

Communing with God in Prayer

The goal of the Christian's life on earth is salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ and, at the same time, communion with God. The means for this communion is prayer, and through his prayer the Christian is joined in one spirit with the Lord (I Cor. 6:17). Prayer is the focal point and foundation of spiritual life and the source of salvation. Without prayer, as St. John Chrysostom says, there is no life in the spirit. Without prayer man is deprived of communion with God and can be compared to a dry and barren tree, which is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt. 7:19).

In prayer, the Christian concentrates together all his spiritual acts. Prayer draws down to him the grace of God and is an invaluable instrument of spiritual defense in the Christian's struggles against the sinful passions and vices. By prayer our thoughts, desires and deeds are sanctified, for he who prays receives the blessing of the Lord on his deeds, for, as Holy Scripture tells us, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain (Ps. 127:1). Nothing so helps us to grow in virtue as our pure and pious prayers to God. Thus it was the shared opinion of all the Holy Fathers that prayer is the mother of virtues. By repeated and fervent prayer, man is made more worthy of God's mercy and more capable of receiving the gifts of grace which God, by reason of His infinite goodness, is already to bestow on us out of His immeasurable bounties.

In prayer, the Christian prays not only for himself, but for all men, for we all are the children of God. We must pray for the salvation of our neighbor just as we pray for our own salvation, and the best means of correcting our neighbor is to pray for him, because prayer for our neighbor has far greater effect than denunciation of his sins. In addition, we pray not only for the living, but also for the departed, that God may forgive them their sins and grant them repose in the heavenly mansions of the righteous.

As with any spiritual endeavor, however, the Christian must learn how to pray properly. As St. Tikhon of Zadonsk cautions us: Of no value is that prayer in which the tongue prays but the mind is empty; the tongue speaks, but the mind lies silent; the tongue calls God, but the mind wanders amongst created things. We must, therefore, pray in fear and trembling and try in every way to ensure that our minds are with our words, or, as St. John of the Ladder tells us, to enclose our mind in the words of our prayer, [so that] the heart may respond to the words of the prayers.

The reading of prayers and prostrations are essential, of course, but these only express the state of prayer, while the prayer itself should come from the heart. And it is only such prayer, from the bottom of the heart and of the soul, that is the life of the spirit. True prayer, however, is a gift of God, and this gift is not granted to us without diligence and struggle. Therefore it is necessary for us to pray that the Lord should deem us worthy of this gift and grant us the grace to offer up to Him our sincere, pure and heartfelt prayer, for we are only able to pray when strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Therefore we must be mindful that the Holy Spirit is drawn to a soul cleansed of the stain of sin and worldly passions, and only in such a soul will He abide.

Our prayers will gradually grow more perfect as we improve the manner of our lives and cleanse our hearts of sinful passion. This banishment of sinful ways from our lives brings as its reward our success in prayer. At the same time, we must say that prayer cannot achieve perfection in isolation, but must be accompanied by all the virtues, for as we grow in virtue, so does our prayer grow ever more perfect.

Therefore we say that a Christian does not achieve true prayer at once, but only gradually, through various exertions and labor. All of life's deeds require toil and patience, but nowhere more than in the striving after the supreme virtue prayer.

Conditions for Prayer.

The first condition for the attainment of true prayer is a fervent desire to be saved and be pleasing to God a readiness to sacrifice all for the sake of God and the salvation of one's soul. As Bishop Theophan the Recluse states: Consider prayer to be the first and foremost duty in your life and as such keep it in your heart. Go about your prayers as to the fulfillment of your primary duty, and not as to something to be done between tasks.

A habit of absentminded, inattentive and careless prayer breeds a coldness towards God, dejection, a weakening of the faith and a darkening of the mind, and these in their turn lead to spiritual numbness. For prayer to be fruitful it must be fervent, offered up with an awareness of the need for what we are asking (Col. 4:2) and it must be untiring and relentless, pursuing its purpose with the firm resolve of the widow in Our Lord's parable who seeks protection from her adversary (Luke 18:2-8). At the same time, however, we must ensure that our supplications be worthy of God and of His glory and not opposed to His divine will. Surely we must pray:

Lord, let Thy, and not my, will be done in all things!

There are different degrees of prayer and for the beginner the effort of prayer consists mainly in attentively reading or listening to prayer, in standing, bowing and making the Sign of the Cross. Here a great deal of self-exertion and patience is called for, because our attention becomes distracted in this process and our heart may not feel the words of the Prayer. Through this verbal prayer through the diligent exercise of it the Christian, with the help of God, gradually trains his mind to collect itself, to understand and penetrate into the words of the prayer and to pronounce them without becoming distracted by outside thoughts.

The Christian must remain constantly mindful of God and must walk in fear of God. He is always before the eyes of God as God is invisibly with him always and everywhere. One's Guardian Angel is also always by his side. One must also be mindful of the fact that earthly life is not eternal. Death, which passes no one by and carries us off in many ways, must always be brought to remembrance as well as the fearsome Day of Judgment, where we all shall have to answer for our every sinful word, deed and thought. We must always call to mind Hell and the eternal torment which awaits all sinners, as well as the Kingdom of Heaven prepared for the faithful who lived in righteousness. In this way we may lead our lives in the fear of the Lord.

When we pray we must remember that if our prayers will rise speedily to God, they must be said with charity, for prayer said without love is not heard. According to St. John Chrysostom, charity is the wing of prayer. As the Holy Fathers also teach us, we should begin our prayers with glorification of the Creator of all, with a sincere thanksgiving to God for all His mercies, for all the trials and sorrows sent down for our benefit and the benefit of our neighbors. Then we must make a confession of sins in repentance of heart after which we will be deemed worthy to entreat the King of Heaven in prayer.

Mechanics of Prayer.

The Church of Christ teaches us prayers composed by righteous and holy men. The Holy Fathers and Ascetics of the Church, enlightened by the grace of God, have composed many beautiful prayers, filled with holy thoughts and deep feeling for the guidance and admonition of Christians. We hear these prayers in Church during the Divine Services, but for private prayer at home, each Christian must recite the prayers contained in the Prayerbook.

When we begin to pray, we do not immediately break off from our daily tasks and just start praying, but we must prepare ourselves. As the Prayerbook says: Stand in silence for a few moments until all your senses are calmed. Furthermore, as Holy Scripture tells us: Before offering a prayer, prepare yourself; and do not be like a man who tempts the Lord (Sirach 18:23). In addition to this, before entering into prayer, one must prepare himself not only inwardly, but also outwardly.

During prayer one should stand straight with ones eyes fixed on the icon or lowered to the ground, while, at the same time, the eyes of the soul, together with one's soulful aspirations, should be lifted up to God. This outward attitude of piety in prayer is both necessary and beneficial, for the disposition of the soul is in conformity with the disposition of the body.

One must also prepare himself for prayer in the soul, the essence of which consists of purging all vengeful thoughts from one's heart (Mark 11:25-26), in an awareness of one's own sinfulness and with the contrition and humility of soul that such awareness brings. For the only sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise (Ps. 50:17). As the Holy Fathers teach us, whosoever does not avow himself a sinner, his prayer shall not be pleasing to the Lord.

In his daily devotions, the Christian must adhere to a strict home rule of prayer. All the great ascetics had such a rule and kept to it diligently. The extent of our home rule of prayer is determined for each of us in accordance with our manner of life and the state of our spiritual and physical strength. It is better that we offer up a few prayers, made, however, in proper devotion, than that we say many prayers in haste, a danger difficult to avoid if we take upon ourselves too heavy a burden.

In the Prayerbook the Church provides all Christians with a rule of morning and evening prayers. This is a moderate rule and is of special help to those who are just learning to pray. As one fulfills his devotional obligations, one must not be thinking only of reciting all of the prescribed prayers, but must strive to arouse and strengthen in the soul the proper prayerful feelings and devotional attitude. One must strengthen himself against the temptations of sloth and must seek not to excuse himself from prayers on the grounds of lack of time. One

must not let off reading the prayers even when fatigued after a day of hard work, since such prayer, done with such great effort, is especially pleasing to God. One must be prepared to sacrifice some moments of bodily repose for the Lord, for by rushing through one's prayers in the anxiety for bodily rest, one will only deprive himself of both physical and spiritual repose.

An unhurried and devout recitation of the words will greatly help in keeping attention on the prayers. If one only has a little time for prayer, it would be far better to say fewer prayers, but with careful thought and attention, than to rush through many prayers without proper attention. But, one must also not allow the omitted prayers to go unheeded; these can be completed later when there is time. While saying a prayer, especially if reading it from a book, one must not hasten from one word to the next, lest there be a failure to grasp the truth of the text and to receive it into the heart.

The Holy Fathers recommend for greater spirituality of mind and heart the rule of executing bows, prostrations, and making the Sign of the Cross, during prayer, as an expression of heartfelt feelings of penitence, humility, deep piety, fear of God and devotion to Him, for when one's body is prostrate, the soul ascends heavenwards to God!

St. John Chrysostom on Prayers.

In his earthly ministry, St. John Chrysostom was well known as a superb homilist and for his efforts received the well-deserved title Golden-mouth. In his sermons, St. John was especially concerned for the spiritual and moral development of his flock and, as a result, he was especially interested in teaching them how to pray. As trees cannot live without water, so man's soul cannot live without prayerful contact with God, he taught. If you deprive yourself of prayer, you will do as though you had taken a fish out of water: as life is water for a fish, so is prayer for you.

To live in God means that one must always and everywhere be with God, and without prayer, such a union is impossible. Therefore the Holy Father, St. John, did not limit conversation with God in prayer to one set time of day or to one definite place. As he taught, one can say prolonged prayers while walking to the square, while walking about the streets. While sitting and working in a workshop, one can dedicate his spirit to God. One can say prolonged and fervent prayers, I say, both coming in and going out. While in public, St. John did not recommend that prayer be said with the lips, for the power of prayer lies not in words uttered by the lips, but by the heart. One can be heard without uttering any words. While walking about a square, one can pray in thought with great zeal, and while sitting with friends and doing any sort of thing, one can call upon God with a great cry (I mean an internal cry) without making it known to any of those present.

While not diminishing the role and importance of prayer set for definite hours, St. John, nonetheless, sees the time of prayer in much broader terms. We can obtain benefit from praying during our entire lives by devoting to it the greater part of our time. He even asked Christians to pray during the night, for he knew from experience what benefit such prayers bring. Prayers at night are often purer because the mind is more at ease and there are fewer worries. These prayers can be short and few, but, as St. John says, let us rise during the night. If you do not say many prayers, then say one with attentive concern and this is enough. I demand no more. If not in the middle of the night, at least towards morning.

Fasting also proves to be an invaluable aid to man in the achievement of perfect prayer. While fasting, as the Saint notes, a man does not doze off, does not talk a lot, neither does he yawn or grow weak in prayer as often happens to many when not fasting.

Speaking of the content of prayer, St. John advises first of all to thank God for everything. Receiving all gifts from God, a Christian not only must thank God for them, but must also ask them of Him. But, not all that is asked of God can bring benefit to man or can be good for him. Many are not heard because they ask for useless things, because they insist on the fulfillment of their own will and not God's, show indulgence towards their own weaknesses, and do not gather spiritual treasure. A man must also be taught by reason of his limitations and sinfulness that he cannot always correctly determine what will bring him what he asks for in prayer.

Whether we are heard or not when we pray, depends upon the following: 1) Are we worthy to receive? 2) Do we pray according to Divine Law? 3) Do we pray incessantly? 4) Do we avoid asking for worldly things? 5) Do we fulfill everything that is required on our part? and, finally, 6) Do we ask for beneficial things?

When these conditions are fulfilled, prayer acquires a truly ineffable power. It spiritualizes a man, renews him,

inspires him, and carries him away to heavenly pastures. As St. John affirms, in truth prayer is the light of the soul, the true knowledge of God and men, the healer of vices, the physician of diseases, the peace of the soul, the heavenly guide which does not revolve around the earth, but which leads up to Heaven! Therefore, the beneficial devotion of prayer is the breath of life.

Church Prayer.

Apart from private or home prayer, which is said in private, according to the words of the Savior, When 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 (Matt. 6:6), as a Christian one must also participate in church prayer, conducted during Divine Service, before the gathering of the faithful. The importance and significance of this type of prayer at the Divine Services is stressed in the Gospels. The Lord Himself, during His earthly life, used to visit the Temple of Jerusalem, as well as the synagogue, and pray therein. He often prayed, not only in solitude, but also before the people, and the first Christians were day by day, attending the temple together (Acts 2:46). Therefore our Holy Orthodox Church our Mother strictly commands her children to attend Divine Services, which is particularly essential to our salvation.

By its very significance church prayer is incomparably higher than prayer said at home, for as St. John Chrysostom tells us, a single Lord, have mercy uttered in church together with the congregation of believers, is worth a hundred prostrations during lonely home prayer. Why is this so? Because our Lord said: For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them (Matt. 18:20).

Some say that it is not essential to go to church to pray, that one can pray just as well at home. Beware, for you deceive only yourselves, warns St. John Chrysostom. You can, of course, pray at home, but you cannot there pray as you can in church, amidst so many people, speaking to God as with one voice. When you pray to the Lord alone you will not be heard as soon as when you pray together with your brethren, for together with them your prayer is great: you pray in unanimity, concord, a union of love and of prayer with the officiating priests. That is why the priests stand before us, that the prayers of the people, who are weak in spirit, may be united with their stronger prayers and thus be uplifted to Heaven. Such prayer has much greater power, is far more bold and effective than private prayer recited at home. During church prayer it is not only people who lift up their voices, but Angels, too, come to the Lord with prayer, and the Archangels also make their devotions to Him.

The Lord's Prayer.

When the Disciples asked Our Lord to teach them how to pray, he gave to them the words of the Lord's Prayer, which, in St. Matthew's Gospel is worded thus:

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from the Evil One.

The words Our Father Who art in heaven bear witness to the truth that God is the Father of all that exists. He not only created the universe, the entire world material and spiritual, visible and invisible but, being the Father, He loves His creation, cares for it, and guides it to the goals of goodness and perfection as He has planned. The Father is He Who calls us to life, Who loves His creation and cares for it. According to Bishop Nicholas of Ochrid, when I open my mouth and cry: 'Father!' love expels fear, and the earth seems to draw closer to Heaven....Egoism cries to Thee: 'My Father,' but love says: 'Our Father!'

The universe created by God is diverse, for, on the one hand, it is our world the world of nature and man and,

on the other hand, it is spiritual the world of the Angelic Host and the Church Triumphant-known biblically as Heaven. Therefore God is called the Father of our natural-human world and the Heavenly Father Who art in Heaven, that is, the Father of the spiritual world. Heaven also implies that purity and sanctity of divine life to which man is called, and which does not exist in him if he is entirely captivated by Sin. As Bishop Nicholas says: Heaven is very, very far for a man whose heart and soul have turned away from Thee...but Heaven is very, very close for a man whose soul is open and awaits Thy coming.

The Lord's Prayer consists of seven petitions, and these are things that we should ask of our Heavenly Father.

(1) Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

In the first petition, we should beseech our Heavenly Father that His name, which is always holy in itself, be hallowed, with His blessing, both in us and through us (Matt. 5:16). The Lord is the fullness and perfection of sanctity but, by glorifying Him, we sanctify ourselves and the surrounding world.

(2) Thy kingdom come.

In the second petition, we ask the Lord to help us and make us worthy, through His grace, of the Kingdom of Heaven which begins, as Christ Himself said, here on earth, within us. But it will only come to us in the fullness of its power when Sin ceases to hold undivided sway in us and righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17) abide in us.

(3) Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven.

In the third petition, we beseech God the Father that He not allow us to live out our earthly lives according to our sinful ways, but according to His will, which is always good, and acceptable, and perfect (Rom. 12:2). By obeying the will of God, we begin to establish the Kingdom of God within ourselves.

(4) Give us this day our daily bread;

In the fourth petition we beseech God to give us our daily bread everything we need in life, spiritual as well as physical. Our spiritual bread is the grace-bestowing Sacraments of the Church, instituted for our salvation. First and foremost, our daily bread means Holy Communion, of which the Lord said: I am the bread of life...and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh (John 6:48, 51). Material bread means all that is necessary for human existence, directly associated with the surrounding world. The words this day warn us against too many cares, and teaches us to ask only for what is most essential, because the Lord says: But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day (Matt. 6:33-34).

(5) And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

In the fifth petition the Lord teaches us how to ask forgiveness for our sins from the Heavenly Father, and how they may be forgiven. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also Who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father Who is in heaven forgive your trespasses (Mark 11:25-26). Man's sins are called trespasses against God in this petition and here we beg for God's mercy. This is our confession, asking for His forgiveness. Whoever seeks forgiveness should resort to the healing power of repentance and forgive his neighbor, the trespasser. When we forgive our trespassers, then God will also forgive us our sins (Mark 4:24).

(6) And lead us not into temptation,

In the sixth petition we ask of the Lord that He not allow us to fall into sin. We ask Him to preserve us from all that confuses our spirit and from temptations that are beyond our strength to reject. If we encounter on our earthly path trials and temptations sent for our purification from sin and spiritual fortification, then we ask God to send us His timely help. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (I Cor. 10:13). For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted (Heb. 2:18), St. Paul says, indicating the Helper and Accomplisher of our salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ.

(7) But deliver us from the Evil One.

In the seventh and final petition, we ask that we be protected against and saved from Evil and the Devil, who is a murderer from the beginning and works for our destruction. As St. Peter says, the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Remembering the Enemy of our salvation, the Lord urges us to be vigilant and sober of spirit, to have courage to accomplish a feat, teaches us to pray for one another, and by prayer to the Heavenly Father, to fortify ourselves spiritually and free ourselves from misfortune and disaster.

Thus the Lord's Prayer is the unfailing model and rule for all prayers. The Church uses it in all the sacramental orders, and in all the Divine Services. As St. John Chrysostom says, it is the crown of all prayers.

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