

Prayer Primer

by Father Thomas Hopko

Prayer is a specific activity that must be a part of a person's life. It is, as the catechism says, "a lifting of the mind and heart to God." It is a talking with God, and a listening to Him. It is communion with God in the most direct, experiential way.

Christians must pray. We cannot substitute anything in the place of prayer. We cannot think that prayer is "anything good that we do" in the sense of replacing the actual act of prayer about which Christ spoke when He said: "When you pray, go into your room and close the door, and pray in secret..." Although everything good done by man glorifies God, the specific activity of prayer must be retained and perfected. "If you are not successful in your prayer, do not expect success in anything. Prayer is the root of all." (Bishop Theophan)

When we Christians pray, we must be consciously aware of the fact that our prayer goes on "within God"; that in prayer we are already somehow "inside of God". We are not lonely, isolated creatures attempting by our prayer to call out in solitude across and unpassable abyss to a God "way out there". We are in God. The Holy Spirit is in us, making us Children of God in Christ, enabling us to call the Transcendent, All-Holy God, "our Father".

"For you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you... for all who are led by the Spirit are sons of God... when we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God... for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words..." (**Romans 8**).

Prayer is not merely the recitation of words. Prayer may begin by reading or saying the words of prayers. But a mere reading or saying of words, without feeling or attention, is not prayer. It is not even poor prayer. It is not prayer at all.

Prayer is learned only by praying. No one can teach another to pray. But a good way to begin to pray is to use the prayers of the prayer book. This is so because, since "we do not know how to pray", the Holy Spirit reveals in the prayers of [the Son and] the saints the proper form and content of prayer. In the prayers of the books - especially the **Lord's Prayer** - we not only pray truly by putting ourselves into the words of the prayers, but we also learn what we must pray.

The catechism classifies prayer in three types: *asking* [for ourselves in *petition* and for others in *intercession*], *thanking*, and *praising*. A fourth category can [also] be added: the prayer of *questioning* or complaining to God. To learn to come to God in every situation, and with each of the four categories operating all the time, is a very important achievement: the achievement of a prayerful life.

What may we ask for in prayer? For everything good; and nothing good is too small. For what should we thank [Him]? For everything. For what should we praise [Him]? For everything. About what may we question? About all things not understood. About what may we lament and complain? About all that is frustrating, confusing, and tragic in our lives. But in all things: thanksgiving and praise, for this is the essence of faith. And in all things: *"Thy will be done."*

Prayer must be private, personal, and secret. It cannot be limited just to the liturgy ["common work" or services] of the Church. Strictly speaking, the liturgy of the Church is not merely a form of personal prayer, a form done corporately and openly, together with others. Liturgy is more than a prayer. It is gathering, being together, singing,

celebrating, processing, announcing, teaching, listening, interceding, remembering, offering, receiving, having communion with God and each other, being sent into the world with an experience of something to be witnessed to... Its efficacy depends upon our personal prayer done alone in secret. the liturgy cannot be our only prayer. If it is, we should seriously question its meaning and power for us.

How can we begin to pray? Just by beginning. But how to begin, with what sort of methods? Everyone's way will be different, but the saints give two absolute rules: be brief, and be regular. These are the pillars of prayer. *Brevity* to ensure humility, to discourage despair, and to enable us to do what can reasonable be done. And *regularity* to build the rhythm of prayer into the rhythm of life as an unchanging element of our existence. It is a million times more effective and pleasing to God to have a short rule of prayer rigidly kept at regular times than to "do a lot" just any old time, whenever we happen to do it.

Suppose we cannot - or will not - be regular in prayer, not even with the shortest of rules? Is everything lost? Not at all. In this case we are told by our saints to take a small prayer or just a few words (like the **Jesus Prayer**, or "Lord, have mercy", or a line from a Psalm) and to say it as often as we can, whenever or wherever we happen to be. Anyone can do this, as it requires nothing but to do it, and it can lead us to union with God.

"Remembrance of God" is the purpose of prayer - to "walk in His presence", to "stand before His Face", to be conscious of His Spirit in us making us His children. Remembrance of God is the way to keeping His commandments, and doing His commandments is our salvation and life.

What about sweet feelings, consolations, comforts, visions, images, sentiments, emotions, graces of special sort...? Forget them all! They are not the purpose of prayer, not the purpose of Christian faith. If God wants to give them to us, we will get them. But we must not seek them or look for them. We must reject and doubt them if we think that we have them. This is the doctrine of the Orthodox saints. For faithful prayer has one singular goal: to allow us to accomplish God's will.

Prayer is in no way separated from good works and social action. When prayer is perfect and we see the Face of God in communion with Him in the depths of the Trinity, He shows us two things: He shows us Christ's Cross and our brother. True prayer teaches us, as the Elder Silouan of Mount Athos has said, that "our brother is our life." There is no touching God, no genuine prayer, which does not directly result for the one who prays in the sufferings of Christ for the love of creation.

If we are not willing to do the commandments of Christ and to take radical decisions and actions toward God, ourselves, others, and the very world we live in, then we had better not even begin to pray. For in prayer, God will push us to do things, things our natural man might not want to do. To dare pray (as one Church father put it) and not to do what prayer will demand of us is to court insanity. If we are not ready to "put up" in our life, we had better "shut up" in our prayer. "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (**Hebrews 10:31**).

"Young man, do not forget to say your prayers. If your prayer is sincere, there will be every time you pray a new feeling containing an idea in it, an idea that you did not know before, which will give you courage. Then you will understand that prayer is an education..." (Dostoevsky). Prayer is a teacher. By praying, we are taught of God by God Himself. And one of the things that we learn is itself how to pray.

"O Lord, teach me to pray: pray Thou Thyself in me..." (Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow).

"Prayer Primer" is reprinted with permission from The Orthodox Educator, Spring 1982, pp.22-24. This article was originally titled, "15 Notes on Prayer".