The gospels of Matthew and Luke record that Jesus himself taught the Lord’s Prayer (LP) to his disciples; early Christian authors relying upon these accounts believed that the prayer itself therefore was endowed with both divine mystery and power. The mystery lay in the fact that the LP succinctly summed up the essence of Christian teaching, especially that it revealed the divine mystery of how God the Judge becomes God the Father for believers through the adoption of baptism. The power of the LP resided in the belief that the prayer could produce what it asked for, namely, daily bread, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance from temptation and evil. Early churches gave the LP a central place in its teaching, public worship, and the private devotional life of individual believers.

1 The author is grateful to the members of the Society for the Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, who sponsored this paper at the International Medieval Conference at Kalamazoo Michigan of May 1998, and who provided helpful comments to improve its content. Likewise I am indebted to my colleagues in the Religion Department at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota for the same reason.

2 For an example of a comment on power see Ambrose who declares, “Behold, how brief the (Lord’s) Prayer is and how full of all power.” Ambrose, De Sacramentiis, 5.4.18; SC 29, “Uides quam breuis oratio et omnium plena uirtutum.” While there are numerous passages which illustrate the emphasis upon the mystery of the LP perhaps some of the most interesting are in Peter Chrysologus, Sermons (see for example his Sermon 67:1–2 in CCSL 14A, p. 402 English translation in Saint Peter Chyrsologus, Selected Sermons (New York, 1953), p. 115. A similar passage emphasizing the mystery of the LP may be found in Peter Chrysologus, Sermon 70; CCSL 24A, p. 420. The following translation of this Chrysologus’ passage is from Selected Sermons, pp. 119ff and it is slightly altered by the author of this article, “However, at nothing does heaven stand so much astonished, or earth tremble, or all creation fear exceedingly, as at that which you are going to hear from us today (through the reciting of the LP). The servant dares to call his Lord Father, the guilty name their judge parent, people in their earthly state bring to themselves by their own voices adoption as God’s children. Those who have lost earthly goods deem themselves the heirs of Divinity.” Another author who delighted in the mystery of the LP was Gregory of Nyssa, cf. Gregorii Nysseni: De Oratione Dominica, De Beatitudinibus, Johannes F. Callahan, ed., Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992. Also see Karlfried Froehlich, “The LP in Patristic Literature,” The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Supplemental Vol. 2 (1992), pp. 71–87 (also in this volume).
Christians as early as the first century (cf. New Testament and *Didache*). Because of its pivotal place within Christian tradition, the earliest churches often guarded the LP from “outsiders” with jealous affection and defended the prayer against what they perceived as misguided “insiders.” Ambrose at the end of the fourth century worried that the sacred treasures of the church (like the LP, the Apostle’s Creed, and the Eucharist) might somehow fall into the hands of unbelievers, who were incapable of understanding the mystery and appreciating the power of the LP. He sternly warned against inadvertently casting these pearls of great price before swine (cf. Matthew 7:6).³

What is sometimes referred to by scholars as a *disciplina arcani* (or a “discipline of the secret”) developed around the LP: at least for a time the LP came to be regarded as an “in-house” prayer intended solely for the eyes and ears of the faithful. Before the fifth century, the evidence suggests that churches taught the LP to converts primarily *after* they had been baptized in order to insure that those who knew and used it were truly faithful members of a particular church: converts intending to be baptized, however, were dismissed from worship services *before* the congregation prayed the LP and the liturgy presented the mysteries of the faith. Church educators placed the LP into the hands of the recently baptized almost immediately, because, as Cyprian noted, the LP was easy to learn due to its divine brevity (for more on this see chapter six in this volume). Likewise Cyprian noted that the LP was perfect for converts because it abounded “spiritually in power,” and was a perfect “summary of heavenly doctrine!”⁴

The emphasis upon the LP as a text for teaching baptized converts in particular affected how and why early polemical authors used the LP. Essentially down to the fifth century the LP was used in polemics to promote what was considered a unity of true Christian teaching and religious practice. Polemical use of the LP at this time focused upon convincing both the faithful and so-called heretical Christian sects of the truth of a particular theological position. Essentially the debate

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³ Ambrose, *De Sacramentis* 5.18; cf. both SC 25, pp. 93ff. and CSEL 73, pars 7, pp. 65ff.
⁴ Cyprian, *De Dominica Oratione* 9; CCSL 3 A, p. 94, “Qualia autem sunt, fratres dilectissimi, orationis dominicae sacramenta, quam multa, quam magna, breuiter in sermone collecta sed in uirtute spiritualiter copiosa, ut nihil omnino praetermissum sit quod non in precibus atque orationibus nostris caelestis doctrinae compendio comprehendatur!” Translation from The Fathers of the Church Series (FC) 36, p. 133.