

FROM ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν TO ἄφεῖς IN MATTHEW 6,12 (?) : A Critique of a Proposed Translation

Quaestio Disputata:

A request has been persistently made by a certain *Arnaldo Nonong Rimando*¹ to the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines and elsewhere, to have the translation of one of the petitions of the Our Father changed from “*Forgive us our trespasses, as **we** forgive those who trespass against us*” to “*Forgive us our trespasses, as **You** forgive those who trespass against us.*”² It is not immediately clear if Rimando is making such a proposal with the original Greek text in mind. It may be true that he is concerned about preserving the meaning of the “actual authentic words of Jesus Christ,” insisting that these words come from “God the Son Jesus Christ” himself, as his prayer to God the Father,³ yet he never mentions or recognizes the (original) Greek text from which these words had been taken, that is, Mt 6,12 (with its parallel in Lk 11,4).

Thus, apparently prescinding from the Greek text of Mt 6,12, Rimando proposes the change in translation, without any attempt at biblical exegesis, but simply based on the presupposition that the intent of the petition is to ask the *help* of God to *forgive* and *absolve* the sins of “our” trespassers.⁴ To say “as we forgive” –instead of “as You forgive” (i.e., God)–he argues, would prevent the sins of our trespassers from being *absolved* since God alone (not “we”) can grant absolution for sins, as opposed to our act of forgiving which is bereft of such an effect. Without such “absolution”, Rimando concludes, the Our Father is being turned from being a perfect prayer into being an imperfect prayer.

Similarly, the intent of the previous line – “*Forgive us our trespasses*” –is to ask God to *forgive* and *absolve* “our” sins. To follow this through with “...as *we forgive* those who trespass against us” would be to equate our act of forgiving our trespassers with God’s act of forgiving us and others, which for Rimando causes some concern. It would look as though we are simply telling God that we are forgiving those who trespass against us, in stead of asking his help for us to forgive them—which to him is erroneous. On the contrary, he says, we need God’s help to enable us to forgive because if we simply rely on our own capacity (implied by the use of “as we forgive”), we will not be able to defeat the strength and power of the devil.⁵

Foremost, however, among Rimando’s arguments to support his proposed translation is his idea that the Our Father is a *perfect prayer*.⁶ Perfectionism (*sic*), he says, or the word *perfect* can only be attributed to the *words* and *works* of God, who is triune—Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Son, in particular, may have become human like us (and died for us), but he remained *perfect*—the only one—as a human being. Thus, in Rimando’s thought, whatever

¹ A. Rimando is a Filipino-American residing in North Las Vegas, Nevada, U.S.A.

² Letter of A. Rimando, dated December 2017. See further *Letter of Arnaldo Nonong Rimando*, dated March 11, 2019 (with three attachments); *Letter of Arnaldo Nonong Rimando*, dated December 2019; *Letter of Arnaldo Nonong Rimando*, dated June 2020; *Letter of Arnaldo Nonong Rimando*, dated September 4, 2020.

³ Letter of A. Rimando, dated December 2017.

⁴ See Letter of A. Rimando, dated June 2020, p. 1.

⁵ See also Letter of A. Rimando, dated June 2020, p. 1.

⁶ Letter of A. Rimando, dated December 2019.

Jesus did and said—presupposedly, in particular, the words he uttered when he taught the disciples the Our Father—was *perfect*.

In other words, the words of the Our Father, being Jesus' words, are God's words and therefore *perfect*. Thus, to use *we* instead of *You* in the translation of the fifth petition of the Our Father, is to turn the words of Jesus into *our own* and the act of forgiving as mere *human initiative* bereft of divine *absolution*—in effect turning the Our Father, let alone the fifth petition, into an *imperfect prayer*. Thus, if the Our Father were to be preserved as a perfect prayer, the pronoun *You* must be used in translating the fifth petition to read, "As *You* forgive those who trespass against us." That would mean « us » asking God to do the forgiving instead of us doing so, which is just but proper after all because only God has the power to forgive and absolve. It was Jesus' intention, Rimando contends, that forgiveness and absolution be bestowed in this part of the Our Father, hence the imperative of using the pronoun *You* to refer to God (Father) who alone is capable of granting such grace.

Rimando found another argument to support his proposed change in translation by likening the Our Father to another frequently prayed Catholic prayer, the *Hail Mary*. He notes that the Hail Mary is a prayer for the intercession of the Blessed Mother, while the Our Father is a prayer for the intercession of Jesus Christ.⁸ Part of the Hail Mary, Rimando observes, reads "*pray for us sinners*" but it does not continue on to read "*as we pray for those who sinned against us.*" The Our Father, on the contrary, reads in part "*forgive us our trespasses*" but continues on to read "*as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Rimando believes that the omission of the line just mentioned in the Hail Mary is correct, but the continuation of the fifth petition in the Our Father introduced by the pronoun (as) *we* is rather unfortunate (incorrect) because this has no place in the Our Father unless the pronoun *we* is changed to *You*.

The reason Rimando gives for this error is that the translators of old may have failed to see the Our Father as a prayer of intercession. A prayer of intercession, he explains, is not a prayer to (simply) inform God that we are forgiving our trespassers. To do otherwise, that is, to persistently use the pronoun *we*, prompts us in effect "to give conditions and limits to our Father's forgiveness" because that would mean *we* are the very *agent* ourselves of forgiveness and no longer him (the Father). This is, in Rimando's language, a usurpation. But who are we, he asks, to put limits to what God should be doing (*i.e.*, forgiving)? Rather, he insists, we should trust God completely by letting him (not us) do the forgiving. If we are to forgive our transgressors, let it then be through other prayers, and let it be shown both in word and in deed.

There is another reason for completely entrusting to God the prerogative to forgive our transgressors. That is because when Jesus taught us the Our Father, he never intended that we forgive others without asking the *help* of God. According to Rimando, this is very clear when Jesus forgave his trespassers on the Cross because there he said; "**Father forgive them**" and not "**I forgive them.**" Citing Lk 23,34, Rimando sees here Jesus teaching us to ask God the Father to forgive our enemies. Confronted by our sins and the wrongs we have been subjected to, we

⁷ As to the ordering of the petitions of the Our Father, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2759. See also T. HEDRICK, *Explaining the seven petitions of the Our Father*, (<https://clarionherald.org/news/explaining-the-seven-petitions-of-the-our-father>).

⁸ Letter of Arnaldo Nonong Rimando, dated March 11, 2019.

reach the limits of our strength to overcome evil. In our clash with the evil one, its power is simply beyond our ability to conquer it.

Thus, we need to ask God to help us, that is, to forgive as he forgives us. It is God who enables us to forgive. So if we want to forgive our neighbors (our trespassers), we need to ask God's help against the power of evil. It is by saying "*as You forgive*" in the Our Father that we express our need for God's help in overcoming the strength and the power of the devil, which is Jesus way of forgiving that we need to follow. He refutes the objection that by using *You* we do not actually forgive our trespassers for it is God doing so. Quite strangely, Rimando argues that the objection does not hold because *we* and *You* in this context mean the same thing. For him, even if we say *You* (referring to the Father), it can still mean that we in fact also forgive.⁹

Rimando has more to say about Lk 23,34, the source text of the first of Jesus' seven last words on the cross: "*Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*"¹⁰ Jesus, he insists, did not say, "I forgive them." Rather, Jesus *as a man* asked God the Father to forgive them, who crucified and trespassed against him.

In effect, this for Rimando, clearly suggests that Jesus wants us, when praying the Our Father, to ask God to forgive those who trespass against us, in imitation of what Jesus did on the cross—thus, the appropriateness of saying "Forgive us our trespasses as *You* forgive those who trespass against us." This is the way Jesus, *as a man* and *as a human being* who lived among men, forgave others when he was crucified. To truly love, respect, worship, and believe in Jesus, Rimando contends, is to imitate his way of forgiving others. He challenges anyone who prays the Our Father: would anyone really want to do the forgiving himself, that is, forgiving others without wanting them to be forgiven and absolved by God?¹¹ To him, doing so would be an imperfect way of praying the Our Father.

Therefore, to reiterate, based on the teaching that God alone can/may absolve sins, Rimando proposes that the verse of the Our Father (Mt 6, 12; cf. Lk 11,4) which says, "*Forgive us our trespasses, as *we* forgive those who trespass against us*" be modified to read, "*Forgive us our trespasses, as *You* forgive those who trespass against us.*" (*You*, meaning God.) After all, asking God to forgive our transgressors also *imply* or *indicate* that we have forgiven them, and that invoking God's forgiveness for them would even bring about an added benefit, *i.e.*, the grace of absolution and thus entry into heaven.¹²

Finally, not to be ignored is how Rimando deals with Mt 6,14-15: "*If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.*" He says that this should not be used to justify the erroneous way of praying, of what it is to forgive. To explain further, he poses the question which he thinks was already raised early on by scholars: "*Is divine forgiveness conditional or unconditional in the Gospel of Mathew?*" He says it is both. It is the result of a gracious offer or declaration on the part of Jesus received by faith (9,2-8; 26,28) as well as a conditional grace that depends upon the

⁹ Letter of A. Rimando, dated June 2020.

¹⁰ Lk 23,34. See Letter of A. Rimando, dated September 4, 2020 (cf. Letter of A. Rimando, dated June 2020).

¹¹ Letter of A. Rimando, dated December 2017.

¹² Letter of A. Rimando, dated December 2017.

forgiveness that the disciple must offer to others (6,12-15; 18,21-35). Even after having acknowledged that forgiveness is conditional in Mt,12-15, what is strange again is that Rimando refuses to connect the idea expressed in Mt 6,14-15 with what is expressed in Mt 6,12.¹³

The Teaching of the Church Fathers

Before analyzing Rimando's objections to the present English translation of Mt 6,12, it would be instructive to look into the teachings of the Church Fathers, for had Rimando done this in the first place, he could have been spared from all the futile effort of trying to reinterpret the meaning of Mt 6,12 according to his own thinking.

St. Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 210-258 A.D.) comes to mind immediately. In his treatise on the Our Father, this is what he had to say:

*Christ has clearly added a law here, binding us to a definite condition, that we should ask for our debts to be forgiven us only as much as we ourselves forgive our debtors, knowing that we cannot obtain what we seek in respect of our own sins unless we ourselves have acted in exactly the same way to those who have sinned against us. ...the servant who had all his debt forgiven him by his master but would not forgive his fellow-servant was cast into prison: because he would not forgive his fellow-servant, he lost the indulgence that his master had granted him. And Christ makes this point even more strongly in his teaching: When you stand up to pray, he says, if you have anything against anyone, forgive it, so that your Father who is in heaven may forgive your sins. But if you do not forgive, nor will your Father in heaven forgive you.*¹⁴

The insight as expressed in the foregoing text almost does not need any explanation as it already speaks clearly for itself. Undoubtedly, St. Cyprian is emphasizing in this place the importance and even the *strict obligation* of forgiving others sincerely and in earnest if we ourselves are to ask forgiveness from God.

Tertullian of Carthage (AD 220), for his part, taught:

Having considered God's generosity, we pray next for His indulgence. For, of what benefit is food if, in reality, we are bent on it like a bull on his victim? Our Lord knew that He alone was without sin. Therefore, He taught us to say in prayer: 'Forgive us our trespasses.' A prayer for pardon is an acknowledgment of sin, since one who asks for pardon confesses his guilt. Thus, too, repentance is shown to be acceptable to God, because God wills this rather than the death of the sinner. Now, in Scripture, 'debt' is used figuratively to mean sin, because of this analogy: When a man owes something to a judge and payment is exacted from him, he does not escape the just demand unless excused from the payment of the debt, just as the master forgave the debt to that servant. Now, this is the point of the whole parable: Just as the servant was freed by his lord, but failed in turn to be merciful to his debtor and therefore, when brought before his lord, was handed

¹³ Letter of A. Rimando, dated June 2020.

¹⁴ Cap 1-3: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL) 3, 267-268; Cap. 23-24 CSEL 3, 284-285. See also The Liturgy of the Hours according to the Roman Rite, Vol III: Ordinary Time, Weeks 1-17, New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975, Friday Week III, 11th Week in Ordinary Time, p. 376-378, esp. p. 376.

over to the torturer until he paid the last penny, that is, the least and last of his faults, (Christ) intended by this parable to get us, also, to forgive our debtors. This is expressed elsewhere under this aspect of prayer; 'Forgive,' He said, 'and you shall be forgiven.' And when Peter asked if one should forgive his brother seven times, our Lord said, 'Rather, seventy times seven times,' that He might improve upon the Law, for in Genesis vengeance was demanded of Cain seven times, of Lamech seventy times seven.

In his commentary on Mt 6,12, St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) similarly expressed the same thought though in a different way:

Let us therefore say every day; and say it in sincerity of heart, and do what we say, Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. It is an engagement, a covenant, an agreement that we make with God. The Lord your God says to you, Forgive, and I will forgive. You have not forgiven; you retain your sins against yourself, not I. I pray you, my dearly beloved children, since I know what is expedient for you in the Lord's Prayer, and most of all in that sentence of it, Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors; hear me.¹⁵

Let no one then retain against himself by refusing to forgive, lest it be retained against him, when he prays. For God says, Forgive, and you shall be forgiven. For I have forgiven you first; you at least forgive after that.

If one were to examine the literature on the subject, such line of reasoning evident in the Church Fathers has, in fact, prevailed over the centuries. No one has ever interpreted Jesus words, until Rimando, to mean other than what Jesus himself originally intended it to mean.

Still, it would be instructive to look into Rimando's arguments and see where they fail to support the change he is trying to propose.

Equal to God?

In one of his discourses on love, Jesus said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. *As I have loved you*, so you must love one another."¹⁶ Here, Jesus enjoins his disciples (and "us" by extension) to love one another in exactly the same way that he does. If forgiving is an expression or manifestation of loving—which indeed it is—why should it be bothersome to think that we are also encouraged to forgive in the same way that God forgives? After all, Jesus also urged his disciples to be perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect.¹⁷ Hence, for us to forgive in the same way that God forgives does not need to be a cause of concern, as it does to Rimando, because it is in keeping with such an urging. Doing so does not make us *equal* to God, but only makes us godlike—his living image.

¹⁵ ST. AUGUSTINE, Sermon 6 on the New Testament, LVI. Ben. Cf. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 6. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.) – as cited in <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/160306.htm>.

¹⁶ Jn 13,24

¹⁷ Mt 5,48

Moreover, for us to forgive (expressed by “as *we* forgive”) does not also mean that we do not need to ask help from God because we can do it on our own. Rather, it is just a way of expressing our willingness to forgive (to imitate God) because we ourselves have also been (and still are) beneficiaries of God’s forgiveness. There is reason to think that this is the intent of the petition and not so much to ask for help in forgiving, considering that in another passage,¹⁸ Jesus tells of a master who punished his servant, had him imprisoned and tortured, because after having been forgiven his huge debt, this servant for his part did not bestow his debtors the same forgiveness that had been generously granted him by his master.

A Usurpation of God’s Role?

Would it be right though to think, with Rimando, that forgiving our transgressors is actually robbing God of his role in bestowing such forgiveness? It is for God to forgive, not us. It would, therefore, be usurping such role were we to do the same. The fifth petition as translated—“as we forgive”—allows us to do just that, which is contrary to the nature of the Our Father as a prayer of intercession.

Rimando is pleased that the same mistake—the mistranslation—is “omitted” in the Hail Mary. Little did he know, however, that it did not occur in the Hail Mary because there was nothing there to omit in the first place. The text which he says was omitted in the Hail Mary did not exist in the original text of the prayer as it developed over time.¹⁹

But why should saying “as we forgive” condition or limit the Father’s prerogative to forgive, thereby usurping his role in doing so? If that was what Jesus taught his disciples, why should it be wrongful to say so? Is it not that by saying so, we even give the Father reason enough to forgive us, as the original text would have us understand? Forgiving our trespassers does not mean curtailing the possibility of our trespassers also being forgiven by God. First, because would God not forgive them were we not to ask him to do so? Would God’s forgiveness of others depend on our asking him to forgive them? Second, others (our trespassers), on their own, may also call on God to forgive them?

Rimando says that if we want to forgive our trespassers, we might as well do this through other forms of prayer because the fifth petition of the Our Father is about asking God to forgive our trespassers and not about us forgiving them instead. Given the reasoning offered here, it seems more appropriate to say the inverse of what he is trying to suggest. Namely, if we want God to forgive our trespassers, we might as well do it through other forms of prayer for the fifth petition of the Our Father is about us instead forgiving our trespassers, as condition for the forgiveness of our own trespasses, as will be made clearer below.

¹⁸ Cf. Mt 18,21-35

¹⁹ See Luke 1,26-28 and Luke 1,39-45. The original text is a combination of two greetings to Mary, one in Luke 1,26-28 (*Hail Mary, full of grace*) and the other in Luke 1,41-42 (*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb*). To these two short texts, a petition “*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death*” was added later and appeared to have been first printed in 1495 in Girolamo Savonarola’s *Esposizione sopra l’Ave Maria*. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hail_Mary.

Asking the Father to Forgive Our Transgressors

Citing the first of Jesus' seven last words on the cross does not actually help either in reinforcing Rimando's arguments. It is true that Jesus said on the cross, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*"²⁰ Following Rimando's line of reasoning, one is prompted to ask: is Jesus also asking his Father's *help* in forgiving his tormentors? Why, does he need such help, in the same way that *we* need it as Rimando would insist? Does Jesus not have the power to forgive and to absolve that he needs to beg his Father to do the forgiving in stead of himself doing it?

First, one might be tempted to say, using Rimando's vocabulary, that Jesus *as a man* and *as a human being* had to do it inasmuch as, using his line of reasoning once again, only God can *forgive* and *absolve*. Such a thought, however, smacks of Nestorianism, a heresy roundly condemned at the First Council of Ephesus in 431 and at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, for teaching that the human and divine persons of Jesus remained separate, thus distinguishing what Jesus did as a human being and what he did as God. On the contrary, whatever Jesus did, the Councils declared, he did in his totality as God-man.

Second, Jesus plea to his Father could not have meant he knew he had no power and neither the authority to forgive and absolve. On at least two occasions, he in fact asserted the contrary. In one instance, when he saw the faith of the men who brought in a paralytic before him on a stretcher,²¹ he told the paralytic, "*As for you, your sins are forgiven.*" The reaction of the scribes and the Pharisees was swift as they began to ask, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who but God alone can forgive sins?" Jesus' reply was just as quick: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — he said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home."

In another instance, while Jesus dined at Simon the Pharisee's house, a sinful woman came to him.²² Seeing her reverence—for she bathed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair—the Lord contrasted such tenderness with Simon's lack of hospitality, and went on to tell the woman, "*Your sins are forgiven.*" The other onlookers at table were prompted to ask, "*Who is this who even forgives sins?*"

Clearly then, Jesus knew he had the power and the prerogative to forgive (and indeed to absolve). Yet, in spite of that, he begged his Father to forgive his tormentors. It may not be that obvious, but here—in this instance—Jesus may be pointing to a truth he had emphatically told his disciples before he accepted the cross, namely, that he and the Father are one.²³

²⁰ Lk 23,34

²¹ See the whole story in Lk 5,17-26. See also Mark 2,10: "'But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—He said to the paralytic..."; and Luke 5,24: "'But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,'—He said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.'"

²² See the whole story in Luke 7,36-50.

²³ See Jn 10,30.

In a more profound way, Jesus confirmed this reality when he further declared to his disciples, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”²⁴ That means to say that any offence against him is necessarily an offence against the Father. Thus, it made sense that he should ask his Father, “Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” In the end, Jesus may only be concretely demonstrating that before anything else, he had already forgiven his persecutors and if only to show how overwhelming and profound his mercy is, he even asks his Father to forgive them as well.

So what is there to imitate? What is the lesson to be learned? When Jesus was pained and offended, he forgave those who caused him such pain. But more than that, he also asks his heavenly Father no less to do the same. Might we find ourselves in a similar situation, it becomes praiseworthy if not imperative that we not only forgive those who wronged us and caused us pain but also ask others, especially *those who care for us* to forgive them as well. It is natural for those who sympathize with us to condemn those who might have wronged us, but it would be meritorious on our part, just as Jesus did to his heavenly Father without having to gain any merit, to ask them not to condemn but likewise to forgive. Such is the context of the first of Jesus’ seven last words on the cross.

The Original Greek Text

The context of the Our Father, however, is very much different, one that can be delineated only if the original Greek text were to be examined, that is, Mt 6,12 (or Lk 11,4). It must, however, first be acknowledged that the *Greek text* of Mt 6,9-13 is the source-text of the Our Father, and Mt 6,12 in particular of the specific text in question. It is important to insist on this because nowhere in Rimando’s excursus is this clearly stated. If ever he mentions Mt 6,12, it is only to state that his proposed translation does not contradict it²⁵ – thus, seemingly implying that there may be another source for his translation, which unfortunately he takes no trouble to explicitate.

The fact however is, there can be no other source for the Our Father, especially for the longer version, but the Greek text of Mt 6,9-13 as follows:

Πάτερ ἡμῶν

(based on Mt 6, 9-13)

Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·
Pater hēmōn ho en tois ouranois
Ἀγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου
Hagiasthētō to onoma sou
ἐλθάτω ἡ βασιλεία σου·
Elthatō hē basileia sou
γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου,
Genēthētō to thelēma sou
ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς
Hōs en ouranō kai epi gēs

Pater noster

(St. Jerome’s translation based on Mt 6, 9-13)

Pater Noster, qui es in caelis,
Our Father, who art in heaven
sanctificetur nomen tuum.
Hallowed by thy name.
Adveniat regnum tuum.
Thy kingdom come
Fiat voluntas tua,
Thy will be done
sicut in caelo et in terra.
On earth as it is in heaven

²⁴ John 14,10.

²⁵ See *Letter of A. Rimando*, dated June 2020.

Τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον
Ton arton hēmōn ton epiousion dos hēmin
sēmeron

καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν,
Kai aphes hēmin ta ophelēmata hēmōn
ὥς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν
Hōs kai hēmeis aphēkamen tois ophiletais hēmōn
καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν,
Kai mē eisenenkēs hēmas eis peirasmon
ἀλλὰ ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ.
Alla rhyasai hēmas apo tou ponērou.

Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie,
Give us this day our daily bread,

et dimitte nobis debita nostra
and forgive us our trespasses
sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Et ne nos inducas in tentationem,
And lead us not into temptation,
sed libera nos a malo.
but deliver us from evil.

In Mt 6, 14-15, Jesus continues:

Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ
παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ
Πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος·

Si enim *dimiseritis* hominibus peccata eorum
dimittet et vobis Pater vester caelestis delicta
vestra.

ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ
Πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα
ὑμῶν.

si autem non *dimiseritis* hominibus nec
Pater vester *dimittet* peccata vestra.

Now to the point. The original Greek text clearly uses the *first person plural* form of the verb in the **past perfect tense**, (ἡμεῖς) ἀφήκαμεν (we forgive)²⁶ and not the *second person singular* form, ἀφεῖς (you forgive).²⁷ Even Luke in a parallel text also uses the *first person plural*, ἀφίομεν (we forgive) in the **present tense**.²⁸ There are just *no other existing ancient manuscripts* (among those that have been discovered) where text-variations in original Greek might be found that would support the translation and the change being proposed without radically changing the original text itself.

In any case, St. Jerome, one of the early translators of the text in question, literally translated it into Latin in 405 A.D. to read *nos dimittimus* (we forgive), and not *dimittes* (you forgive). Such being the case, Rimando cannot escape lumping St. Jerome among the original translators whom he faults with having mistranslated the original text.

But is St. Jerome's Latin rendering really a mistranslation? Hardly, as it is the exact (literal) equivalent of the original Greek. On the contrary, changing the *we* to *You* in the English translation, as Rimando vigorously and incessantly proposes, would in fact mean not only changing the translation but also changing the original text itself to accommodate the proposed translation! Rimando needs to pinpoint which **Greek word** was ever mistranslated by the likes of St. Jerome!

²⁶ The first person plural form of the verb ἀφήκαμεν occurs also in Mt 19,27 and Mk 10,28.

²⁷ The second person singular form, ἀφεῖς, occurs in many other places, e.g., Mt 5,24; 5,40; 7,4, etc. The aorist active indicative second person singular form of the verb is ἀφῆτε, aphēte (Mt 6,14; Mt 6,15; Mt 18,35; Jn 16,31; and Jn 20,23) or ἀφήκες, aphēkes (Rev. 2,4).

²⁸ The complete verse in Lk 11,4 reads: “καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν.” (And forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us).

To insist on the change (in translation) which Rimando proposes would unavoidably mean introducing to the original prayer itself in Greek a non-existent text and an interpretation that is extraneous to it. On this, Rimando need only be reminded about texts in Sacred Scriptures no less that warn against changing – whether this be by addition or subtraction – anything to the original texts.

Consider the following verses:

- a) Deut. 4,2: “You shall not **add** to the word²⁹ which I am commanding you, nor **take away** from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”
- b) Deut. 12,32: “Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not **add** to nor **take away** from it.”
- c) Prov. 30,5-6: “Do not **add** to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar. Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.”
- d) Rev. 22,18-19: “ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone **adds** to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone **takes away** from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”

A text cannot be changed just so it could be made to fit a certain theological opinion or speculation. To do otherwise would be to distort the real intent and message of the text. Theology must be based on Scriptures, not determine what it must say to suit a belief or an interpretation. Replacing *we* with *You* in the translation when the original text uses *we* in ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν would constitute not only a simple change but a corruption of the text.

Moreover, it must be borne in mind from the very beginning that, as Rimando himself would acknowledge, it was **Jesus himself** who composed the Our Father – that is precisely the reason why it is called the Lord’s Prayer. In other words, it is a prayer couched in **Jesus’ very own words** (*ipsissima verba*). Out of respect for these words, one may, therefore, not tinker with them, especially because doing so would mean altering Jesus’ message.

A Perfect Prayer

Thus, Rimando was right in saying that the words of the Our Father was Jesus’ very own words, but he was wrong in postulating that using the pronoun **we** turns the words into our own. They are still Jesus’ words because that is what he really said. Changing **we forgive** into **You forgive**, on the contrary, would make them the translator’s (our) words because that is not what Jesus actually said. On this, going back to the original text cannot be emphasized enough to prove the point.

²⁹ This could mean: adding to God, the Word of God, additions to the commands in the Old Testament, respect for God’s character, subtracting from God, and revelation in the New Testament.

The Our Father is for sure a perfect prayer because it is the Lord's very own prayer. But beside the divine origin of the text, there are far more weighty reasons that render it a perfect prayer. St. Thomas Aquinas ((1225-1274), in his *Summa theologiae* emphatically said:

The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers...In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them."³⁰

One can be sure that when St. Thomas characterized the Our Father as a perfect prayer he had in mind its traditional formulation as found in the Vulgate, *i.e.*, St. Jerome's Latin translation of the original Greek. It is a translation which rendered the Greek ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν into the Latin *nos dimittimus* (we forgive)—both of which used the first person plural forms both of the personal pronoun and that of the verb. There is nothing here to suggest that the use of *we* instead of *You* in the fifth petition, because there was no reason to replace it with any other form in the first place, would turn it into an imperfect prayer.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) found reason to agree with St. Thomas with an affirmation. Referring to the Our Father it says: "*The prayer that comes to us from Jesus is truly unique: it is 'of the Lord.'*" The CCC continues, "...in the words of this prayer the only Son gives us the words the Father gave him... He is the model of our prayer."³¹ Such is the reason why the Our Father is a perfect prayer, and not only specifically because we ask the Father in this prayer—with the use of the pronoun *You* in reference to him—to forgive our transgressors. Indeed, that would not be weighty enough, compared to the reasons aptly propounded by the Angelic Doctor.

The Context: Mt 6,14-15

Apart from this, there is a more cogent reason for supporting the literal translation of (ἡμεῖς) ἀφήκαμεν in Mt 6,12. This is found in Mt 6,14-15 which states: "*For if you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.*" (For the Greek and Latin texts, see *supra*.) These verses, in fact, serve to more clearly define the context and real intent of Mt 6,12. That is, we need to forgive others' transgressions against us because this is the condition whereby God would also forgive us.³² For how can we ask God to forgive us when we ourselves cannot or refuse to forgive others?

Thus, in comparison, if in the first of Jesus' seven last words on the cross he was encouraging us (that is, by extension) to forgive the way he does and to ask others to forgive our transgressors, in the Our Father, he urges us—not others—to forgive our transgressors ourselves that we may likewise obtain in return the Father's forgiveness for our own transgressions when we ask for it.

³⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 83, a. 9, as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2763.

³¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church #2765.

³² See also Luke 6,37: "*Forgive and you will be forgiven.*"

Again, the parable about the master and his servant in Mt 18,21-35 comes to mind. The master demanded that his servant should forgive his own debtors because he himself had benefited from his master's having previously written off his huge debts. This servant's harshness and unforgiving attitude thereafter towards his debtors was cause enough for him to get punished and imprisoned by his master. The lesson here is that forgiveness ought to beget forgiveness.

Rimando somehow anticipated an objection to his arguments, as the above explanation would in effect have it, when he said that asking the Father to forgive our trespassers *implies* that we have in fact (already) forgiven them, thus sparing him from being faulted with having ignored such context. Yet, a condition, and a *necessary* one at that, for the granting of forgiveness cannot just be implied and given light attention. For forgiveness to be sincere and honest, it needs to be explicitly expressed and not simply implied. That *we* and *You* in this context mean the same thing, as Rimando supposes, is simply absurd for if they mean the same thing, why would there be a need to change anything – the *we* into *You*?

It is puzzling why Rimando, after having affirmed that forgiveness is both graciously offered (unconditional) and dependent upon one's being able to forgive others (conditional), continues to fail seeing that its being conditional is precisely the whole point of Mt 6,12. Mt 6,14-15 says it plainly: *"For if you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions."* What more can be clearer than that? Both texts (*i.e.*, Mt 6,12 and Mt 6,14-15) belong to the same pericope after all; one should be understood in the light of the other.

Once again, what stands out in this discussion is that human forgiveness and God's forgiveness are inextricably connected. As one biblical commentator would put it, for Jesus, our forgiveness of our fellow human beings and God's forgiveness of us cannot be separated. In other words, they cannot be considered apart from each other because they are interlinked and interdependent.³³

Can God Alone Forgive?

From the previous discussion, it may already be clear that Jesus did not mean to teach us that God alone has the authority to forgive. There seems to be, however, some scriptural passages that suggest otherwise. In the Old Testament, we find the following verses:

- a) Psalm 130,3-4: *"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But **with you there is forgiveness**, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."*
- b) Isaiah 43,25: *"I, even I, **am he who blots out your transgressions**, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."*
- c) Daniel 9,9: *"The Lord our **God is merciful and forgiving**, even though we have rebelled against him..."*

³³ W. BARCLAY, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The Daily Study Bible Series, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), p. 222.

- d) Micah 7,18: *"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy."*

On closer look, however, these texts do not really *explicitly* and *clearly* state that God **alone** can forgive, but only suggest a slight implication of such a thought. One cannot, therefore, take these texts as conclusive.

A verse from the Acts of the Apostles can similarly be characterized. It says: *"Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that **he may forgive you** for having such a thought in your heart."*³⁴ Again, this text does not necessarily say that God alone can forgive. But two other Gospel verses at least pose the question:

- a) Mk 2,6-7: *"But some of the scribes were sitting there and contemplating in their hearts, 'Why does this man speak like this? He is blaspheming! **Who can forgive sins but God alone?**'"*
- b) Lk 5,21: *"The scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, 'Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? **Who can forgive sins, but God alone?**'"*

"Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" Such a question may indeed suggest that God alone forgives. But raised as it was by the Scribes and Pharisees, such a question is in fact much more indicative of their belief (and perhaps that of the Jews at that time) than of Jesus' own teaching on the subject. If one were to consider what Jesus says elsewhere, it becomes obvious that he did not share such a belief. Consider the following:

- a) Mt 18,21-22: *"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, '**Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me?** Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!'"*
- b) Lk 17,3-4: *"Watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, **forgive him**. Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to say, 'I repent, '**you must forgive him**."*

Jesus is telling his disciples in these verses to forgive a brother for a number of (even unlimited) times. Reading between the lines, forgiveness in Jesus' teaching is an expression of love and mercy which he urges his disciples to imbibe. To be forgiving indeed is a virtue that should characterize a disciple of Jesus for to be so is to imitate him.

Forgiveness and Absolution

Be that as it may, there is also a "way of forgiving" that is exclusive to God but which may be properly called "remission" insofar as this word has a nuance in meaning that forgiveness does not necessarily have. Etymologically, remission comes from *re-* (meaning *away* or *again*) and *mittere* (meaning *to send*), thus to send away. Applied to our sins, remission of sins means

³⁴ Acts 8,22.

sending our sins away. In the Old Testament, it refers to the casting of our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7,18), or the removal of our sins as far as the East is from the West (Ps 103,10-12). In the New Testament, it is God's act of forgetting our sins—God remembers our sins no more! (Heb 8,12)

In a more profoundly theological sense, however, it refers much more to Jesus' *redemptive act on the cross*, his having shed his blood for the remission of sins (Mt 26,28). It is in this way that the remission (forgiveness) of sins is an exclusively divine act that no other human being is able to duplicate. Concretely, in the life of the Church, the remission of sin/s is granted in the sacraments—in the sacrament of baptism, the remission of original sin, and in the sacrament of reconciliation (penance or confession), it is the remission of individual personal sins. In canonical language, this sacramental remission of sin/s is what is referred to as *absolution*. This, as the Church teaches, is something that God alone—through the instrumentality of the Church in the ordained minister—can bestow.

On close inspection, one of the defects in Rimando's argumentation is that it conflates forgiveness and absolution to suggest that they are exactly the same thing. He insists on replacing "as *we* forgive" with "as *You* forgive" because this would mean asking God to *forgive* and *absolve* our trespassers, in stead of us arrogating to ourselves the power to do so—a power which in Rimando's view we do not have. This, however, is not entirely true if the distinction between forgiveness and absolution were to be taken into account, that is, forgiveness (in the general sense) is simply the "letting go of the hurt and pain caused by an offence or transgression," while absolution is the redemptive remission of an offence against God and neighbor. Absolution has a sacramental and canonical effect (sacramental grace) which forgiveness when elicited by humans does not necessarily effect or bring about.

With this in mind, the texts just examined show that while the Our Father is about God and us bestowing forgiveness, it is not about God granting absolution or remission for our sins and those of our transgressors. To hold otherwise would render the sacrament of reconciliation unnecessary and superfluous for one may then just recite the Our Father, need not go to confession any longer and that would be enough for one to obtain absolution from one's sins. Clearly, this was not what Jesus wanted to convey when he taught his disciples to pray.

For the absolution and remission of sins, one should look elsewhere for the source text—not in the Our Father. That is, when Jesus promised to confer on Peter (and by extension on the other apostles) the power of binding and loosing in Mt 16,19: "*I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*"

One may also cite Mt 18,18 where Jesus continues : "*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, regard him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, **whatever you bind** on earth **will be bound** in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

Jesus, however, actually confers such a power to his disciples in John 20,21-23 when he said to them once again: "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And when he had said*

this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.'"

Conclusion

In any work of translation, the original text couched in the original language is always the point of reference—it being the base or the source text. One should not rely on translation/s of a translation. In his proposal to change the translation of the fifth petition in the Our Father, Rimando never mentions the original (source) text in Greek: “ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν” (Mt 6,12). This is the reason why he misses seeing that the text in question uses the *first person plural form* of the Greek verb ἀφίημι (to forgive) which is ἀφήκαμεν or ἀφίομεν (we forgive).³⁵ He keeps referring back to the English translation (“as we forgive”) and simply presupposes that the use of the first person plural here (we) is a mistranslation of the original text, which he does not even care to spell out. His only basis for saying that this is a mistranslation is his own interpretation of the text: *the Father alone can forgive/absolve and that Jesus asked Him on the cross to forgive his oppressors*. Against Rimando’s reasoning, it should be pointed out that one cannot separate interpretation from the original (source) text for otherwise one is bound to distort the text and draw the wrong conclusion.

Moreover, the work of translation is in a sense also a work of interpretation. But interpretation requires not only an analysis of the *text* itself but also an analysis of the *proper context*. This is also what Rimando misses because not only is his interpretation based on a false assumption, it also fails to consider the whole context of Mt 6,12 which is indicated in Mt 6,14-15, namely, that to forgive others of their transgressions against us is the condition whereby God will also mercifully grant us forgiveness for our very own transgressions. The reason why Rimando does not see this is because his interpretation has become a *straightjacket* as it were, so that anything that does not fit into it is deemed erroneous, regardless of arguments to the contrary.

To conclude, there is no need to change the translation of the fifth petition of the Our Father because it is correct as it is. To change it otherwise, namely changing the “we” into “You” would instead make it erroneous as it would not only literally depart from the original text but would also introduce a context and an interpretation that is alien to it, namely, asking the Father to forgive (absolve) those who trespass against us for He alone can do so. On the contrary, Jesus taught us to forgive those who trespass against us because this is the only moral basis for us in asking the Father to forgive us our own trespasses. If we ask for forgiveness, we must also be willing to grant it to others who may have wronged us. Otherwise it would be hypocritical on our part to ask to be forgiven when we ourselves cannot and do not forgive. Thus, to put it inversely, we must first be willing to forgive others before we can dare, without being hypocritical, to ask the Father to forgive us—which is what the fifth petition of the Our Father is really all about.

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³⁵ See *Strong's Concordance* #863.