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"The Our Father"

(Mt 6,9-13)

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Transposition of an audio-recording not reviewed by the author

The Our Father, as far as I have observed, is a very difficult text. Differently, about the Beatitudes, there are many writings and I just put together the guidelines given by fr. Juan Mateos S.J., verifying them, deepening them, adapting them, while already having safe tracks, for the Our Father there is *tabula rasa*. A serious study on the Our Father doesn't really exist; I've been looking for it also at the library of *École Biblique* in Jerusalem, which is really full of books, but I didn't find any. The Director of *École Biblique* told me that this is absolutely normal, only a fool can choose to study the most difficult text in the New Testament.

In fact this is really a difficult text because there are some Greek words that in modern Greek language don't exist anymore, and there are others that can have two different meanings. Therefore it has been a very difficult job, but maybe for this reason, it has been more accurate, or, as a friend of mine says, more cautious.

The Our Father that I've studied is the one in the Gospel of Matthew. When we happen to read the Gospel we are amazed at one specific aspect: why does an evangelist report certain episodes, sometimes very important ones, while other evangelists ignore them. The reason is that each evangelist follows his own theological outline.

The Our Father of our times comes from three different versions, one by Matthew, one by Luke and one by the primitive Church's catechism, the so called *Didachè*. I chose the one of Matthew's Gospel which has a specific vision that has to be understood in order to comprehend the whole richness of this text.

First of all, let's understand who is the audience of Matthew.

He writes to a Judaic community who welcomed and acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, but only in line with the tracks described by Moses and other Prophets. So Matthew starts his teaching and pedagogical work by comparing Jesus with Moses.

In order to do this, he structures his Gospel like the Books attributed to Moses.

- At that time they believed that Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible, the so called Pentateuch, and the Gospel of Matthew is divided into five parts, as if they were five different books, each of one ending with a sentence that is similar with the final words of each Book of Moses.
- He starts then describing life and activities of Jesus, along the lines of Moses life. That is why we could wonder why only Matthew reports the slaughter of children in Bethlehem, a fact that all other evangelists totally ignore. Moses, thanks to a divine intervention, has been saved from Jewish children's slaughter ordered by the pharaoh, in the same way Jesus is saved from the Bethlehem children's slaughter ordered by Herod, the then pharaoh.
- An important moment in the life of Moses is when he's on the Sinai mountain and receives the commandments; that's why Matthew talks about Jesus going on a mountain. The difference is that he doesn't receive the new law code, he promulgates it personally, being God himself; this code of the New Alliance are The Beatitudes that replace the commandments.
- As acceptance formula of commandments Moses drew up a text that corresponds to our Creed; In Israel it is still recited and very well known since from the very first Hebrew word "Shema Israel", which means "listen Israel". By reciting this text the Jew undertakes to put the ten commandments into practice. Similarly the evangelist formulates the Our Father, which is not a real prayer, but an acceptance formula of Beatitudes.
- After that, we see that Moses sets his people free asking God the famous ten signs, better known as "Ten plagues of Egypt" which culminate in the death of Pharaoh's son; in Chapter 8 of Matthew's Gospel there are ten recoveries made by Jesus and among these there's the resurrection of the synagogue chief's daughter; while Moses faces ten plagues of destruction and death, Jesus takes ten actions that restore plain life also to enemies, also to the daughter of the synagogue's chief.
- You all know that Moses dies on Nebo mountain, but before dying he indicates his successor, Joshua. Matthew is the only evangelist to end his Gospel on a mountain, but it is not a death's scene as the one of Moses, it is a life scene, a life that overcomes death. The display of Jesus resurrection will take place on a mountain. While Moses felt the

need of indicating Joshua as his successor, Jesus doesn't need to do so; in fact Matthew's Gospel ends with the words "I am with you always, to the very end of the age". This is most important to comprehend the meaning of The Our Father.

You may observe that the evangelist used for this text the same structure of Beatitudes. Both of them are carefully structured.

There are 8, because number 8 is very important for Christian spirituality, it is the day of Jesus resurrection, meaning an indestructible quality of life. That's why in the ancient Christian art all baptisteries had an octagonal shape. Beatitudes are composed by 72 words. Why? Because pagan nations known at that time, were 72 (Gen 10), and the evangelist wants to symbolize that the message is intended for the entire universe, all people can welcome it and by practicing this text they can experience an indestructible life.

Beatitudes replace the ten commandments. The Jews used to recite "Shemà Israel" as formula of acceptance of commandments, the evangelist instead formulates The Our Father. It is the first indication, and can be recited by everyone, but can be understood only by those who practice Beatitudes. Otherwise it is simply nursery rhyme with no significance for human existence.

Beatitudes were structured by including a first one referred to the Kingdom of God, and others referred to mankind's needs and the last three regarding human behavior among a Christian community (the last one specifically treats persecution).

The Our Father has the same structure. The first cry refers to God; then other three refer to mankind, then others refer to behaviors among a community of brothers, the last one appeals a liberation from evil.

OUR FATHER

Jesus addresses to God by saying **OUR FATHER** avoiding all terms used before like God, Creator or Lord. Jesus addresses to God by calling him "Father", this is His new name among Christians.

In particular Jesus uses the Aramaic expression "Abbà", which means Father, the one who is the source of life. In Hebraic culture the mother was considered a sort of incubator, life was received exclusively by the father. So by using this term, Jesus sentences that God is the only source of life.

At that time God was known as father, but as a master-father, a sort of authority. The father was a despot who got exclusive power on the children. Jesus removes this significance and replaces it with one of a motherly. God comprises both aspects.

Why this double significance?

A father is the one who expects that his son resembles to him, a mother is the one that accepts his son as he is. These two aspects have to balance because if fatherhood prevails, we feel the tension of looking like the father; if motherhood prevails we could just think we are perfect as we are; so they must be strictly connected when we invoke Our Father.

The Our Father is not an individual prayer, but is better expressed by a community. Sentences are all written by using plural. In fact we say "Our", which means that He is able to be Our Father only if we act like Brothers. I can be a brother only if I act as a son of a Father, and I can be a son, the one who looks like the Father, if I act as a brother to others.

WHO ART IN HEAVEN

A very important expression is **WHO ART IN HEAVEN**. Normally this expression doesn't mean nothing particular, it seems to indicate God's residence. But all evangelists use sentences that represent a considerable theological truth. "Heaven" is not God's home address, but the divine quality of his action. In the ancient culture "being in heaven" meant "living a divine condition". Also Roman emperors or pharaohs were considered divine

entities, living in heaven. That means that they were the ones who got power in their hands.

This is a first important indication. In a Christian community we say: the only person that holds the power and the authority is the Father, nobody else has this right. The best way to translate **WHO ART IN HEAVEN** is "Father of Heaven" that has a very important meaning for all of us: the only one that guides us is the Father and doesn't guide us by promulgating laws that we have to respect, but by transferring his Loving Ability to his sons.

That's why Jesus in Matthew's gospel (23,9) says: "Don't call any human being 'father' -- for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. And you must not let people call you 'masters' (Mt 23,8) -- for you have only one master, the Anointed One (Christ).

Please note: in religious world the assigned to novices' training is called "father master" ... We didn't understand anything!

Jesus is very clear, there must be no authority among you, the only one is God, the only one to be called "Father".

Those who expect to represent God's will, and often happens, those who claim to know whether we are right or wrong, Jesus warns us: run way from them!

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

The first petition we find in the text of The Our Father is **HALLOWED BE THY NAME**. If you ask people about the meaning of this sentence, nobody is able to answer. Some say that this could mean "Don't blaspheme against God", some say it means "to glorify God's name" and I remember the very day I entered my novitiate I saw a brother that was going back and forth along the corridor clapping his hands and saying "Hurrah to the name of Jesus!!". I thought to myself: "Oh my God, I don't want to become like him!". He just wanted to sanctify God's name.

Let's try to understand what "name" means. The name, in Hebrew culture doesn't indicate the first name of an individual, but his activity. You remember the episode of Moses in the burning bush? He asks God what His name was. God doesn't answer by telling him His first name, He answers: **I**

AM THE ONE WHO IS WITH YOU. God doesn't reveal himself through an identity, but through an action.

The name we are referring to is the one by which God is identified among a community, that is: Father. Father is not the identity of God, but his activity, He is the one who transfers His life. In Eastern culture this life is not referred to a specific generation, but to the entire existence. That's why in Hebrew world the male son always has his father's name. He is his father's son all life long.

What does the verb "hallow" (ἀγιάζω) mean?

In Hebrew it means "separate". It is used in religion to indicate a specific use of something. If I take a pot or a glass and I separate it from its usual, daily utilization, by using it only for prayers or devotions, I separate it, I hallow it.

If we refer this same concept to a human being we could say "consecrate", separated from evil. That's why the first Christians used to call each other "saint". Saints are those who have chosen to live separately from evil, consecrated to good. But if we apply this to God, what does this mean?

Do you remember when Isaiah sees God and exclaims "Saint, Saint, Saint", three times. Number three in Hebraic means "the entirety". Isaiah means that God is completely Saint, that is separated, but not from men, from evil. Saying that His name is hallowed, is like saying that we recognize His reality, we recognize this as His very name, that is Father. This implies a specific involvement for the community of believers that, before addressing its needs to God, it gives priority to others' needs.

In this way we allow others to recognize God's Fatherhood like we do.

THY KINGDOM COME

Next request in the test is **THY KINGDOM COME**. Also in this case if we ask people the meaning of the sentence, there's a great confusion. I

personally heard somebody answering "It means the end of the world". Are you really asking this to God?

This request is in the middle of the other two, the **hallowing of the name**, and the **will be done**. According to Hebrew-Greek structure of the sentence it means that is the most important one. By the coming of this Kingdom, His name is hallowed and His will is accomplished. This Kingdom is very important then. But what is it exactly? It is the situation in which God is allowed to act as a Father for all His sons; Christian communities in which the Father is the only authority.

This realm, this sovereignty is not expressed through a dominion, but through a service. The original Greek verb has been translated with "come", but that is not exact, because this Kingdom is already here. Where Beatitudes are practiced, the Kingdom is present.

In case we can only ask this Kingdom to be expanded (gr. ἔρχομαι). The community asks the Father to enlarge the Kingdom, but at the same time, the community itself has to undertake to accept the Beatitudes.

But how can this Kingdom be expanded? When Jesus foretells the Kingdom of God He asks people to undergo a conversion, that is a root change of the existence where others' sake comes at first. Furthermore He says "unless you change and become **like little children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". This doesn't mean, as it was told before, to become stupid or foolish, always in need of a father to obey. At that time children were at the last place in the social life. So Jesus refers to the First Beatitude, if you don't give up your ambitions you will never enter the kingdom.

THY WILL BE DONE

Here is another petition that caused problems and misunderstandings among people. I met many people who were not able to recite the Our Father because when they arrived at this point they stopped and started telling about their mournings. As always happens when you meet pious and devote people, the most dangerous ones to meet in painful situations, they tell you that it was God will; one is forced to accept it, but keeps asking himself if

God really wanted that dear person to die. God's will is introduced in a strange way.

The evangelist in the Greek text doesn't utilize the verb "to do", which refers to a man's action, but he uses a particular verb that is more similar to the meaning of "to complete" or "to fulfil" (γίγνομαι), specifically referring to an action made by God. God is the one who fulfils His own will, not men. We are not asked to do God's will, but to let this will be fulfilled or completed.

What is this WILL? In the past we have confused things a little bit, because we thought that every single event of our life corresponded to God's will. We misunderstood the meaning of this phrase of Matthew (10,29). He speaks about the love of the Father and says: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father"*.

Sparrows were considered, at that time, as the most insignificant elements of the nature. Jewish used to bless everything but sparrows... Therefore, if even a sparrow falls apart from the will of the Father, if something bad happens to me, we may deduce that the Father so decided.

But this is a wrong translation. The right meaning is "without God's knowing" (ἄνευ τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν), which is completely different.

God doesn't want the sparrow to fall, Jesus says that the Father is so in love with us all, that he knows us and cares of us, as He even cares of a little sparrow.

But what is God's will?

In the letter to Ephesians (1, 4-5), S. Paul provides this definition: *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves"*.

Being "Holy" means "being separated from evil", **irreproachable before God through His love**. The assurance to be in place before God

derives from practicing His love and not from observing religious rules. In this way we become His adopted children.

Therefore God is very optimist. He is so in love with mankind to say that we are the only ones capable of perpetuating His project. This provides a kind of incredible joy because God knows us, he is aware of our inconsistencies, our infidelities, but it doesn't matter, He wants us to pursue His project on mankind. His will is that **WE BECOME HIS ADOPTED CHILDREN THROUGH JESUS CHRIST**.

Nothing more than this, and He provides all tools for us to achieve this goal. We keep asking ourselves what is the project of God for us? What does He want me to do? There's no answer, you have to reach the necessary maturity in order to decide on your own the right thing to do. I made the same mistake while entering the seminar, I was waiting for the calling, I used to imagine a light beam coming over the window or an angel, because I thought that God's will should come from heaven. I was wrong, God wants me simply to become His son by practicing His love. I have to choose the right ways, not Him.

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Then we find the sentence **ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN**. This expression is not linked to the will, but to the other three cited petitions. I would choose to put it immediately after **OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN**. It would sound like this: **OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, ON EARTH AND IN HEAVEN HALLOWED BE THY NAME, THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE**.

We saw that at that time they believed that heaven was ruled by powers hostile to God and to mankind. Therefore the community gets involved in order to let God's love be realized throughout the world. It's not a supine acceptance but a dynamic and constructive engagement of the community that allows the Father to be acknowledged by the entire mankind.

The first part of The Our Father is not particularly difficult; the community gets involved in making alive it's experience through the world.

The second part is more difficult, because there are terms and verses that make The Our Father the most difficult text in the New Testament.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD

This is also an expression that we pronounce without thinking, but what does it mean? Normally we understand that God has to provide the food to the poor. Even when we were children they used to remind us of all children in the world that were starving, but they pray The Our Father, too, why doesn't the Father give them the bread? We think that God has to supply the food, the Divine Providence, but there's so many catholic people that are still starving. How comes? In the Third World this prayer doesn't work...

In the Bible and in the Gospels "the bread", meaning "the food", is not to be asked to God. God is not a baker. Men have to produce it and share it with the ones who don't have it.

In this verse there is a Greek word that, as of today, it's impossible to translate, and has been translated in many different ways. This word is "ἐπιούσιος", but in Greek language it doesn't exist.

It had to be a very important word because it is included in all the three versions of Our Father that we have: the one of Matthew, the one of Luke and the one of the ancient Church's catechism, called Διδαχή (Didachè); three different versions, but this strange word is always there. We still don't how to exactly translate it.

When S. Jerome translated Gospels from Greek into Latin he chose a Solomonic translation:

- in Matthew's Gospel he translated it with the Latin word **SUPERSUBSTANTIALEM**, that is "beyond the substance",
- while in Luke's one he translated it with **COTIDIANUM**, "daily".

The most utilized version is the one of Matthew, but this **SUPERSUBSTANTIALEM** has been removed and replaced by **COTIDIANUM** (from Luke's). We still don't understand the exact meaning of this Greek

word even if we are sure it is a very important one. It should be a very intense concept because we find "this day" besides "daily" (τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον). So, this kind of bread should be very important for the community. For sure it is not a matter of food.

There are three different hypothesis, consistent with each other:

The bread of tomorrow, not intended as food. Jesus says this frankly in the Sermon on the Mount. *"Be not therefore anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the Gentiles seek; for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you"* (Mt 6,31-34) This bread of tomorrow is the only one strictly necessary for life, and this is the one that only God can provide. Jesus says *"I'm the bread of life"* (John 6, 24-26), *I'm the bread coming from Heaven*, that is from God, a ever lasting one.

We could say that the community is asking God that His presence, Jesus presence, be constant. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus guarantees *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Mt 28,20)

Jesus resembles himself to bread; also in the last supper Jesus takes the bread and shares it with His disciples by saying: this is my body, meaning "this is ME". Jesus identifies with bread. He addresses a precise request: he wants to be always present through that bread. But how comes? When Jesus says "I'm with you always" he sets a condition: that the community practices the Beatitudes. It is through Beatitudes that His Kingdom comes true.

Therefore, we can translate **GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD** in different ways, but the one I suggest (please note that it's only a proposal) is the following: **give us the bread of life or the bread of Kingdom**. As of today, in some translations, we find **the bread of tomorrow**.

This bread is not a foodstuff, the one that we are asked to share with the poor, but is the presence of Jesus among the community, that is guaranteed only by practicing His teachings.

**FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,
AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US**

Another petition that has shown difficulties for interpretation is **FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US.**

We are used to understand this phrase as a matter of mercy. But at the end of the Our Father, after **DELIVER US FROM EVIL**, in Matthew's Gospel, there is also **IF YOU FORGIVE MEN WHEN THEY SIN AGAINST YOU, YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER WILL ALSO FORGIVE YOU** (Mt 6,14). So, why saying this twice? This has been a great surprise for me, during this hard work of translation.

First of all, let's analyze the words.

The evangelist avoids the word "sin" (gr. ἁμαρτία) which is a religious word, but utilizes the word "debt" (gr. ὀφείλημα). Furthermore the word that has been translated with "forgive" in fact means something different like "cancel" or "remit".

Which is the difference?

While "forgiveness" demands a reparation (I'm forgiven because I apologize, I do penance), "remission" is granted by God only through His mercy, apart from credits of the individual. There is a parable in Matthew's Gospel (Mt 18,23-27) where we can find this expression. It's the parable of a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants; one of the servants was not able to pay and the master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. He doesn't cancel the debt because the servant promised to pay back everything, but thanks to His compassion.

So the verb "remit" (ἀφίημι) implies an action of generosity by the creditor.

Here Jesus touches on a delicate subject: economic debts. Also primitive Christian communities tried to reduce the meaning of this

expression. Only a community that has accepted and practiced Beatitudes can understand and implement this generosity. The rich is not generous, otherwise he wouldn't be rich.

Jesus makes a provocation. While it is commonly possible to forgive others' offenses and maintain our own inheritance, by remitting debts we renounce to our possessions.

We can deduce this message because the evangelist uses the word "debts" (ὀφειλήματα), the same word findable in Deuteronomy (15,2): *This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.*

In the Old Testament God gave a law by which every seven years all creditors should cancel debts. It was intended in order to favor debtors, the weak of the society, but it didn't work. Who would ever lend money to somebody who was not able to guarantee the refund of the loan?

The evangelist, as per Jesus teachings, changes this concept and explains that among a Christian community debts are always canceled, not only every seven years. A Christian community is the one in which no one is needy. The expression used by the evangelist (ἀφήκαμεν) indicates that it is not a pious intention but a regular practice within the community.

When Jesus washes his disciples' feet and says **YOU ALSO SHOULD WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET** (John 13,14). "Should" translated from Greek ὀφείλετε means "you are debtors to others".

S. Paul says "**don't be in debt with anyone, apart from a debt of mutual love**", while mutual service enriches the community, selfishness makes it poor, triggering off a devastating process of self-destruction. This is such a strong expression!

Going back to the Our Father we can say that if I am able to cancel a debt, for sure I'm able to forgive offences.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

Another expression, which has been very difficult to translate is **LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION**. Here we find a Greek word (πειρασμός) which can refer either to "trial" nor to "temptation". The right translation depends on who is the actor of this action.

In the Old Testament we find that if we refer to a God's action the word "trial" is used; otherwise, the word "temptation" is preferred. Asking feedbacks to people I received very strange answers, usually referring to sexual arguments, a new version of Kamasutra, we may assume...

Jesus is saying something completely different. He talks about trials, not temptations. It is better to translate as "don't put us to trial". Disciples are not asking to be exempted from trials of life, but ask God not to let them fall in times of persecution. They failed when Jesus asked them to pray and stay with him when he was arrested, they all ran away. The community has failed, is destroyed, but is conscious of its weaknesses and asks to be able not to fail again in the future when persecution will inevitably fall on it.

I want to recall a phrase of Luke's Gospel, the parable of the sower: "*Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture*" (8,6). Plants had no moisture, they grew for a while, but in times of trials, withered. Trial is persecution. It is the suffering of the community, which comes not only from outside, but is present inside the community itself.

BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL

This is the subject of the last petition of the Our Father: **BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL**. The word (gr. πονηρός) may represent "evil" or "malignant". Grammatically it surely means malignant, but has always been translated with evil. The community wants to be delivered from "the malignant". Who is he? Is it Satan, the devil, or does it refer to all internal and external elements that reveal diabolical actions?

In Matthew's Gospel the only individual called Satan by Jesus is Simon. When Jesus says he's going to Jerusalem to die, Simon tries to prevent him from going. So Jesus calls him "Satan, go back behind me". Satan is the one who wants to guide the community, opposing to the Father.

Please note that that the prayer starts with the word "Father" and ends with the word "evil". It indicates the great contrast between these two subjects; if we adhere to the Father we are not afraid of evil. The presence and the action of "malignant" are internal to the community; remember the two disciples James and John that caused a sort of dispersal among the group due to their ambition (Mt 20,20 and foll.). There is also an external action by phariseans who ask Jesus to do extraordinary signs to reveal God's presence.

Therefore the community asks to be delivered from the presence of situations or persons that obstruct Beatitudes' accomplishment.

So, "deliver us from whom"? From the ones among us that want to dominate others, rather than serving them. This petition, just like others, is not formulated by an individual who asks for personal protection, but by a community that fears its survival.

Here we finish this brief explanation of the text of The Our Father. Please keep in mind that it is not a prayer; it is the formula of acceptance of Beatitudes, expressed in the form of prayer.