

# Developing Prayer in the Byzantine Tradition

A Reflection given on February 24, 2016

## **I. Introduction:**

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Our Lord, in His Sermon on the Mount (in St. Matthew Chp. 6), directs us to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Each year the Great Fast offers us an opportunity to practice them with renewed commitment and devotion. Tonight's talk will focus on "Developing Our Prayer in the Byzantine Tradition." The question is, "How do we make prayer a part of daily lives and not just something we do once a week on Sunday?" St. Paul tells us we are to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). My talk will focus on the question of the practical application of prayer in our daily lives and how we can develop a daily practice of prayer, either on our own or with our families.

## **II. The Importance Prayer:**

The first question we might ask is, "WHY should we pray? For Christians, prayer is life. Vasili Rozanov once said, "There is no life without prayer. Without prayer, there is only madness and horror. The soul of [Orthodox, Eastern Christianity] consists in the gift of prayer." Our goal in life as Christians is to be in constant and ongoing communion with the All-Holy Trinity and prayer is the essential means of doing this. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of prayer throughout his Epistles. To the Church in Rome he writes "Be steadfast in prayer" (12:12). To the Church in Ephesus he states "Pray always" (6:18). To the Church of Colossae he encourages "continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it -with thanksgiving" (4:2). To the Church of Thessalonica he directs, "night and day be praying..." (3:10), and the same epistle he concludes "pray without ceasing" (5:17).

Prayer directs our whole life to God. Prayer, like fasting, requires sincere faith in God and a deep desire to draw close to Him. As St. James states in his epistle, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (4:8). And St. Paul adds "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He exists, and... is a rewarder of those who... seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Whereas fasting is a sacrifice of something good we enjoy, like meat, dairy or desserts, prayer is a sacrifice to God of something else we hold dear: our time. It's taking time out of our busy lives, in the mornings and evenings to say to God, "YOU are more important than any other thing in my life." And God is pleased with such sacrifices. As St. Isaac of Syria states, "Thirst after Jesus, and He will satisfy you with His love." And St. Cyril of Jerusalem adds, "Take courage, toil and strive zealously, for nothing will be lost. Every prayer you make, every Psalm you sing, is recorded..."

### III. Liturgical Prayer

The highest prayer we have together as Christians is the Divine Liturgy which is a representation of and participation in the eternal "once for all" self-offering of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world (Heb. 6:10, 7:27, 9:12 & 10:10). Whereas some Christians go to Church for what they get out of it, in our Tradition the opposite is true, we go to Church for what we can put into it. We come to offer God our highest praise.

In Byzantine Tradition our worship is holistic; we worship God in body and spirit. We do this through the prayers we say, the songs we sing with our voices, the bows and prostrations we make, and the many signs of the Cross that we bless ourselves with. As St. Paul said we glorify God in our bodies and our spirits (cf. 1 Cor 6:20). The more we offer God our all, the more we receive from Him His Divine energy and grace. We receive this especially through the reception of Christ's Body and Blood. As we pray in the Liturgy of St. Basil, "Receiving them worthily, may we have Christ living in our hearts and become temples of your Holy Spirit."

Next, we have the Canonical Hours of Prayer in Byzantine Tradition. The practice of prayers at certain times of the day came from Jewish tradition where prayers were recited at set times of the day. As the Psalmist prayed, "Seven times a day I pray to you" (Ps 118:164). One example of this is in the Book of Acts where Peter and John went to the temple at the 9th hour of prayer (cf. Acts 3:1). This practice was passed down in the Church from the Apostles and over the centuries different practices developed in different areas. "As monasticism spread, the practice of specified prayer hours developed and become more standardized" (Wikipedia).

As one website explains, "In the Eastern tradition, the Church's day begins at evening, and its services run from sunset to sunset: [As it states in the Book of Genesis:] 'Thus evening came, and morning followed: the first day.' (Gen 1:5). Each day, the following services are celebrated in monasteries and churches of the Byzantine liturgical tradition around the world (MCI website):

- **Vespers** is the evening prayer of the Church which begins the liturgical day. We thank God for the blessing of creation, especially for the gift of light both [physical] and spiritual, and ask for pardon for our sins and offenses, and protection throughout the night.
- **Compline** is a communal prayer before bedtime.
- **Midnight Office** is a nocturnal vigil, in which we meditate upon the unexpected coming of Christ.
- **Matins** is the morning prayer of the Church, an office of supplication, repentance and praise.
- **First, Third, Sixth and Ninth Hours**, are celebrated respectively at 6am, 9am, 12 pm (noon) and 3pm in the afternoon.
- **Typika**, a service of psalms and prayers appointed for the Liturgy of the day, which is held when the Divine Liturgy is not celebrated (Ex., if no priest...).

The website adds: "Together, these services are called **the Divine Praises [or Canonical Hours]**. They serve to sanctify the day, keep the believer's mind attentive to God's presence, and provide us with regular moments of prayer."

Behind this idea of Canonical Hours is belief in the sanctification of time. All of our time is a gift from God. Out of sheer gratitude, we should consecrate some of our time and offer it back to Him.

Some of these Canonical Prayer Hours are very simple and easy to pray (like the lesser hours – the 1st, 3rd, 6th and 9th). Others (like Matins) are rather complex but extremely beautiful. Since we are not monastics, we can only spend so much time in prayer. While it would be difficult for a person to pray all of these, we can still pray parts of them. The easiest way to learn the Canonical Hours is by attending Church when these services are offered throughout the year. They are very profound and contain great meaning and significance.

Our liturgical prayers are the highest form of prayer because they contain our official "Lex orandi." The Latin maxim, "Lex orandi, lex credendi," means, "the law of prayer is the law of faith." In other words, we pray as we believe. Our Church's prayers are actually filled with theological statements and affirmations. Therefore, if we want to know the faith of our Church, all we have to do is look to our Church's prayers and hymns as a sure guide. This is why the Church always encourages the use of our liturgical prayers. The more we pray our Liturgy the more we know our faith and the more we can know and love our God.

### **III. Practical Suggestions for a Daily Rule of Prayer:**

But even if we can't pray all of these services on our own, in Orthodox Tradition, our spiritual Fathers and Mothers encourage every Christian to follow a daily rule of prayer. They emphasize this because being an Orthodox Christian is not the result of mere intellectual belief, nor is it a result of accepting a set of theological truths. Orthodox Christianity is meant to penetrate our entire lives. In other words our Orthodox Faith is not something just to be believed, it is something to be lived.

And one of the most important ways to live our Orthodox Faith is by keeping a daily rule of prayer, closely following the Church's Liturgical Calendar, observing its Feasts and Fasts; celebrating its canonized Saints and following their teaching and example. This, more than anything, keeps our lives and our homes intimately close and in harmony with the life of our Church.

Now, there is not one set formula to creating a daily rule of prayer. What is recommended is to have a basic rule of prayer that is short enough that one can always follow it, even on the busiest days. This can be as simple as praying the Lord's Prayer three times a day.

The basic rule of prayer can always be added to as time allows or as we develop our prayer in its depth and meaning. It is good to offer prayer at least twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. As St. Hippolytus of Rome said, "All believers, men and women alike, upon rising in the morning, are to wash their hands and pray to God before they go to work... Pray again when you retire [for the day]." I'm going to share with you some practical suggestions on how to develop a Daily Rule that you can choose from to fit your own prayer needs.

Our daily prayers can be offered anywhere but it is traditional to have a special place in our home for our offering prayer like an icon corner. We can make this place more conducive to prayer by lighting a candle before Holy Icons and burning incense (which represents our prayers ascending to God as we pray). It is also customary to pray towards the East which is the direction not only of the rising Sun but also of our Lord's return at His Second Coming.

### **1. Opening prayer:**

Traditionally our prayers always begin with the Trisagion (or Thrice Holy) prayers to God (i.e., Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal...) 3X. SEE LIST BELOW FOR MORE INFO AND SOURCES FOR EACH OF THESE SUGGESTIONS.

### **2. A Hymn:**

The Latin Church father St. Augustine is credited as saying, "He who sings prays twice." The singing of hymns is an important part of prayer (Eph 5:18-21). We are blessed with so many beautiful hymns in our Byzantine Tradition, like "It is meet," "O Gladsome Light," "The Prayer of St. Simeon," "Heavenly King," etc.). In building our rule of prayer we can use any hymn but it best to sing hymns that correspond to the liturgical season. We can also sing each day's special Troparion and Kontakian, which are religious songs or poems that relate to the day's feast or saint.

### **3. The Holy Psalms:**

There is no better praise of God available to us, which is why the Church has always used the Psalter extensively in her services. As our Holy Father St. Basil the Great teaches, "The Book of Psalms contains everything useful... It predicts the future, it recalls the past, it gives directions for living, it suggests the right behavior. It is, in short, a jewel-case in which have been collected all the valid teachings in such a way that individuals find remedies just right for their cases..." (Commentary on Psalm 1). The Psalms can be recited or chanted.

### **4. Intercessions:**

It is extremely important to pray for others. As St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, "I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercession, and giving of thanks be made for all men... (1 Tim 2:1-2)."

### **5. Meditation on the Church's Feasts or Lives of the Saints:**

Every year our Byzantine Church offers us an elaborate plan of Christian living in the liturgical calendar. Each year our Lord's entire life is re-lived, along with His Mother's, in the Church's liturgical cycle. Our calendars state which feast or saint is honored each day and gives a short biography.

Each week: Sundays are dedicated to the Lord's Resurrection, Mondays to the Holy Angels, Tuesdays to St. John the Forerunner, Wednesdays to the Theotokos, Thursdays to the Apostles (and St. Nicholas), Fridays to the Crucifixion and Saturdays are dedicated to the Faithful Departed. Wednesdays and Fridays are penitential days because Wednesday is the day Judas conspired to betray our Lord and Friday our Lord was crucified.

A noteworthy thing about Eastern Church calendars is that in addition to all the New Testament Saints, we also have the great Old Testament Saints there as well. In Eastern Tradition the Old Testament figures are saints too. This demonstrates the great emphasis our Church places on remaining firmly rooted in the Biblical foundations of our faith.

Each saint on the calendar has been placed there by our Church Fathers for a specific purpose or reason. The saints are not just people who lived holy lives. Each one of them manifests an essential element of our Orthodox Faith and Life which are important for us to recall yearly for the preservation of the faith and life of the Church. The more familiar we

become with the struggles, challenges and heresies which they had to overcome, the more fortified we become against these.

## **6. Daily Readings:**

The next important part of the daily rule is the reading of the Holy Scriptures. Again our father among the saints, Basil the Great states, “Any part of the Scriptures you like to choose is inspired by God. The Holy Spirit composed the Scriptures so that in them, as in a pharmacy open to all souls, we might each of us be able to find the medicine suited to our own particular illness” (Comm. on Ps 1). The great Biblical Scholar and Latin Church Father, St. Jerome once said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” We can’t know Jesus if we don’t become familiar with the Scriptures.

The Scriptures are important because, “When we pray, we speak to God. But when we read the Bible, God speaks to us.” Most Christians realize that reading Scripture is important but they just don’t know how to implement the Scriptures in their daily lives. One of the easiest plans for reading the Scriptures is offered to us in the Church’s daily lectionary which is easily accessible on our Church calendar. Every day the Church in its wisdom has ingeniously selected passages of the Scriptures to highlight the wisdom and importance of the saint or feast we are celebrating -or- the meaning of the fast we are observing.

## **7. The Lord’s Prayer:**

The early Latin Father, Tertullian once wrote, “In the Lord’s Prayer we have a summary of the entire Gospel.” An early Christian practice recorded in the oldest Christian document outside the NT called “the Didache” written around 70 AD, states to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Following this ancient practice we can incorporate the Lord’s Prayer in our morning and evening prayers. Since lunch time is usually a hectic part of the day for many, the Lord’s Prayer could suffice as a midday prayer.

## **8. Closing Prayer: SEE LIST BELOW FOR MORE INFO**

## **9. Practicing Silence:**

So far we have talked about the many ways to pray to God using words. But God also speaks to us in the silence of our hearts and the practice of silence is an important part of our Orthodox prayer tradition. Fr. Thomas Hopko states, “St. Ambrose in his commentary on the priesthood begins the commentary with a section on silence. He states, ‘Those who cannot practice *hesychia* / *silentia* must never speak... because they will have nothing to say.’ This is very important and precious for Orthodox Christians because we had St. Gregory Palamas and all the saints who were *hesychasts* (which means ‘practitioners of silence’)” (*Commentary on the Apocalypse*). In fact, St. Gregory Palamas is remembered each year on the 2nd Sunday of the Great Fast to remind us of the importance of silence and contemplative prayer in our journey towards union with God (Theosis) during the Great Fast.

Practicing silence simply means being quiet before God and allowing Him to speak to us in the depths of our heart. “St. Isaac of Syria and St. Seraphim speak about communion with God where prayer ceases and you go beyond even prayer... as the ultimate [union with God]” (Fr. Hopko). As it states in the famous book on Eastern Spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, “Interior prayer costs nothing but the effort to sink down in silence within the depths of one’s heart, while calling more and more upon the radiant name of Jesus. Everyone who does that feels at once the

inward light... he even catches sight in this light of some of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.” Next we’ll consider what the writer meant by “calling on... the radiant name of Jesus.”

### **10. The Jesus Prayer:**

The final form of prayer, highly recommended in our Byzantine tradition, is "the Jesus Prayer" and the use of the Prayer Rope. The Jesus Prayer comes from our Eastern monastic tradition. The monastic spirit fills the life of our Byzantine tradition because Orthodoxy recognizes that the two key elements of monasticism is (1) prayer and (2) repentance... is something we all need. The Jesus Prayer comes from a simple practice of praying and meditating on the holy name of Jesus. This has many variations but the basic formula is the simple and powerful prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." The desert dwelling monastics would use it to combat the devil and repel him from their lives.

The prayer rope was first used by Eastern monastics to help count their daily prayers. It is said that the method of tying the prayer rope came from the Saint Anthony the Great, Father of Eastern Monasticism. He started by tying a leather rope with a simple knot every time he prayed the “Lord have mercy.” But the Devil would come and untie the knots so that Anthony would lose his count. Then, inspired by a vision, Anthony devised a way of tying the knots so that the knots themselves made the Sign of the Cross. It is said that the Devil could not untie it because he is vanquished by the Sign of the Cross. This is why prayer ropes to this day are tied using knots that contain seven little crosses which are tied over on top of one another. Orthodox Christianity regards the prayer rope as “the sword of the Spirit” to combat evil.

St. Gregory Palamas wrote about the Jesus Prayer, “Not only should we ourselves... pray unceasingly in the NAME of Jesus Christ, but we are bound to reveal it and teach it to others... to inspire them all with zeal for prayer unceasing.” I can personally attest to the power of the Jesus Prayer in my own life. At one low point, I became very sick. I suffered with a neurological illness for over a year and a half that made me very ill. I was even on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The Jesus Prayer was a key part of my recovery and return to health. Today I keep a prayer rope with me at all times. Whenever life throws me a curve (as it often does) or I am attacked unexpectedly, or just taken unawares, I turn to the Jesus Prayer silently for strength and trust in Christ. God has truly used it to save my life. As the Prophet Joel said, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:32).

### **IV. Conclusion:**

To close, St. Paul wrote to the Church of Colossae: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom - teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs- singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (3:16-17). This is what we do every Lord’s Day when we come together as the Church and it is also what we can do every day in our homes. The idea of a daily rule of prayer, like the Divine Liturgy, is not so much an obligation as it is an invitation. It’s an invitation to exercise the great privilege we have as Christians to be in communion with and worship the Living God. This is a way to ensure that our hearts and our homes are “one in Spirit” with our Byzantine Church Tradition. Thank you for listening.

## **Suggested material to help build a Daily Rule of Prayer:**

Note: All of the above referenced books are available through the Church bookstores listed below.

1. Orthodox Study Bible: Made by our sister Eastern Orthodox Churches. The best Eastern Study Bible available. Also has a very helpful guide for daily prayers.

2. Orthodox Church in America Website: Has an excellent description of every feast and saint of the Church as well as the daily Troparion & Kontakion. A very valuable resource:  
<http://oca.org/saints/lives>

3. Building A Habit Of Prayer: An excellent little booklet published by Conciliar Press. It gives many helpful directions on how to build a Rule of Prayer.

4. St. Vladimir Seminary Press: Once we become familiar with the biographical info of our Saints, we can grow even more in our Orthodox Faith by becoming familiar with the writings of these Saints -especially the great theological doctors of our Church. Most of their writings are easily accessible -through Amazon, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. In this way we allow their relevance and importance to our Church to directly impact our own life and faith. SVS Press website: <http://www.svspress.com/>

5. St. Tikhon's Monastery Bookstore & Press: Another excellent source of prayer, liturgical and hagiographical material: <https://www.stspress.com/>