

UNIT 3B: PASTORAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

74: Prayer - the Heart in Pilgrimage

This lecture will not consider *why* we pray. That is a question more suited to the catechumenate but hardly something that requires justification to those developing their Christian witness and service in the Church and in the world. We shall touch briefly upon *where* we pray and *when* we pray, but our major concern will be *what* we pray and *how* we pray.

In Luke 11:1 one of Jesus' disciples requests of Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Jesus replies with the Lord's Prayer (Luke 12:2-4; cf. Matthew 6:9-15). St Cyril of Alexandria reflects on this Biblical text that through prayer, Christ:

Gives His own glory to us. He raises slaves to the dignity of freedom. He crowns the human condition with such honour as surpasses the power of nature. He brings to pass what was spoken of old by the voice of the psalmist: 'I said, you are gods, and all of you children of the Most High' (Psalm 82:6 [81:6 LXX]). He rescues us from the measure of slavery, giving us by His grace what we did not possess by nature, and permits us to call God 'Father,' as being admitted to the rank of sons. We receive this, together with all our other privileges, from Him. One of these privileges is the dignity of freedom, a gift peculiarly befitting those who have been called sons.... Most fittingly, He enables those who pray to understand this also [:] since we call God 'Father' and have been worthy of such a distinguished honour, we must lead holy and thoroughly blameless lives. We must behave as is pleasing to our Father and not think or say anything unworthy or unfit for the freedom that has been bestowed on us....¹

¹ St Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke, Homily 71*; cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament III Luke*, Arthur A. Just Jr. (Ed.) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 185.

Thus, learning to pray is an integral part of the experience of spiritual fatherhood as set out in the previous lecture, for every man, woman and child who chooses in God-given freedom to be Christian. St Cyril concludes his reflection with the insight that:

The Saviour of all very wisely grants us to call God 'Father,' that we, knowing well that we are sons of God [and we would today add "daughters of God"], may behave in a manner worthy of Him who has honoured us. [We] will then receive the supplications [i. e. humble and earnest requests] that we offer in Christ.

Thus, St Cyril is an "Abba" who as a spiritual father is offering us the opportunity to experience how a life lived out in freedom and prayer (linked to appropriate action) is a path open to each of us for the rest of our lives.

Place

"Where" we pray is answered very simply—anywhere, for God is worshipped "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). However, we do not take this to mean that a Christian might or should pray aside or apart from the Church, even when by choice or circumstance he prays for a time on his own. By baptism he is always a member of the Body of Christ and in that Body, he prays whether in the secrecy of his own chamber or in the assembly of the brethren. This assembly is not to be neglected, for as urged in Hebrews 10:23-25: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works [as] we meet together." Our connection in baptism to our brothers and sisters is what enables us to make spiritual progress.

We are saved together but we are damned alone. A Christian, therefore, who attempts to break this link has excluded himself from the very society that God has provided for his salvation—the Church, her mysteries, her communion and her love. We always pray in the Church and as the Church. We only talk to ourselves outside of that context. Of course, God hears those whom He wills but we should not take that condescension for granted when His appointed place of prayer remains close

at hand; and by “place” is meant the assembly, which may or may not have a building consecrated to the offering of prayer.² This is why, strictly speaking, in the Orthodox Church we call God’s House the *Temple* not the Church, for the Church is the People of God, the Divine Society.

There is also the important reality, as St Paul reminds us, that “The Temple of God is holy, and that is what you are” (1 Corinthians 3:17). St Augustine offers a deeply personal interpretation of these words, urging: “Make yourself a temple for God within yourself. ‘For the temple of God is holy, which means you.’ Would you pray in a temple? Pray in yourself. But first be a temple of God, for He in His temple hears the one who prays.”³

In addition to the Temple of God as both God’s house and God’s presence within each of us, there is a place where a Christian prays which is the “little-church;” and that, of course, is the home of a Christian family. Outside of Orthodox countries this prayer as a shared experience within a family is often difficult to achieve. Sometimes this is for the obvious reason that a family member, be they an adult or child, may not have been Orthodox during the family’s formation, which may not even have involved marriage. In what sense, therefore, can an Orthodox Christian be said to share prayer with a partner and children in a domestic “little church” under such circumstances? They cannot; but they should, of course, still pray at home, as indeed they would at work or in any other place or activity. If, however, the faith is shared by the whole family then we have the happier possibility of that family sharing in domestic prayer, which is a vital part of the building up of the body of Christ in an Orthodox parish. How can this happen?

² It is of interest to note that “the synagogue probably evolved from the first ‘assembly houses’ of the Jews in Babylonian exile.” See Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Story of the Synagogue: A Diaspora Museum Book* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986).

³ St Augustine, *Tracts on the Gospel of John 15.25*; cited in cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament IVA, John 1-10*; Joel C. Elowsky, (Ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp. 162-163.

An Orthodox Christian family will pray together before the icon corner on a regular basis, sanctifying the time of day and the sacred meals that sustain it. “Sacred” because eating has become a debased activity in secularised cultures. It is sometimes thought of as little more than taking in calories and essential nutrients—often a joyless silent activity, solitary, in front of the omnipresent television set. In the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church eating together is a holy act. So often Jesus chose this means of establishing redemptive contact with sinners and outcasts. This was outrageous to the falsely pious, because they knew what the Rabbi was doing when He did that, and it wasn’t pleasant for them to contemplate: God having table fellowship with sinners indeed! Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has even gone so far as to say that our debased practices of eating have imperilled our awareness of Eucharistic Communion, driving an unconscionable wedge between Church and life.⁴ So at home, within ourselves or in church we pray “eucharistically.”

To summarise the meaning of “place” in prayer, it is helpful to think of four dimensions—within ourselves, in our homes, in the assembly in church with other Orthodox Christians, and anywhere in the world. Father Theodore Stylianopoulos concludes a short, helpful essay on prayer with the words: “Prayer’s ultimate purpose is the transformation of daily life into a sacrament of the presence, power and holiness of God.”⁵ That is a possibility anywhere for each of us.

Time

“*When to pray?*” The holy apostle St Paul says that we should: “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints....” (Ephesians 6:18). This does not invalidate the practice of prayer at certain times of the day. The Psalmist refers

⁴ *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir Seminary Press [SVSP], 1988), p. 34 f.

⁵ Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “Prayer,” in John Anthony McGuckin (Ed.), *The Concise Orthodox Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK, 2014), pp. 368-370.

to seven times (Psalm 118 [119]:164) and this text helped fix the pattern of monastic prayer in the Christian Church. A similar prescription was never laid down for Christians in the world but many spiritual guides have counselled prayer both in the morning and the evening with a prayer of commendation before retiring to sleep. Notwithstanding these prescribed times, the teaching of continuous prayer has remained a strong witness within Tradition. How we set aside specific times to pray as well as how we learn to pray at these times and indeed continuously are matters for later consideration in this lecture.

Practice

“What to pray and how to pray?” There are several different elements in the answer to these questions. First and foremost, Orthodox pray all the services that they attend. Yet it should be recognised that the gold standard of praying liturgically has weakened in recent centuries in the West. A certain compartmentalisation has taken place such that the congregation thinks that it is not praying when for example the sermon is preached or the hymns are sung. In some heterodox traditions prayer is only thought to begin in the service when the Minister says: “let us pray...” Although this invitation is proclaimed in Orthodox services as well, no Orthodox person would think, “Well, I must now begin to pray, because I have not been doing so up to this point.” Non-Orthodox Christians who attend services in the Orthodox Church are sometimes puzzled by what they perceive to be a lack of congregational participation. Since they are used to doing something else other than praying at different times in their own services, the notion that one prays the whole service is alien to them.

So how do Orthodox Christians pray the whole service in the Temple? The words heard are understood in the mind at one level, but then the mind descends into the heart in prayer; and these words find richer and deeper meanings in this centre of our personhood where the Holy Spirit dwells. The transformative word is like a jewel inside an envelope of silence; the envelope being richly coloured and fragrant

as befits worship in which all the senses are engaged and not just through the medium of discursive or rational thinking. The spirituality that supports this approach to public liturgical prayer is learned and applied by practice and the guidance of one who is experienced in such prayer. Alternatively, and more usually, it is learned by a child growing up in the church from its most formative and early years.

Outside of the liturgical assembly, an Orthodox Christian prays in every place where he lives, plays and works. Whereas in the Temple, personal extempore prayer is rarely appropriate, outside this context it is more usual. However, although there is more freedom to adapt prayer to personal circumstance and expression in the world outside the Temple, the prayer of the Church in the Hours of Prayer still acts as a scaffold or structure within which more personal supplications and implications may be included. Essentially, this Prayer of the Church (the Horologion) does not differ in overall content between the monastery, the parish, and the icon corner at home. However, much greater freedom to adapt the Hours of Prayer to personal circumstance is necessary in domestic usage. Many different prayer books are available to the faithful to assist in such prayer. When the Hours of Prayer have been offered at the appropriate time of day, personal prayers may be added by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

A word must now be said about meditation in relation to the Scriptures in a comparative context. "Lectio Divina" or the prayerful reading of Holy Scripture, although more strongly and systematically developed in the post-Orthodox Christian West, is, in itself, not alien to Orthodox Christianity. Its roots lie in the Bible itself (Romans 10:8; Psalm 118 [119]:15). Prayer is applied to the biblical text by, successively, reading it slowly, ruminating its meaning, offering to God all that we are in the light of the text and finally by contemplation, that is the silent communing of our heart with God whereby our lives are transformed little by little. So far, so good. Orthodoxy took leave, however, of the Western tradition, as it

subsequently developed in the second millennium when it began to stress technique and the systematic use of the imaginative faculty. The issue Orthodoxy has with such approaches is that the imagination is not value free and unsullied by sin. The potentialities for self-delusion and hubris in the human mind are legion. Psychic states for good or for ill can easily be manipulated by a skilled director, prayer leader or by those who pray themselves. Orthodoxy's insistence on the absence of images in prayer is configured to its apophatic theology which purges all potentially idolatrous conceptions of God from the human mind. "The Greek term *apophaticism* signifies a 'turning away from speech' [linked to an awareness of] ... the profoundly limited capacity of human language or thought to capture the deity," even while affirming "the necessity of making precise dogmatic statements about God, in opposition to heretics of various kinds."⁶ We cannot "capture the deity" in this life, but we can continue to seek Him and draw closer to Him.

Sympathetic observers of the Orthodox tradition of prayer are sometimes a little puzzled by all of this. Do not the Orthodox themselves stress the importance of the use of icons in prayer? How then could it be that the imagination is so deprecated in Orthodox worship? However, this reaction reveals a lack of understanding of what happens when an Orthodox Christian prays before an icon. Beholding the image, the person who prays does not then, as it were, "play" with that image in all its possibilities in his mind. Rather, as the person contemplates the image, a love arises in the heart for the person depicted; and this straightway passes to the prototype, be that our Lord and Saviour, the Mother of God or the saints.

It has often been observed that the Orthodox Church embraces a mystical theology and practice in prayer. The only problem with the use of the word mystical today is that it has become associated with spiritualities entirely alien to the Orthodox way of prayer whether these are pantheist or magical-naturalist (New Age) or arising

⁶ Father John Anthony McGuckin, "Apophaticism" in *The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 23-24.

out of so-called Eastern religions of a monist (Hinduism) or non-realist type (Buddhism). When an Orthodox Christian uses the word "mysticism" what is meant by that word is a way of prayer that unites a person to God beyond words, God being wholly other than and distinct from creation, in His nature unknown, and yet permeating that creation by His energies.

Orthodox mystical prayer, itself an unhappy and misleading turn of phrase, does not drift free as it were from theology or liturgical prayer. It is informed and shaped by both, returning to each as the Holy Spirit transforms the offering of the people of God in an I-Thou relationship. Orthodox mystical prayer is not even ecstatic in *intent* although such psychic states may often accompany this prayer of the heart. One cannot, therefore, even say that the Western Carmelite tradition stands closer to Orthodoxy in the teaching and experience of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila. Although more mystical in its Christian praxis, the women of the Carmelite order have been particularly noted for their ecstatic visions of our Lord or his Mother and these were often accompanied by altered states of consciousness of a highly emotive or even, more controversially but arguably, sexual character. Any Orthodox spiritual guide encountering such manifestations in the life of a spiritual son or daughter would immediately counsel that such experiences be ignored. This would also apply in the Pentecostal tradition to such psychic gifts as glossolalia, (speaking in tongues), or prophecy generated in an ecstatic state. A demonic source for such experiences is just as likely as a divine one.

This Orthodox approach to mystical visions in prayer goes back to the desert fathers and mothers who were well versed in the dangers posed by such potential self-deceptions in the minds of some monastics, sending not a few into madness and despair. What characterises Orthodox mystical prayer above all is sobriety. When the Gerasene demoniac was delivered by our Lord from his demons and healed by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit he was then found by his compatriots to be

clothed and in his right mind, (Mark 5:15). Being out of one's mind, even in a state of bliss, is not necessarily an indication of either sanctity or sanity.

Moving on then to Orthodox mystical prayer, it is necessary to consider how this is practised and what is its goal. As to the latter part, the answer is simple—the goal is salvation. Salvation in the Orthodox Church is deification—the perfection of our humanity in union with God. It is the practical aspect which concerns us here—how to pray towards this end.

There was a heresy in the early church called Messalianism.⁷ This spoke the language of the prayer of the heart and of transformation by the Holy Spirit but it deprecated the sacramental life of the Church as subordinate and even inferior. As such, it exalted the status of the illumined masters of prayer at the expense of the communion of the Church and all its faithful. It was condemned at the third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 as being a manifestation of hubris or pride and self-delusion. This is mentioned here because it is important to remember that Orthodox mystical prayer has both an ascetical AND a sacramental aspect. One cannot expect to be filled with the Holy Spirit in mystical communion with God unless one is also fed by the holy mysteries of the Church and in communion with one's brothers and sisters. Correspondingly sacramental participation in the body of Christ is without value unless a person denies himself, takes up his cross and follows Christ. We bring a spirit of discipline and repentance to the sacraments so that we might not commune unworthily. However, a spirit of discipline and repentance is vitiated by the rejection of that very body into which we have been baptised, which is the Church. All the teachers of mystical prayer in the Orthodox Church insisted on both asceticism according to our spiritual capacity and sacramental participation according to our opportunity. With these caveats in mind let us now proceed to consider the tradition of hesychastic prayer in the Orthodox Church.

⁷ For a detailed critique of the Messalians, see McGuckin, "Macarius the Great II (Pseudo-Macarius)" in McGuckin, *Patristic Theology*, pp. 210-211.

His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos has written and spoken eloquently⁸ concerning the Jesus Prayer.”⁹ The ground covered by the Metropolitan will not be repeated here, but rather we ask now: what place should the prayer of stillness (hesychasm) and the Jesus Prayer have in non-monastic Orthodox Christian spirituality?

On a number of occasions in the gospels those desiring to be healed by Christ cry out to Him: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” with slight variations and additions in the phrasing. These heartfelt cries of need, however, are uttered only once and not in the context of continuous prayer. Although, therefore, the words are more or less the same as those in the Jesus Prayer it is doubtful that they can be used as justification for the universal use of the Jesus Prayer as it developed later in the Tradition. Opinions vary concerning the appropriateness of the prayer’s use in this manner by non-monastics, and even on Mount Athos there are some traditions that deprecate its use by monks without extensive prior ascetical training. If the latter case applies, then clearly the prayer lies beyond the reach of most Christians in the world. On the other hand, many other commentators on prayer in the Orthodox tradition commend the use of the Jesus Prayer to all, but in forms adapted to the non-monastic state. As a prayer for mercy, protection or peace from God and even uttered repeatedly, this modified use of the Jesus Prayer is surely uncontroversial. Nonetheless, if the Jesus Prayer is to play a prominent role in a Christian’s prayer life then the guidance of a spiritual father or mother is necessary to guard against a prideful over-enthusiastic use. The principle of moderation and balance applies according to one’s state in life and too many Orthodox Christians have been damaged by an unwitting pretence at being a monastic in the world when clearly this is neither actually the case nor desirable.

⁸ See here: <https://youtu.be/d1-IBqTodZ0>

⁹ See also Metropolitan Kallistos’ historical essay, “Hesychasm,” in McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (2014), pp. 241-246.

Conclusion

Having surveyed the different forms that the prayer can take in the Orthodox Church, let us recall the objective of all prayer which is the underpinning theme of this lecture. Prayer is the means by which we come to know God, to love Him and to serve Him. Prayer unites us to Him and ourselves to each other. It is the means of grace, a divine fire, and the hope of glory to come.

Consider the words of the 16th Century divine, George Herbert:

*Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days'-world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices, something understood.¹⁰*

Prayer is indeed “something understood” between God and each person. Yet in the midst of our weaknesses, we can be encouraged by Romans 8:26-27:

¹⁰ See “The Works of George Herbert” here:
<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/herbert/herbbib.htm>

... the [Holy] Spirit helps us in our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the [Holy] Spirit Himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the [Holy] Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

This intercession of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a great encouragement, even if we do not always understand how and why that intercession takes place. One fifth century Church Father advised:

Do not think you will be set free by things which are harmful. You do not know what is good for you in the way that God does. Therefore, give yourselves to Him who holds the key to the universe. For even if you ask nothing but merely groan under the impulse of the grace which dwells in you, He handles your affairs wisely and will ensure that you get what you need.¹¹

However, even if God is always looking after us, we still need to make efforts to reach His will for our lives. St John Chrysostom reflected:

Take away the contestant[s], and you take away the opportunity for the crowns [given in athletic competitions]. Do you not see how the athletes exercise when they have filled the bags with sand? But there is no need for you to practise this; life is full of things that exercise you and make you strong. Do you not also see that the trees, the more they are shaken by the winds, become ever stronger and firmer? We then, if we are longsuffering, shall also become strong.¹²

¹¹ Theodoret of Cyr, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans; cited in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI, Romans*; Gerald Bray (Ed.), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 231.

¹² St John Chrysostom, *On the Epistle to the Hebrews; cited in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament X, Hebrews*; Erik M. Heen & Philip D. W. Krey (Eds.), (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 163.

As we face challenges in our lives and in our prayer lives, we grow stronger.

Because of the strength of Tradition within the Orthodox Church, we can still pray in the twenty-first century as St Polycarp did in the second century:

Now may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and may Jesus Christ Himself also, the eternal high-priest and Son of God, build you up in faith and truth, and in gentleness, avoidance of anger, forbearance, long-suffering, patient endurance and purity; and may He grant you to inherit a place among His saints; may He grant this to us also so that we can be with you, and to everyone under heaven who will believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and in His Father who raised Him from the dead.¹³

Amen. So be it for each of us as we continue to learn how to pray, where to pray, when to pray and what to pray.

¹³ St Polycarp of Smyrna, *The Letter to the Philippians 12*; cited by Michael Counsell, "Two Thousand Years of Prayer" (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1999), p. xxvi. In the midst of 600 pages of prayers followed by some 20 pages of indices on themes and authors, the first 100 pages offer an excellent selection of Orthodox Christian prayers.