

Prayer

the Breath of the Soul

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What is prayer?

Food and rest are essential to sustain human life; knowledge, art, and culture in general enrich the mental capabilities of men, but only prayer reveals and expands our spiritual faculties.

God loves all His creations, and in particular He loves each of us since He is our Heavenly Father. As it is natural for children to want to see and converse with their parents, so it should also be natural and pleasant for us to converse with our Heavenly Father and to want to be in spiritual communion with Him. This conversation with God is called prayer. The soul, while uniting with God in prayer, simultaneously is united with the whole spiritual world — with the angels and saints. According to Saint John of Kronstadt, “Prayer is a golden bond of the Christian — a stranger and wanderer on earth — with the spiritual world of which he is a part, and even more so with God, the source of life.”

Prayer is frequently accompanied by devout words and other outward signs of piety: the sign of the Cross, kneeling, prostration, etc. But prayer can also be offered without words, and without other external manifestations. This is the inner or hidden prayer of a pious soul, which is familiar through experience to many earnest Christians.

Types of prayer

During prayer a Christian pours out his soul before God: he glorifies Him for His great perfection, thanks Him for His mercy and goodness, and makes requests for his needs. Hence there are three main forms of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, and petition.

Praise (*Doxology*) — is the most perfect and selfless type of prayer. The more pure and blameless a person is, the more the perfection of God is reflected in him, and through this he involuntarily calls forth happy words of praise and glory. Thus the angels in the heavens unceasingly glorify God in hymns. “Praise,” says Bishop Theophan the Recluse, “is not an indifferent contemplation of God's attributes, but a living experience of them, full of joy and exaltation.”

Thanksgiving is sent up to God for all the good things received from Him. It arises naturally in a grateful and sensitive soul. God is merciful to all of us, but not many of us remember to thank Him. Out of the ten lepers healed by our Savior, only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank Him (Luke 17:12-17).

The most widespread form of prayer is *petition*, offered in acknowledgment of our weaknesses, infirmities, and lack of experience. Because of sins and passions, our souls become weak and sick. Therefore, it is essential in prayer to ask God to forgive us and help us to overcome our faults. Sometimes requests are made because of an impending danger hanging over us, a need, etc. Petition in prayer is inevitable in view of our weakness and is readily accepted by the all-merciful Lord (Matt. 7:7; John 16:23). But if our prayer has only a predominant character of request, if the voice of praise and thanksgiving is almost unheard, this indicates poor development of our spiritual life.

Often these various forms of prayer become combined in one. A person begs the Lord about his needs and simultaneously praises Him for His greatness and goodness and thanks Him for being able to fearlessly address Him as to his merciful Father. The most festive hymns of praise in the Church frequently turn into compounded petitions (“Glory to God in the highest,” “We praise Thee, O God”), and sometimes the opposite: tearful prayers to God for help resolve into a sublime harmony of grateful thanks and praise. Many Psalms reflect this type, for example, Psalms 146, 148, and others.

How we should pray

When praying, it is important to turn away from our usual cares and preoccupations, **collect our scattered thoughts**, as if closing the door of the soul against all that is worldly, and direct all our attention towards God.

Placing oneself before the face of God and bringing to mind His greatness, one who prays must necessarily recognize his **unworthiness** and spiritual poverty. “While praying one should imagine all creation as nothing compared to God, and only God as everything” (St. John of Kronstadt). An edifying example of the proper attitude of prayer was given by our Savior in the parable regarding the publican who was justified by God for his humility (Luke 18:1-14).

Christian humility does not cause depression or hopelessness. On the contrary, it is linked with firm faith in the goodness and omnipotence of the Heavenly Father. Only prayer of faith is accepted by God, as we read in the Gospel: “*Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them*” (Mark 11:24). Warmed by faith, a Christian's prayer is very powerful. The Christian remembers the command of Jesus Christ that it is necessary to pray always and not lose heart (Luke 18:1), and His promise: “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you*” (Matt. 7:7).

The Gospel has many examples of the great power of prayer: the Canaanite woman who begged the Lord to heal her daughter (Matt. 15:21-28), the defenseless widow who persuaded the unjust judge to take her side (Luke 18:5-8 and others). One should not despair if his prayer is not answered immediately: this is a test, not a refusal. “This is why the Lord said ‘knock,’ to show that if He does not open the doors of His mercy immediately, we should nevertheless remain waiting with the light of hope” (St. John Chrysostom). The true Christian will continue his prayer with uninterrupted effort until he convinces the Lord, and until he calls down upon himself His mercy,

like the Old Testament patriarch Jacob who said to the stranger wrestling with him, *"I will not let You go unless You bless me!"* (Gen. 32:26) and indeed he received God's blessing.

Because the Lord is our Heavenly Father, we are all brothers. He will answer our prayer only when we have a true, brotherly, benevolent relationship with each other, when we have vanquished all strife and enmity and have shrouded all offenses with forgiveness and made peace with everyone. *"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).

What to ask for?

Regarding how to pray, St. Isaac the Syrian writes: "Don't be thoughtless in your petitions, in order not to offend God by your foolishness. But rather be wise, to become worthy of the greatest gifts. Ask for a treasure from Him Who is a stranger to stinginess and you will receive a treasure from Him in accordance with the reasonableness of your request. Solomon asked for wisdom and together with it he received an earthly kingdom because he made a wise request before the Great King. Eliseus asked for a twofold portion of grace of the Holy Spirit and his request was not refused. To ask for trifles from the King insults his dignity."

The greatest teacher of prayer is our Savior. Prayer accompanies all the important events of His earthly life. The Lord prayed, receiving baptism from John (Luke 3:21). He spent the whole night praying before He chose the Apostles (Luke 6:12). He prayed during the Transfiguration (Luke 22:41). He prayed on the Cross. The very last word before His death was a prayer (Luke 23:46).

Being impressed by the inspiring image of the praying Savior, one of His disciples turned to Him with the request: *"Lord, teach us to pray"* (Luke 11:1). And in answer to this Jesus Christ gave the prayer, short in form, but rich in content, that wonderful, incomparable prayer which to this day unifies the whole Christian world, the "Our Father," the Lord's Prayer.

This prayer teaches us about what and in what order to pray. Having turned to God, *"Our Father,"* we acknowledge ourselves to be His children, and in relation to each other, brothers, and, therefore, we pray not only for ourselves but for all people. With the petition *"Hallowed be Thy name,"* we ask that His name might be holy for all people, that everyone might glorify the name of God by their words and deeds. *"Thy Kingdom come."* The kingdom of God begins within the believer, when the grace of God, having filled him, cleanses and transfigures his inner world. Simultaneously, grace unites everyone, people and angels, into one great spiritual family called the Kingdom of God or the Church. For the good to be spread among people, one should ask: *"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven;"* that is, that everything in the world should be done according to the all-good, all-wise will of God, and that people should as diligently fulfill the will of God on the earth as the angels do it in heaven.

"Give us this day our daily bread;" give us today all that is necessary for our daily sustenance. What will happen to us tomorrow we don't know; we need only our *"daily bread,"* i.e., every day that which is necessary to sustain our existence. *"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."* These words are explained by St. Luke who states them thus: *"And forgive us our sins"*

(Luke 11:4) — our sins become our debts because in sinning we fail in our duty and become debtors before God and man. This petition with special emphasis admonishes us to forgive our neighbor for all offenses. Having refused to forgive others, we dare not ask God to forgive us our sins and say the words of the Lord's Prayer. "*And lead us not into temptation*" — a test of our moral powers by means of an inclination towards some sinful act. Here we ask God to protect us from falling into sin if such a test is necessary. "*But deliver us from the evil one*" — from every evil and the cause of evil, the devil. The prayer finishes with the assurance of fulfillment of our request, for to God belongs an eternal kingdom, power, and glory.

Thus the Lord's Prayer, unifying within itself all for which it is necessary to pray, teaches us to place in proper order all our personal desires and necessities. First we must ask for the highest good — for **God's glory**, for the spreading of good among people and the salvation of our souls, and only then we make requests for our daily needs. In relation to our requests "Let us not teach Him how He should help us," says St. John Chrysostom. "If we discuss our business with those who defend us before the judges, and leave the way of defense up to them, all the more should we act likewise in relation to God. He knows well enough what is beneficial to you." Besides this, we should completely deliver ourselves to the Lord's will: Thy will be done! An example of such a prayer has been left to us by the Savior Himself. In the garden of Gethsemane He prayed: "*O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me,*" and immediately added: "*Nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt*" (Matt. 26:39).

When to pray?

The apostle Paul teaches us: "*Pray without ceasing*" (1 Thess. 5:17). It is necessary to pray during those bright, exalted moments when the soul experiences a visitation from above and soars towards heaven and feels a need for prayer. It is necessary as well to pray at all other times assigned for prayer (in the mornings and evenings) even though we are not in the mood to pray. Otherwise, the ability to pray will be lost, just as an old iron key rusts when it is not used. For our soul to preserve a pious freshness, it is necessary to set as a goal to pray regularly, despite the fact that we might or might not be inclined to. Orthodox Christians pray daily in the morning, after awakening, and in the evening before going to bed. We should also pray at the beginning and the end of every important work. In this respect a prayer book is a necessary companion.

Besides private prayer at home, there is another form of communal prayer, performed in church. Concerning this prayer the Lord said: "*Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matt. 18:20). Since apostolic times the most essential public prayer has been the Liturgy, performed in churches on Sundays, in which the believers with one heart praise God. The public worship carries with it a great spiritual power.

The fruits of prayer

Prayer, like a farmer, plows the field of our heart and makes it capable of receiving heavenly blessings and bringing forth fruits of virtues and perfection. Prayer attracts into our hearts the **grace of the Holy Spirit**, thus strengthening our faith, hope, and love. It illuminates our minds,

directs our will to do good, consoles the heart in sorrow and suffering, and, in general, gives us everything that serves our true welfare.

Prayer, according to the teaching of the Holy Fathers, is “the breath of the soul” and is a great blessing to us all. The ability to pray with due concentration and with the whole heart, or to have the gift of prayer, is one of the most precious spiritual gifts. The merciful God endows a person with this ability as a reward for his diligence in prayer.

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Communion with God in prayer

Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky

“Near art Thou, O Lord” (Psalm 118:153).

God is with us everywhere. If we were not so distracted, we would have a constant awareness of God's presence — whether we were at home, on the street, in the field, in the forest, on the sea, underground; whether we were in freedom or in captivity — everywhere.

Always to be with God in one's thoughts — this is to be in a state of constant prayer. But we are distracted by our daily concerns. Knowing that to pray we must remove ourselves at least somewhat from the day's tumult of activities, we set aside some time in the morning and evening. Usually we pray alone, by ourselves, as the Savior taught; *“When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is, in secret”* (Matt. 6:6). But our Lord also said something else: *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst”* (Matt. 18:20). And in his High-priestly prayer to His Father, He uttered these holy words concerning those who believe in Him: *“That they may be one, even as We are One”* (John 17:22).

We Orthodox Christians comprise the one Body of Christ's Church, the one House of God, as it is written in the Scripture: *“Christ as a Son over His own House, Whose House are we”* (Heb. 3:6). Here is another world, different from the vain world that surrounds us. Here is a holy world, God's inheritance. Here is — a world of prayer. And this expresses its very essence: life in this special world is a life of prayer — prayer as communion with God, as glorification of God. And more — through prayer we are able to have communion with the entire world of heaven: with the angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs, hierarchs, the righteous ones, and a particularly joyous communion with the Most Holy Virgin, the Theotokos. Here is the prayer which we Christians who are still citizens of earth offer for one another. Here we also have our prayer for those close to us, who have departed this life, and here is our appeal to the saints that they, too, raise their prayers on behalf of our beloved ones. This, then, is the **fullness** of prayer.

Communion with God is prayer. In its fullness prayer is most completely achieved in the Orthodox temple. The Church is a world of prayer, and the place of prayer — its fullness — is the temple. Therefore the Orthodox temple itself is called a **church**. Here is the catholicity, the com

prehensivity, the universality of the Church, as it was expressed by the holy Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews: *“Ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are witnesses in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect”* (Heb. 12:22-23).

Man was created to glorify God and to rejoice in union with his Creator. With the fall of Adam, the law of sin took root in the human race, despoiling the close relationship man enjoyed with God in Paradise. But through God's infinite love, man was given the opportunity to regain harmony of soul and restore the bond with his Creator. This is most readily attained through the Church which guides man in the way of repentance and sets him on the path of true faith, teaching him to 'rightly glorify' God — which is the very meaning of the word “orthodox.” And how do we glorify God?

The general principle of Orthodox worship is expressed in the words of the Psalm: *“Let every breath and all creation praise The Lord.”* All of nature, in and of itself, glorifies the Lord. For this reason, in our churches various elements of nature — incense, blessed water, blessed oil, wax candles, palm branches — all serve to the glory of God, and to the fullness thereof.

If nature offers itself in praise of its Creator, how much more should man, the crown of creation, give glory to God. In like manner, therefore, we join our physical bodies in the act of worship — whether in standing, kneeling or making prostrations — in fulfillment of the Apostle's injunction: *“Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service”* (Rom. 12:1).

How often we hear the familiar call of King David's Psalm: *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name”* ... 'All that is within me' — of course, all the best and most noble energies, abilities, talents — God's gifts — are called to glorify the Lord. Through love for God expressed in words of prayer, homilies, chants, painting, architecture ... using everything that contributes to the magnificence of the temple and its Divine services, we strive to thank the Lord for those gifts He has bestowed on us. Of course, not every art form lends itself to this purpose. Instrumental music, for example, tends sooner to divert our attention from feelings of reverence and awe than to inspire them. And statues, aside from their ancient association with pagan worship, are ill-suited — because of their earthly solidity or form — to represent the life of the spirit, to direct our gaze heavenward. Moreover, the soul and the spirit are expressed primarily through the eyes which, in sculpture, are left empty.

Above all, it is through prayer that we glorify our Creator. Prayer is an expression of love towards God and towards our neighbor. Prayer is that bond of love which unites the Church on earth with the Church in heaven. Let us strive, then, to enter more deeply into the world of prayer found in the holy Orthodox Church, to develop a constant awareness of God's presence, and to recover that blissful state experienced by Adam in Paradise, a state of communion with God, for which we were created.

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