
Prayer in Eastern Orthodox Spirituality

Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition teach us that prayer is the most natural thing a person can do, it is what we are created for. In Paradise Adam and God converse frequently. It is only after the Fall that we hide from God and choose not to speak openly with Him. Human beings were made for prayer, not because God needs us to pray to Him, but because we need to connect with Him who made us, saved us from sin and death, and shows His sanctifying grace upon us.

What is prayer?

In Orthodox Christian thought, prayer is understood as an intimate encounter with God. When we pray, we meet with God in our hearts, in the sanctuary of all our thoughts, motivations, dreams, emotions and concerns. This is a place where we can share our inner selves with no other human person as completely as we can share ourselves with the Lord. To enter into this place with God, full of faith and love, is to feel His presence in our lives in the most profound and life-giving of ways. In this place in our hearts, we no longer perceive God as being "out there", looking down on us. Rather, we sense His presence inside us, stirring our hearts, guiding our actions, enlightening our minds.

In Orthodox spirituality, we recognize two types of prayer: liturgical (i.e., worship); and personal (i.e. private). In Orthodox thought, both of these types of prayer are corporate acts; that is, they are carried out as a single body -- the body of Christ. This point is obvious in liturgical prayer, when a group of brothers and sisters in the faith are gathered together in one place. However, even when one prays in private, one is joining his or her voice to the countless other Orthodox Christians throughout the world who are also lifting their hearts to God in prayer at that time. In other words, whether we are praying with others or by

ourselves, we never pray "alone".

Liturgy and private prayer are interdependent. One cannot limit one's prayer life to private devotions, because every human has an innate need for community, a need to belong. Our liturgical prayer also gives us the order and structure by which we live out our spiritual lives. At the same time, however, our liturgical prayer is truly vibrant and life-giving only when those present are "people of prayer" outside the service as well.

Our corporate worship is very intricate, having a specific structure, tempo and lay-out. On the other hand, our private prayer can be much more simple and "customized" to each personal situation. When developing a "rule of prayer", under the guidance of a spiritual father, one encounters as many possibilities of structure, length, and content as there are people at prayer.

When building a personal rule of prayer, we need to remember that prayers do not have to be long or complicated to be effective. Some of the most effective prayers in the history of the Church have been sentences of only a few words. The Thief on the Cross merely had to say, "Remember me, Lord, in Your Kingdom", to hear Jesus' promise, "today you shall be with me in Paradise". It is far better to spend five minutes each day in private devotions, than to "bank" the time and take thirty five minutes once per week.

Written and extemporaneous prayer

The Orthodox Christian approach to written and extemporaneous prayers is one of balance. Our written prayers are truly a treasury of Christian spiritual insight, nurture and guidance. However, the Orthodox would never say that one can only use prayers from a prayer book. Most Orthodox prayer books instruct after opening with the written prayers, we also take time to address God in our own words. Rather

than develop a slavish dependence on these prayers, they should be understood more as a "blueprint" for prayer. Written prayers help us formulate our own prayers in an Orthodox "voice".

The shape of prayer

In Orthodox spirituality, we can find a general "superstructure" governing both the content of prayers and the times when one should pray. Ancient Christian sources instruct Christians to pray three times a day: in the morning, at mid-day and in the evening. In this way we keep God on our minds and hearts throughout the day -- upon waking up, in the midst of our daily tasks and upon retiring for the night. This regularity is very important because, at its core, a life or prayer is a life lived in the constant remembrance of God.

Our prayers should include the following four "movements", in this order: 1) glorification; 2) thanksgiving; 3) confession of sins, and 4) supplication/entreaty. The primary work of prayer is to glorify God and thank Him for His great blessings (1 & 2); then, after asking His forgiveness for when we fall short of our great calling to holiness (3), we ask God through His mercy to grant our petitions for others and for ourselves (4). This structure keeps God in His rightful place as the Lord and Savior of our lives. It also lets us stay mindful of the fact that God's blessing are giving to us not because of who we are but in spite of our imperfections and faults. And finally, this structure helps us avoid looking upon Him as a spiritual "bell boy" who is there merely to answer our requests.

Prayer as silence

Prayer is a two-way interaction. As we all know, its hard to say we have "interacted" with someone, if one party has monopolized the time without giving the other party the chance to give

any input. In order for prayer to be truly life-giving, it must not only involve talking, but must also involve listening.

One way that we "listen" in prayer is through the reflective reading of the Holy Scriptures and other edifying works from our Holy Tradition. In our private devotions, we select a passage to read and after reading it over, take some time to reflect upon it, remaining open to specific passages that seem to "speak" to us. Some people will take this one step further and journal their reflections for future discussion with their spiritual father.

The second means through which listening to God in prayer is through silence. The Saints instruct us that as we say our prayers, we should take time to stop and sit quietly, just being present to God. The monastic fathers and mothers of our Church liken prayer to a flying bird. When a bird is in the air, it beats its wings until it has reached a certain height; at that point, it stops beating its wings and glides along. The words of our prayers are our spiritual wings. There will come a point while praying where words are no longer necessary, we can stop talking and glide in silence, allowing God's presence keep us aloft.

Regardless of content or form, all prayers must be said with the conviction that it is God's will that ultimately governs all things. The Saints instruct us not to say, for example, "Lord, help me get this job", but rather, "Lord, if it is Your will, may I get this job." Every prayer must be founded upon the conviction: "In all things, Lord, Thy will be done." This, difficult though it may be, is our fundamental belief as we approach God in prayer; it asserts ultimate trust in His Lordship in our lives.

A Call to Prayer

Sometimes we think that if we are not feeling at peace in our spiritual life, that we are in some way not "worthy" to approach God in prayer. Regardless of how we feel, any time is an appropriate time for us to pray. We start from where we are, emotionally and spiritually. We approach God as we are, trusting that He is ready, willing and able to overlook our faults, doubts and wounds and to lift us above them.

At the same time, we must take care never to assume that we are doing "good enough" in our lives, that we may excuse ourselves from prayer. Christ did not call us to being "good enough"; He called us to be perfect. The struggle for holiness is a life-long endeavor. It is an endeavor that can be accomplished only with, and through God — the God that we encounter intimately through prayer.

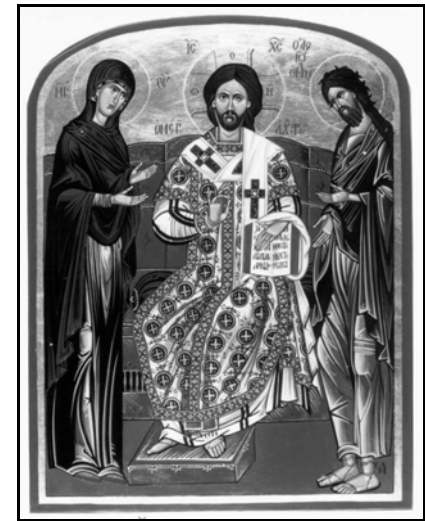
In the Divine Liturgy, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, we hear the invitations "Let us lift up our hearts", and "Let us give thanks to the Lord". These two calls truly sum up the center of human existence. When we lift up our hearts to God in glory, thanksgiving, confession, and intercession we are being as human as we possibly can be. And in doing so, the image of Him who is the maker, saviour and sanctifier of our lives shines within us, and through us into the world.

"Prayer is the test of everything; prayer is also the source of everything; prayer is the driving force of everything; prayer is also the director of everything. If prayer is right, everything is right. For prayer will not allow anything to go wrong."

— St. Theophan the Recluse

Prayer

The Cornerstone of Orthodox Christian Spirituality



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