In the Heart of the Treasury of Christian Prayer: The Our Father in the Practice and Teaching of Jesus

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It is a honor for me to be asked to share a part of the Christian treasury of prayer with those who would like to know more about our faith and our understanding of the testimony of the Apostles and the teachings of the prophet Jesus himself. We know of the love Muslims have for Jesus/Issa and his mother Mary/Miriam. May this essay help you, and us with you, to love him more and more.

The Our Father is a very old prayer-formula. Jesus may have transmitted it to his disciples in Aramaic, or, according to others, in Hebrew—the official liturgical language at that time. We no longer have a complete Aramaic or Hebrew text of any prayer taught by Jesus. The only extant version of the Our Father is in Greek, and it was soon translated into many languages.[104]

[104]In Jerusalem one can visit the Carmel of the Our Father, a monastery and pilgrimage site on the Mount of Olives. There, on the walls of the inner cloister, you will find a large number of translations, including Chinese and Kiswahili,

Surprisingly, in the Gospels there are several different prayer formulas that go back to Jesus himself. This raises many questions for exegetes. They are especially interested to determine which is the oldest formula. Could it be the prayer of Jesus during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane as recorded in the oldest Gospel, the Gospel according to Mark? There we have the Lord Jesus' short but exemplary way of praying:

> Abba, Father,
> for you all things are possible;
> remove this cup from me;
> yet, not what I want, but what you want (Mark 14:36).[105]

Immediately afterward, Jesus says to his followers,

> Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial;
> the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Mark 14:38).

Or is the oldest formula the one we find in chapter eleven of the Gospel of Luke, which comes even closer to the form of the Our Father in Matthew's Gospel, the form that is most commonly used in Christian prayer today? In Luke's Gospel, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray as John the Baptist had taught his disciples. We do not know anything more about the prayer of John, the Forerunner of Jesus. The prayer Jesus gave his disciples consists of just five petitions. It was

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Arabic and Coptic. The oldest translations of the Greek text were in Syriac, Coptic, Latin, and Armenian.

[105] For citations from the Bible, I am using the New Revised Standard Version (1989).

intended to give the followers of Jesus their identity, in the same way that the prayer taught by John gave his disciples their identity.

He [Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

> He said to them, "When you pray, say:
> Father,
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come.
> Give us each day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our sins,
> for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
> And do not bring us to the time of trial" (Luke 11:1-4).

Here we are very close to what we find at the midpoint of the "Sermon on the Mount" in the Gospel of Matthew (chapters 5—7). In this first long discourse, Jesus teaches his followers how to practice three essential behaviors: giving alms, praying, and fasting, practices that Christians have in common with Jews and with Muslims. The practice of prayer is put in the middle of the discourse, and there Jesus teaches his followers what to say when they pray. Since this teaching is at the very center of the entire speech, many authors, old and new, have said, "This is a summary of the whole Gospel."

Matthew presents this prayer as the distinguishing feature of the followers of Jesus. They are not to pray as others do, namely, the "gentiles" or the "hypocrites." By these terms, Jesus refers to the pagans and the Pharisaic Jews of the time. Once again, as in the Gospel of Luke, this prayer has the function of strengthening the identity of the members of the new movement.

And whenever you pray, *do not be like the hypocrites*; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

When you are praying, *do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do;* for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

> Pray then in this way:
> Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come.
> Your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven.
> Give us this day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our debts,
> as we also have forgiven our debtors.
> And do not bring us to the time of trial,
> but rescue us from the evil one (Matthew 6:5-13; emphasis added).

Here we have seven petitions instead of the five that are present in Luke's Gospel. In the opinion of the scholars who carefully compared the versions of Luke and of Matthew, Luke did not eliminate elements from Matthew's version of the prayer. Rather, Matthew added two new elements to it that were partly also traditional and that would make for a formula with seven petitions, thus giving it a larger and more complete form. Since the common basic text was composed in Greek, the differences between the version of Matthew and that of Luke are not just a question of different translations of a common Semitic source.

We can leave these discussions to the specialists. We may, however, recall that even Paul mentions a prayer that goes back to Jesus, and his writings predate the redaction of the four Gospels by at least twenty years. In his letters, we read these two references to the prayer of Jesus:

> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, "*Abba*! *Father*!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Galatians 4:6-7; emphasis added).

> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "*Abba*! *Father*!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:14-17; emphasis added)

This "Abba, Father" is exactly what we saw in Mark 14:26. In some ways, this is the shortest formula of all, going back to the Pascha-night of Jesus, his passing over to the realm of the Father, crying "Abba! Abba!" It was in the ritual context of their baptism that new members of the Christian movement were able to invoke God as Abba, as Jesus did. At the moment they were baptized, they became—as later catechetical teachings put it—"sons [and daughters] in the Son."

We may also recall what is found in the Gospel of John. He has no formula of the kind we find in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew or Luke. He has even eliminated the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. However, before recounting the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, John records a long prayer that Jesus said after he washed the feet of his disciples during the course of the Last Supper (John 17:1-26). In this prayer we find many

themes of the classical Our Father. The first words of Jesus' prayer are "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." The words "the hour has come" are also spoken by Jesus in Mark's and Matthew's accounts of the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (see Mark 14:41; Matthew 26:45).

What the New Testament shows us, therefore, is that there is not just one "prayer of the Lord," the one known as the Our Father. Rather, we see that this unique prayer appears in at least five different forms—from the one in Paul's letter, which is the oldest and shortest of all and still in Aramaic (*Abba*), to the form in John's Gospel, which is the longest of all, taking up the entire seventeenth chapter of his Gospel.

A last essential element to be noted is that in the first centuries of Christianity, the Our Father was transmitted within a very particular context, namely, a ritual that in Latin was called *traditio* [handing over]. One learned the Our Father with a teacher during the time of preparation for the celebration of the Easter Vigil, the night when initiation into the Christian community took place. After a day of fasting, the candidates participated in the vigil celebration of Easter, during which they were baptized. Coming out of the water, they received a new spirit: the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption as sons and daughters of God, the Spirit of the Messiah. In that Spirit they were now able to pronounce the solemn formula of the Our Father. From that time on, they were brothers and sisters of Jesus, sons and daughters of God, the Father of Jesus, who had now also become their Father, "*our* Father."

In John's account of the Easter event (chapter 20), Jesus says to Mary of Magdala, the very first to see him risen from the dead in the garden near the tomb, "Go *to my brethren* and say to them, I am ascending *to my Father and your Father*, to my God and your God." (John 20:17; emphasis

added). The ritual of the *traditio* makes explicit the deep meaning of these words of Jesus by emphasizing that the Our Father is not just a formula that anybody can learn and recite. It belongs to the heart of Christian initiation, it is a secret prayer, transmitted in the holy night of Easter and expressing the new Christians' sharing in the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. Coming out of the waters of baptism, they are now dead to the past, to sin and to evil; they are reborn in the Spirit and receive a new identity, one founded on a new relationship with God, with Jesus and with their fellow believers of the Jesus-movement.

The seven petitions of the Our Father

Let us now take a closer look at the seven phrases that make up this prayer. We will see that they incorporate all the essential themes of the preaching of Jesus.

When in October 1986 Pope John Paul II invited all religions to come together in Assisi to pray for peace, the Christians gathered in a large square. They represented a multitude of races, colors, dresses, tongues, but together they all pronounced the same words of that old prayer, going back to Jesus: "Our Father who art in heaven. . . ." Our histories and traditions may be very different, may even divide us, but when it comes to the Lord's Prayer, we are all one. I shall never forget the powerful expression of our oneness that was given on that occasion.

In the most commonly used English translation of the prayer, we say:

Our Father, who art in heaven.	*(1)*
Hallowed be thy name;	*(2)*
thy kingdom come,	*(3)*

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (4)
Give us this day our daily bread, (5)
and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; (6)
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (7)
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen. (8)

Composition

The general structure is simple and clear: after the salutation-invocation (1) there are three petitions (2,3,4) that can be considered as one. Together, they express our fervent desire that God alone reign over our world. All three petitions are formulated in the second person ("thy" or "you"), indicated in Greek, as in the Semitic languages, by a repeated final word or syllable: *sou*, in Greek, *-ekha* in Hebrew. Thus: *Shim*EKHA, *malkouth*EKHA, *ratson*EKHA in Hebrew, and *to onoma* SOU, *hē basileia* SOU, *to thelema* SOU in Greek: "**your** name, **your** kingdom, **your** will". In each case, the verb comes first in the sentence. The first part (1-4) has a kind of inclusion with the word "heaven" in the first phrase being repeated in the fourth. The double expression "on earth as it is in heaven" should be applied not just to "thy will," but to "thy name" and "thy kingdom" as well.

The second part also has three petitions (5,6,7), and they concern our essential needs: bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil. The last petition is expressed in a double, parallel sentence; the form is antithetical, with "but" in the middle. In this final petition we ask for one thing, expressed in two different ways. We may, of course, consider the last member ("but deliver us from evil") as a petition in itself, and that would give us seven petitions in this one prayer.

At the end there is a doxology (8). It is not found in the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel according Matthew and is totally absent from the manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke (11:1-4). However, it soon became the norm when the prayer was said in common worship. Some later manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew have included this doxology. The *Didachē*, a community manual from the first century C.E. that requires the "prayer of the Lord" to be said three times a day, includes the same version of the Our Father that is found in Matthew's Gospel (with only a few letters changed) and concludes the prayer with a similar doxology.

The version of the Lord's Prayer found in the Gospel according Matthew is a very harmonious composition, concise and strongly bounded by introductory phrases addressed to the divine "thou," and only then introducing "our" personal petitions. This way of approaching God is found in the old Jewish prayer-tradition: "When you ask something to the king, you first great him, and stay with fear and honor to praise his power and glory. Only after that comes the moment to present some of your requests. So we do with the King of kings" (in the Babylonian Talmud, *bBerachot* 34a). The Eighteen Benedictions, the prayer *par excellence* in the Jewish tradition, begins with three benedictions that are only concerned with the Lord, and ends with three that are again only concerned with divine attributes. Concrete petitions for personal needs—bread, healing, and so on—all come in the middle.

The salutation: "Our Father, who art in heaven."

When Jesus prays to God, he says, "Father" or "Abba." This is always the case in the Gospel of Luke. In Mark and Matthew we find just one exception. On the cross, Jesus quotes a Psalm (22:1), crying out, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? *My God, my God*, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; emphasis added).

Following the example of Jesus, we too say, "our Father." The very first word, "our," indicates that we are a family, a community of sisters and brothers, children of God. This metaphor is not unknown in earlier writings of the Bible. The prophet Isaiah, for instance, says, "You are *our Father*" (63:16; 64:8; emphasis added). Because we are a community, a third century Church Father, Cyprian of Carthage, was able to say in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer: "No one in fact can say Our Father without realizing at the same time our common Mother, the Community, the Church."

However, God is not just Father, with all the closeness that implies, but also "the heavenly Father," as Jesus calls him on many occasions. God is the one who is "in heaven," or even the "Lord of heaven and earth" as we read in Matthew 11:25. The Jewish philosopher Simone Weil perceived some irony in this bringing together of "Father" and "who art in heaven." We feel a closeness that suddenly escapes us, since the one we feel close to is "in heaven"! Each time we pray, we do well to be conscious of both dimensions: the transcendence of the Holy One we pray to, and also the moving concern of our compassionate God for all of us. The Almighty is near to our hearts, and still totally transcends our minds and thoughts.

Three wishes for God: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

We greet God and mention his name, his reign, his will. His reality should reign over us, and through us, over the entire world.

We start with the name, God's mystery and holiness, and pray, "Sanctify your name!" The expression is very close to what we read in the book of the prophet Ezekiel. There the Lord says,

> Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but *for the sake of my holy name*, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. *I will sanctify my great name*, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. (36:22-23; emphasis added).

We ask God to do this, in a very qualified way, by a passive formulation: "Hallowed [sanctified] be thy name." The implication is that it is not we who should do this, but God. We do it with God, of course, but how can we sanctify God if God does not sanctify us?

At the center of the triple petition is the kingdom. With Jesus we ask that it come soon. The Greek verb is in the aorist tense, and what that expresses is that we want the God's kingdom to happen as soon as possible, even right now. Jesus sensed this immediacy: God is coming now!

By "kingdom," we are to understand God himself. God is the king. The divine reign is the unique reality, the value of all values in the eyes of Jesus. In this kingdom we let God be fully God, with all the divine attributes of justice, pity, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, of peace.

"Thy will be done."

In Gethsemane, in the hour of his agony before the arrest that led to his being sentenced to death and executed on Golgotha, Jesus prayed that the Father's will be done: ". . . yet, not what I want, but what you want"

(Mark 14:36). The prayer of Jesus becomes a constant attitude and concern for every disciple: our willing is to be lived as an act of consent to what we discern God's will to be. We are brought very close to the words of Psalm 40 (39), quoted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews:

> [When Christ came into the world he said:] "*See, God, I have come to do your will, O God*, in the scroll of the book it is written of me"[see Psalm 39]. When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "*See, I have come to do your will*." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by *God's will that we have been sanctified* through the offering of the body of *Jesus Christ once for all* (Hebrews 10:5.7-10; emphasis added).

We pray these words, and by joining ourselves to God's will and to the will of Jesus, who follows God's will, we enter into our salvation, and realize it.

"on earth as it is in heaven."

A common refrain among the Church Fathers is "In heaven the will of God is fulfilled by the angels. On earth it should still be done by the free will of human beings."

Maxim the Confessor (seventh century) saw in the succession of "Father," "Name," "Reign," and "Will" a downward movement from heavenly reality to that of earth. We go from the Father in heaven, to the Son, present in the name of the Father; from the Son to the Holy Spirit, who, according to Jesus' own words, is present in the kingdom: "But if it

is *by the Spirit of God* that I cast out demons, then *the kingdom of God* has come to you" (Matthew 12:28; emphasis added). In heaven, the divine will is accomplished by angels; on earth, its fulfillment is left to human responsibility.

Now we can shift our gaze and ask God to respond to our most essential needs: bread, forgiveness of sins and deliverance from evil.

"Give us this day our daily bread"

The Greek text contains a *hapax legomenon,* a word that is found nowhere else in the Greek literature before the Gospel. That word is used to describe the bread: *epiousios*. Literally translated, the verse in Matthew's Gospel says, "Give us today the bread, the one that is *epiousios*." Some scholars think the Greek is an attempt to translate the Aramaic word *mahar*, which means "tomorrow." But the correct and very common way of saying "the day of tomorrow" in Greek is by using the *epiousos.* If you wanted to say "of tomorrow," why would you add another letter to the word? And what would it mean to ask God to give us *today* the bread of *tomorrow*, especially if, as Jesus teaches just a little further on in the Gospel of Matthew, we are not to worry about tomorrow: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (6:34).

Another understanding of the word was first suggested by Origen (ca. 300). He considered *epiousios* to be an adjective created by adding the prefix *epi-* to the noun *ousia*, which means "essence" or "substance." This neologism means that the bread we ask for today is not just common bread, but another kind of bread, the *essential* bread, the "bread of life," the bread that we share when we practice "the breaking of the bread" in Jesus' name. What we are praying for, in fact, is the *eucharistic* bread, designated by a new word that only insiders immediately understand.

The creation of a neologism has a social dimension: through it, the new group expresses some aspect or practice of its new identity. With that special word an allusion is made to the sacred meal in which the community remembers Jesus' Last Supper when, in breaking the bread, he said: "This is my body for you" (Mark 14:24).

By understanding *epiousios* in this way, we are praying for more than just our daily bread. At the same time, we may rightfully say that we are also praying for that very first, existential bread. The commentators of every age—Church Fathers and modern exegetes alike—insist that this petition concerns life and justice. It is about bread in a world where there is peace with justice for all, a world in which everyone receives what is really needed for a full human life. Many commentators see here a possible allusion to the manna God gave the Israelites as they wandered in the desert after their exodus from Egypt. They all received the food they needed each day, some more, some less. We do well to pray to God, asking that that exemplary way of sharing the goods of the earth may become a reality *today*.

"And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"

"Give" and "forgive" go together. God is the one who gives and also the one who forgives. God gives what we need and forgives what we cannot repair by ourselves.

Forgiveness is one of the most prominent themes of the entire New Testament. That little library contains twenty-seven books, and on the first page of almost all twenty-seven, with just one or two exceptions, we find a reference to "forgiveness." Jesus teaches that God has forgiven us everything and done so gratuitously, out of the divine womb of mercy. He insisted that if God has forgiven our debts, we then have to forgive to

the others the tiny little debts they owe us. Jesus clearly sees the intimate correlation between divine and human forgiveness: if we do not forgive others, how can we receive God's forgiveness? Therefore, in this prayer, we do not only ask for forgiveness. We commit ourselves to forgive those who offend against us. This is not so easy. When Saint Augustine (around 400) commented on this passage, he mentioned a peculiar behavior of his local community. The first part of the sentence was spoken very loudly, but the second part remained unsaid. They were not ready to bring those words to their lips as long as their hearts were not disposed to forgive.

"And leave us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

As we said earlier, this double petition is actually one. The two formulations complement one another—the second illuminating the first. Evil can be understood as more than the sum of negative experiences. In the language of Jesus, it may also mean the personification of evil, Satan. Likewise, the word "temptation" can cover more than the various kinds of attractions and fascinations that draw us away from the right path. It can mean the test and trial at the end of time. That being the case, this petition is that God not allow us to be vanquished by a trial that is too strong for us. Since Jesus was convinced the end was coming very soon, this last prayer is in line with his expectations about the eschatological crisis that will occur when the Last Judgment takes place. In that terrible time of testing, we ask God to save us from destruction. We can recall another saying of Jesus that shows us his own view about the final tribulation:

For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved;

but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days (Mark 13:19-20).

The Final Doxology

This last sentence, as we saw earlier, is not part of the Gospel text, but it belongs to the movement of prayer. Some commentators have pointed out that no Jew would end a prayer with the word "evil." The final doxology brings us back to the central theme of the first part: "Thy *kingdom* come." In worship we are already living what we still hope for. "Already" and "not yet" belong to the mystery of the art of celebration. The more we commit ourselves to the liturgical celebration, the more we may experience in anticipation the object of our hopes. Praying, we already stand inside the reality of God's kingdom and power—and even glory.

Commentators insist on the eschatological intensity of this prayer: Jesus lived within the tension of "May your kingdom come soon!" and "It "has in fact already started to come in all the signs I have given." As he said to the disciples of John, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (Luke 7:22). On another occasion, he said, "But if it is by the finger of God [or the Spirit of God] that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). But we still wait and pray just for the arrival of the fullness of that kingdom.

Over the course of centuries, the Our Father has been on the lips of all pious Christians. The well-known rosary with its 150 beads was called, in some languages, the "*Pater noster*," Latin for "Our Father." In ancient times, members of a religious congregation or of a monastic order who were not able to read and learn the 150 Psalms of David by heart were

invited to pray the *Our Father* seven, fourteen, or even twenty-one times, according the number of Psalms in a particular prayer service. That practice was prescribed, for instance, in the thirteenth-century Rule of the Carmelites. Only later on, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, did it became customary to pray the rosary, with its 150 prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In the Rule of Saint Benedict (sixth century) we find three forms of reciting the *Our Father*. Twice a day, at morning and evening prayer, the abbot sings it solemnly at the end of the prayer service. The intention is to bring to peace the community as all hear and consent to the petition: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In the other hours of prayer, the leader of prayer intones the first words of the Our Father, and the monks continue the prayer in silence. The leader then says aloud, "And lead us not into temptation," and all conclude, "But deliver us from evil. Amen."

The shortest Our Father happens in the monastic community when the brothers greet their abbot. As Benedict puts it in the second chapter of his Rule, "For he [the abbot] is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, when he is called by his name, according to the saying of the Apostle: 'You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry Abba (Father)'" (Romans 8:15). The heart of the monk is rooted in a filial relationship to God, to Christ, and even to the one called "abbot" in the community.

Finally, the Our Father is prayed in every celebration of the Eucharist (Mass)– officially since Gregory the Great (d. 604), but Augustine and even Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) already refer to this practice. It concludes the central part of the celebration and prepares the congregation to offer a sign of peace to one another before sharing the living bread and the cup of the eternal covenant in his blood, "poured

out for many for the forgiveness of sins," as Jesus said before his death (Matthew 26:28). The Eucharistic setting gives new meanings to virtually every phrase of the Our Father.

Every person can discover in this strong, synthetically unified poem and prayer the words that fit best his or her heart at a particular moment of the day or of the night, at a stage or period of life. Just one phrase can be enough: "Hallowed be thy name"; "Forgive us"; "Deliver us"; "Give us this day our daily bread." No one can exhaust the meaning of this prayer at any one time, and no commentary can fully express the power of all that is contained in it. We begin with praise; we end with praise. We hope that God—God's Kingdom, God's Will, God's Holy Name—will reign over our world and penetrate all reality, in us and around us. Peace and justice are the culmination of our hope, a peace and justice that reigns among countries, races and religions.

May this short essay have drawn you a bit more into the sanctuary of our most central Christian prayer, you who were so eager to know more about the Christian way of praying. May the common God of heaven bless you in your understanding and your behavior.

Peace be with you.