CHAPTER SIX

THE LORD’S PRAYER:
A CORNERSTONE OF EARLY BAPTISMAL EDUCATION

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THE HANDING OVER OF THE LORD’S PRAYER IN
EARLY BAPTISMAL EDUCATION

The Christian Church during the fourth century surrounded the Lord’s Prayer (LP) with a comfortable, yet firm, secrecy. The furtive attitude toward the prayer had already existed for some time in places like Tertullian and Cyprian’s third-century Carthage in North Africa, but by the end of the fourth century a more widespread discipline of the secret (disciplina arcani) developed in many Christian locales. This view held that, along with other sacred mysteries of the church, like the Eucharist and the Creed, the LP was to be known and prayed by Christians alone, and hidden away from non-Christian outsiders and even those seeking to be baptized. The LP was to be protected from the eyes of the unbaptized and only cherished reverently by the christened faithful. Therefore, during the course of the early church, the LP was primarily utilized within Christian worship, private and group devotions, baptismal ceremonies, education, theology, and polemics. Throughout the fourth century, the mystagogical interpretation and the use of the LP in baptismal catechetical contexts especially developed stronger and more rigid attitudes about protecting the LP from non-Christians. Teachings that emphasized the awe and majesty of the LP encouraged humility before the prayer most acutely in the context of training the newly baptized.

The teachings of Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan represent a high-water mark for commentary that uses language of high respect for the LP, which manifest itself in part in an unsurpassed concern for encompassing the LP within a shroud of secrecy. Even though the majority of commentary upon the LP from the late second until the early sixth century dealt primarily with the education of adult converts, the custom of teaching the LP to neophytes in a mystagogical context
slowly was replaced with the practice of entrusting the mysteries of the LP to converts before they had actually been baptized during the late fourth and early fifth centuries. These converts were given the Latin names of *competentes*, “those who seek”; *electi*, “those who have been chosen”; or *illuminandi*, which the Greeks referred to as *photisomenoi*, “those who are to be enlightened.” During the late fourth century, and shortly thereafter, new attitudes developed concerning the prayer of Jesus. Very slowly the *disciplina arcani* surrounding the LP became less rigid, and an obvious period of transition can be observed in Christian literature with regard to the LP. The move away from the prior secretive attitude, now allowing catechumens before baptism to learn the LP for practical reasons, had to be defended with clear theological reasoning, because even this slight move represented a major shift in thinking. The great preachers John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Augustine of Hippo in their writings reflect this transitional, new attitude regarding the use of the LP in baptismal catechetic training.

**The Lord’s Prayer in Augustine’s Baptismal Catechesis**

Augustine, in particular, wrote more about the LP than any author before him and almost every author after him down to the time of the Reformation. In fact it can be argued that the LP was one of Augustine’s favorite scripture texts by virtue of the fact that he was so fond quoting it throughout every phase of his life and teachings. Augustine’s reverential attitude even led him to consider the LP not only to be sacramental, but also a sacrament in its own right.

Augustine’s examination of the LP in a baptismal-catechetic setting builds upon the fathers of the past, hearkening back especially to the

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1 Klaus Schnurr has quite appropriately called this the *Initiatorisch-katechetische Auslegung*, Klaus Bernhard Schnurr, *Hören und Handeln* (Frieburg, 1985), p. 277.
2 For more on all of these and other such terms see Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainright, Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of the Liturgy* (New York, 1978), pp. 97ff.