elicited from our study of the Pater Noster of the version in the Gospel according to Matthew, which many Christians adopt in their prayers, affirm further the observation of many people that the Lord's Prayer is the summary of the Gospel. It highlights in all its parts and in the seven petitions found therein one of the principles of the mystery of Christian unity; the one Church of Christ is God's only flock. It is a dignity bestowed on Christians as a group. God himself is her Shepherd. His character as the Shepherd is emphasised in the Lord's Prayer when the initial invocation of this Prayer addresses him with the intimate appellation 'abbā' "Father". In order to stress further the oneness of the flock, the version in the Matthean Lord's Prayer adds the possessive pronoun "our". Thus, in this prayer, which should be understood more as a format of prayer, members of God's Family are taught to recognise him as their Father. He is the symbol of our unity in our diversity. If he is our Father, then all of us in this sheepfold are brothers and sisters to one another. Our vocation of spreading the Good News will be fully realised when we all act as one family of God, in spite of our differences.

The first petition in the Lord's Prayer, which is programmatic in content, prays for the vindication of God's name. It also invites all Christians, who have made this Prayer their own, to their common obligation to be holy as their Father is holy. Holiness of life is the vocation of all Christians. To be holy is to be what one is expected to be. Christians are expected to translate into action the name they bear. As Christ's followers, the assembly of persons justified by the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are baptised in the name of the Trinity, who is unity of the three persons. Holiness of life among Christians will not be complete without this unity of which the Trinity is an exemplar. This should spur all Christians to ecumenical commitment; otherwise our *modus operandi* contradicts what we are by nature.

The expected unity among Christians is further reflected in the four petitions that constitute the second part of the Lord's Prayer: daily sustenance, forgiveness of sins, vigilance in this life and protection from evil. All these petitions are construed as communal concerns. We pray for common need of all. Each of the petitions bears its ethical obligation. The Lord's Prayer is both an outline of Christian Prayer and of unity of all Christians.

Christians in Nigeria have their peculiar obligations from these petitions. A society with high proliferation of Christian faith in varied forms, and all diligently pray the Lord's Prayer, but has a good number of his citizens living under abject poverty, ought to reflect deeply on the ethical obligation attached to the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread". Christians in Nigeria have the duty to work together for the common good of all. Again, the insurgency of the evil breed of Boko Haram calls on all Christians, who pray "deliver us from all evil" to be united in facing this evil in our society. We should not be indifferent to the suffering of those who are badly affected by this menace.

#### **V. Conclusion**

Prayer is a way of life. We are what we pray. Jesus taught us how to pray and how to live. This is exemplified in the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer with their corresponding ethical obligations. It is not surprising that this prayer is recognised as the summary of the entire Gospel. The Good News is outlined in prayer and instruction. It is Christian way of Life. Jesus earnestly desired and prayed for the unity of his followers. The Prayer he taught his disciples bears the steps that lead to this unity.

The contribution in this paper attempts an analysis of the Lord's Prayer in the version of the Gospel according to Matthew and highlights some principles of ecumenical commitment in it. When Christians understand and say this Prayer as they should, they must be spurred to find effective solutions to their common setback to holiness and authentic proclamation of Jesus in the world. This setback is lack of unity to which Pater Noster offers practical remedy.

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