

On Prayer

Saint Athanasius the Great once said that he who prays is a theologian and a theologian is one who prays. We often imagine theologians as religious scholars, holding academic degrees from universities or theological schools. However, if we look at the word *theology*, we find two words: *theos* - God and *logos* - word or knowledge. Thus, a theologian is one who knows God. Such knowledge comes only through a genuine personal relationship with God. Prayer is the most important means for a human being to cultivate this relationship.

The word *pray* simply means *ask*. The Greek word for prayer, *προσεύχομαι*, also implies an interaction. Thus, prayer is a personal, communicative, interaction between us and God. In reality, the basis of any human relationship begins with a personal, communicative, interaction. How long would any relationship last, between colleagues, co-workers, friends, family members, or spouses, if such interaction became absent? Being that we were created according to God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:27), our relationship with Him can only be genuine if we pray. Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko further explains, "God knows the needs of His people. Man prays in order to unite his mind and heart with God. He prays in order that God's will would be done in his life. He prays so that whatever he needs from God would be given. He prays so that he would consciously and with full awareness express the fact that all that he is, has and does is dependent on God. It is man who needs to pray. It is not God who needs man's prayers."¹

Prayer occurs in solitude and corporately. Our Lord Jesus Christ instructs, "when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father, Who is, in the secret place." (Matt. 6:6) Likewise, He also says, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt. 18:20)

Christians are called to pray at all times, as the Psalmist writes: "As for me, unto God have I cried, and the Lord hearkened unto me. Evening, morning, and noonday will I tell of it and will declare it, and He will hear my voice." (Ps. 54:17) In the Book of Exodus, God commands Aaron to offer up incense every morning and every evening. In the Old Testament, we find that surrounding both the Tabernacle and later the Temple, along with the local synagogues, was a daily cycle of divine worship. Such is also the case in the Church. Monastic communities today maintain the most rigorous daily liturgical life. In the Russian Church, cathedrals are also expected to maintain a daily cycle of services. Such a practice is also common in parishes in Orthodox countries.

¹ <http://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/spirituality/prayer-fasting-and-alms-giving/prayer1>

Orthodox Christians should also keep a daily rule of personal prayer in their homes, as each home is its own little church and each family a small parish. Saint Theophan the Recluse writes, "The great men of prayer had a prayer rule and kept to it. Every time, they began prayer with the established prayers, and then, if self-initiated prayer came, they turned to it from reciting prayers. If *they* needed a prayer rule, then we need one even more! Without formal prayers, we would not know how to pray correctly at all. Without them, we would be completely without prayer."

Where do we find these "established prayers"? The first place we find them would be in an authorized Orthodox prayer book. However, the order of morning and evening prayer found in them is not uniform for the entire Orthodox Church. Even in the Russian tradition, there are differences between the order of prayers set forth in most standard editions and in those used by the Old Ritualists. Instead of a prayer book, one could use the *Horologion* and keep the Midnight Office as a morning rule and Small Compline as an evening rule. Of course, the most ancient collection of established prayers are the Psalms of David. Additionally, many devotional books have been published containing a variety of akathists and liturgical canons. In establishing one's rule of daily prayers, consistency is most important. The Church Fathers teach that it is better to have a shorter prayer rule, which we keep faithfully than a longer rule that is kept infrequently.

When one of His disciples asked "teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the "Our Father", which is the model of all Christian prayer. We pray the established prayers because they are God-inspired and they teach us how to pray. However, that does not mean that we cannot or should not pray to God with our own words. If we have a healthy prayer life, we will pray both established prayers and with our own words. Furthermore, our own prayers will be influenced by the established prayers.

Our prayers are not just thoughts or words, but physical acts such as making the sign of the cross, kissing holy objects, bowing from our waist, and making prostrations. Just as we communicate both verbally and bodily, so we pray. Saint Ephraim the Syrian says, "If your body is not praying when you are praying, you are not really praying." Prayer is not just an activity of the mind and heart, but of the whole person.

Along with a daily rule of prayer, we should pray throughout the day. The Holy Apostle Paul tells us to "pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) This has been most commonly achieved through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner."

For what do we pray? From the Holy Scriptures and the Sacred Tradition of the Orthodox Church, we find three types of prayer: 1. praise and thanksgiving, 2. supplication, 3. and penitence. We praise God simply for being God. We give thanks to God for all the blessings He has bestowed upon us. We ask God for what we need and we intercede for the needs of others, that these intentions be accomplished according to His will. We confess our sins and repent of them before God, asking His forgiveness and that we may live our lives according to His commandments.

Prayer is not magic. It is blasphemous to pray for those things, which contradict the Divine commandments. Thus, if we are angry with somebody, we do not pray that God brings them misfortune or harm. We must never pray for success in accomplishing something that is sinful. Often at sporting events, we witness people praying for their team's victory. Such prayer is ridiculous as victory in a superfluous game has no spiritual benefit and may even lead the victor into pride. However, in any of life's situations, we should pray that all things be accomplished according to God's will, for His glory, and our salvation. In that spirit, God will always answer our prayers, even if we do not receive the result that we desire.

Saint Theophan the Recluse writes that prayer is "the primary work of the moral and religious life." Furthermore, "our prayer reflects our attitude to God, and our attitude to God is reflected in prayer."² While it is true that any person can pray, if we are to deepen our prayer life, we must strive to live according to God's commandments. Furthermore, prayer, like any other important task, requires preparation. Our Lord taught, "whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (Mark 11:25). Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov comments that "the first preparation (for prayer) consists in rejecting resentment and condemnation of our neighbors... Further preparation consists in the rejection of cares by the power of faith in God and by the power of obedience and surrender to the will of God; also a realization of one's sinfulness and the resultant contrition and humility of spirit."³

A common temptation that arises as we pray are mental images and thoughts. Some religious and spiritual traditions encourage using the imagination during prayer, however, the Church Fathers reject such a practice. Saint John of the Ladder writes, "the beginning of prayer consists in banishing by a single thought the thoughts that assault

² *The Art of Prayer*, p. 61.

³ *The Arena*, part I, ch. 18, p. 67-8.

us at the very moment that they appear.”⁴ Even if these thoughts or memories are of good and pleasant things, they are to be rejected as they distract us from prayer. Saint John Cassian writes that for prayer to be fervent and pure, “there must be a complete removal of all concerns for bodily things. Then not just the worry but even the memory of any business or worldly affair must be banished from within ourselves... Because of the workings of memory whatever has preoccupied our mind before the time for prayer must of necessity intrude upon our actual prayers. Therefore in advance of prayer we must strive to dispose ourselves as we would wish to be during prayer.”⁵

We prepare for prayer through silence. The psalmist instructs, “be still, and know that I am God.” (Ps. 45:11) Saint John of the Ladder calls silence the “mother of prayer.”⁶ Before we pray our morning and evening prayers, we should take a few minutes to just be quiet. Likewise, when we come to the church for the divine services, we should strive to arrive a few minutes before the service begins so that we may have some silence.

Human beings have very few natural instincts. Thus, almost every ability we possess has been taught to us. In our modern society, education is the work of youth. In the Church, we are all God’s children and therefore in need of instruction. This reality should bring us great joy, because, as Orthodox Christians, we need not (and cannot) figure out the spiritual life on our own. Men and women experienced in prayer can guide us to enrich our relationship with God. The best place to find such people are in the monastic communities. Pilgrimage remains a venerable custom for Orthodox Christians and we should take the opportunity to visit a monastery, even if we are not called to the monastic life. If our parish is a school of prayer, the monastery is a university of prayer. We go to the monastery and glimpse into their life, returning home spiritually renewed.

Along with the Holy Scriptures, we have many works on prayer, written throughout the centuries and available to us. We should read these books and try to realistically put their counsel into practice, with guidance from our spiritual father or father confessor. Most importantly, our prayers must be sincere. “Both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase,” writes Saint John of the Ladder.⁷

⁴ *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 28:19, p. 214.

⁵ *Conferences*, 9:3, p. 102.

⁶ *The Ladder*, step 11:3, p. 92

⁷ *ibid.*, step 28:5, p. 213.

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