

Speaking personally

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WHAT'S THE connection between personal prayer and personal pronouns, apart from the alliteration?

People normally pray in the first person singular: "I, me, my, mine, myself." *Credo*. "I believe ..." But occasionally they switch to the first person plural, "we", and its variants – "us, our, ours, ourselves". Think "Give us this day our daily bread", or "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death". And that raises an interesting issue. "I" is straightforward. It means "me", and that's all. But "we" has an extraordinary range of uses. It can refer to any of the following:

- The speaker/writer along with the person(s) being addressed – inclusive *we*, as in "we should leave now, Hilary".
- The speaker/writer without the person being addressed – exclusive *we*, as in "we can get there without you, Fred".
- The speaker/writer along with an indefinite number of others, as in "we won our last match" (that is, the team plus supporters).
- The speaker/writer along with the rest of the world, as in "we aren't paying enough attention to climate change".
- The speaker/writer alone, i.e. the "royal *we*", as in "we are not amused".
- The authorial use, to suggest that writer and reader are involved in a joint enterprise, as in "as we saw earlier ..." – very common in *Tablet* articles.

"We" can also refer to second and third persons: it means "you" when a nurse



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asks a patient: "How are we today?" It means "he" or "she" when two receptionists talk about the boss who has failed to greet them with a "good morning": "We are in a nice mood today!"

And there are uncertain cases. Who exactly is being referred to if a police officer were to ask me: "We don't want any trouble now, do we, sir?"

So, relating this to religious settings, there's obviously no problem if a prayer clearly relates to the people present, such as saying a grace before and after meals ("Bless us, O Lord ..."), or the response of parents and godparents at a baptism ("We do", "We are" ... etc.). The plural is needed. It gets trickier if a personal prayer or

affirmation is said while part of a congregation. What should we say, for instance, when renewing baptismal promises ("Do you reject Satan ...")? Some recommend replying "I do"; some "we do".

Nor is there a problem if the prayer is clearly private, such as the Morning Offering or the Prayer to my Guardian Angel, or when we make an Act of Contrition. But some popular Catholic prayers introduce the more distancing "we"; the focus shifts from the individual to the community. That makes sense when prayers are said in unison, as in the *Salve Regina* ("Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope; to thee do we cry") or the *Memorare*: "To thee we come, before thee we stand, sinful and sorrowful". But when said in private, replacing plural by singular can have a dramatic effect. I need it to be: "Hail my life, my sweetness and my hope; to thee do I cry ..."

Which brings us/me to the two best-known prayers, when they are said alone. Try a pronoun switch, and feel the difference: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for this sinner now, and at the hour of my death." And then the "My Father": "Give me this day my daily bread, and forgive me my trespasses, as I forgive those who trespass against me, and lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil." Amen to that, I say.

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