Bless us, O Lord!

“*Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive …*“

Why do we pray over our meals? Because we, as a community of believers, learned it a long time ago.

The custom of praying over a meal is ancient in our faith tradition. Even before Jesus – who prayed over the gifts of the Last Supper and over the gifts at the multiplication of the loaves and fish – ancient Jews prayed over their meals.

They did so in gratitude both for the food and for the land which the Lord had given them.

In Deuteronomy 8:10, we see the ancient order given to prayer at meals attributed to Moses: “But when you have eaten and are satisfied, you must bless the Lord, your God, for the good land he has given you.” Modern Jews call this the *Birkat HaMazon* (“blessing on nourishment”).

Following this tradition, as well as the custom of Jesus’ own meal prayers, early Christians offered prayer over their own meals. Several early Church Fathers cited the need to pray before meals, both in thanksgiving and as part of the natural desire to worship God. For example, Tertullian, who lived and wrote in the early third century, noted in his treatise “On Prayer” that “it becomes believers not to take food … before interposing a prayer; for the refreshments and nourishments of the spirit are to be held prior to those of the flesh, and things heavenly prior to things earthly” (Chapter 25).

Our familiar meal prayer today – “Bless us, O Lord” – dates back to the Gelasian Sacramentary, named for Pope Gelasius, who led the Church at the end of the fifth century, but who did not write this liturgical book.

Nonetheless, the book dates back to at least the eighth century and from it we have the roots of this prayer.

Short though it is, our blessing prayer contains three of the four following main types of prayer: gratitude, supplication, praise and contrition. We can break the meal prayer down into these specific prayer parts:

Supplication: "Bless us, O Lord"

Gratitude: "and these, thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty,"

Praise: "through Christ our Lord, Amen."

That's a lot of prayer, handled in just a few words. The Dictionary of the Liturgy describes a good meal prayer as something that "usually includes a request for His blessing on the food and the group present, together with gratitude to the Lord for His gifts and an expression of our total dependence upon Him even for food and drink…. In this fashion, the mealtime … becomes an act of worship."

That covers supplications, gratitude and praise (as in worship). But wait? Where is the "dependence" part of our "Bless us, O Lord"?

That comes in the act of praying itself. By taking time, before eating, to ask God's blessing, we show that we know how much we need His care – not only to bring us the food, but to let it nourish us and bring us health and well-being.

Read more about our mealtime prayers, and find more prayers of thanksgiving – and a prayer for after a meal! – here.