CHAPTER TWO

THE LORD’S PRAYER IN PATRISTIC LITERATURE

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Jules Lebreton once said that the Lord’s Prayer was the biblical text most commented upon in ancient Christian literature. Indeed, it is hard to find any author who does not remark upon, or at least allude to, these few biblical verses somewhere in the course of his extant works. There is also an astonishing amount of substantial commentary from fathers and church writers East and West. In the East, the foundational piece was Origen’s exposition of the Lord’s Prayer in his treatise “On Prayer” (233/34). Gregory of Nyssa used this work extensively in five profound homilies “On the Lord’s Prayer” which he preached in his mature years (after 379) and which remained popular reading for centuries to come. We also have running commentaries in Cyril of Jerusalem’s “Fifth Mystagogical Catechesis” from the middle of the fourth century; Theodore of Mopsuestia’s “Eleventh Catechetical Homily” of 388/92; John Chrysostom’s Commentary on Matthew;
and Cyril of Alexandria’s biblical commentary on the Gospel of Luke. The earliest and most influential expositions were Part 1 of Tertullian’s treatise *On Prayer*, written just around 200 A.D., and a treatise *On the Lord’s Prayer* which Cyprian wrote at the beginning of the Decian persecution in 250. Ambrose of Milan explained the Lord’s Prayer as part of his mystagogical catecheses of c. 390/91 which are preserved in his *De sacramentis*. From Augustine’s hand we have the early commentary in his “Exposition of the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount” written between 392 and 396; a wonderfully rich treatment in his pastoral Letter 130 to the widow Proba, a noblewoman from Rome who had fled to North Africa from the invading Visigoths in 410; a catechetical exposition in Sermons 56–59 from about the same time; and an anti-Pelagian interpretation in the late treatise *On the gift of perseverance* (429/30) in which he makes ample use of Cyprian’s classical exposition as proof of his thesis that perseverance is a free gift from God and is a central theme of all petitions. From the first half of the fifth century we also have brief remarks in Jerome’s commentary on the Gospel of Matthew; full expositions in John Cassian’s “Conferences” (IX.18–24); the poet Sedulius’ “Easter Hymn” (II, 231–300) and its prose version in the *Paschale Opus* (II, 17); the fourteenth homily of the anonymous *Opus imperfectum in

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19 Latin text: PL 19, 622–634; English translation: G. Sigerson (Dublin, 1922). I was unable to consult this translation.