

Theophan the Recluse, On prayer, Homily 1

Written by Theophan the Recluse

Delivered 21 November, 1864

On the feast day of the Entrance into the Temple of the Most-holy Theotokos, I find it timely to give you instruction in prayer - the main work of the temple. A temple is a place of prayer and arena of prayer's development. For us, entry into the temple is entry into a prayerful spirit. The Lord has the kindness to call our hearts His temple, where we enter mentally and stand before Him, ascending to Him like the fragrant smoke of incense. We are going to study how to attain this state.

Gathering in the temple, you pray, of course. And in praying here, you surely ought not abandon prayer at home. Therefore, it would be extraneous to speak to you about our duty to pray, when you already pray. But I do not think that it is extraneous in any way to give you two or three rules about how to pray, if not in the way of teaching, then simply as a reminder. The work of prayer is the first work in Christian life. If in everyday affairs the saying: "live and learn" is true, then so much more it applies to prayer, which never stops and which has no limit.

Let me recall a wise custom of the ancient Holy Fathers: when greeting each other, they did not ask about health or anything else, but rather about prayer, saying "How is your prayer?" The activity of prayer was considered by them to be a sign of the spiritual life, and they called it the breath of the spirit. If the body has breath, it lives; if breathing stops, life comes to an end. So it is with the spirit. If there is prayer, the soul lives; without prayer, there is no spiritual life.

However, not every act of prayer is prayer. Standing at home before your icons, or here in church, and venerating them is not yet prayer, but the "equipment" of prayer. Reading prayers either by heart or from a book, or hearing someone else read them is not yet prayer, but only a tool or method for obtaining and awakening prayer. Prayer itself is the piercing of our hearts by pious feelings towards God, one after another – feelings of humility, submission, gratitude, doxology, forgiveness, heart-felt prostration, brokenness, conformity to the will of God, etc. All of our effort should be directed so that during our prayers, these feelings and feelings like them should fill our souls, so that the heart would not be empty when the lips are reading the prayers, or when the ears hear and the body bows in prostrations, but that there would be some qualitative feeling, some striving toward God. When these feelings are present, our praying is prayer, and when they are absent, it is not yet prayer.

It seems that nothing should be simpler and more natural for us than prayer and our hearts' striving for God. But in fact it is not always like this for everyone. One must awaken and strengthen a prayerful spirit in oneself, that is one must bring up a prayerful spirit. The first means to this is to read or to hear prayers said. Pray as you should, and you will certainly awaken and strengthen the ascent of your heart to God and you will come into a spirit of prayer.

In our prayer books, there are prayers of the Holy Fathers - Ephraim the Syrian, Makarios the Egyptian, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, and other great men of

prayer. Being filled with the spirit of prayer, they were able to up that living spirit into words, and handed it down to us. When one enters into these prayers with attention and effort, then that great and prayerful spirit will in turn enter into him. He will taste the power of prayer. We must pray so that our mind and heart receive the content of the prayers that we read. In this way the act of praying becomes a font of true prayer in us. I will give here three very simple instructions: 1. always begin praying with at least a little preparation; 2. do not pray carelessly, but with attention and feeling; and 3. do not go on to ordinary work immediately after prayer.

Even if prayer is common for us, it always demands preparation. What is more common for those who can read and write than reading and writing? However, sitting down to read or write, we do not immediately begin, but we calm ourselves before beginning, at least to the point that we can read or write in a peaceful state. Even more so preparation for the work of prayer is necessary before praying, especially when what we have been doing before praying is of a totally different nature from prayer.

Thus, going to pray, in the morning or in the evening, stand for a moment, or sit, or walk, and strive in this time to focus your thoughts, casting off from them all earthly activities and objects. Then call to mind the One to Whom you are praying, Who He is and who you are, as you begin this prayerful petition to Him. From this, awaken in your soul the feeling of humility and reverent awe of standing before God in your heart. As you stand piously before God, all of this preparation may seem small and insignificant, but it is not small in meaning. This is the beginning of prayer and a good beginning is half the work.

Having stood up in your heart, now stand before your icons, make a few prostrations, and begin with the usual prayers: "Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee. O Heavenly King...", and so on. Do not read hurriedly; pay attention to every word and let the meaning of each word enter into your heart. Accompany your words with prostrations. With this effort, the reading of prayers becomes pleasant to God and fruit-bearing. Pay attention to every word, and let the sense of each word enter into your heart; understand what you are reading and feel what you are understanding. No other rules are necessary. These two – understanding and feeling – have the effect of making prayer fitting, and fruitful. For example, you read: "cleanse us from every stain" - feel your stain, desire cleanliness, and ask it from the Lord with hope. You read: "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" - forgive all in your soul, and having forgiven everyone everything in your heart, ask for forgiveness for yourself from the Lord. You read: "Thy will be done" - completely give up your own will to the Lord in your heart, and honestly be prepared to meet everything that the Lord is well-pleased to send to to you with a good heart. If you read each verse of your prayers in this way, then you will be truly praying.

In order to facilitate the development of true prayer, take these steps: 1) keep a prayer rule according to the blessing of your spiritual father - not more than you can read unhurriedly on a normal day; 2) before you pray, in your free time become familiar with the prayer in your rule, fully take in each word and feel it, so that you would know in advance what should be in your soul as you read. It will be even better if you learn the prayers by heart. When you do this, then all of your prayers will be easy for you to remember and feel. There is only one final difficulty: your thoughts will always stray to

other subjects, therefore: 3) you must struggle to keep your attention focused on the words of your prayer, knowing in advance that your mind will wander.

When your mind does wander during prayer, bring it back. When it wanders again, bring it back again. Each and every time that you read a prayer while your thoughts are wandering (and consequently you read it without attention and feeling,) then do not fail to read it again. Even if your mind wanders several times in the same place, read it again and again until you read it all the way through with understanding and feeling. In this way, you will overcome this difficulty so that the next time, perhaps, it will not come up again, or if it does return, it will be weaker. This is how one must act when the mind wanders. On the other hand it may happen that a particular word or phrase might act so strongly on the soul, that the soul no longer wants to continue with the prayer, and even though the lips continue praying, the mind keeps wandering back to that place which first acted on it. In this case: 4) stop, do not read further, but stand with attention and feeling in that place, and use the prayer in that place and the feelings engendered by it to feed your soul. Do not hurry to get yourself out of this state. If time cannot wait, it is better to leave your rule unfinished than to disturb this prayerful state. Maybe this feeling will stay with you all day like your guardian Angel! This sort of grace-filled action on the soul during prayer means that the spirit of prayer is becoming internalized, and consequently, maintaining this state is the most hopeful means of raising up and strengthening a spirit of prayer in your heart.

Finally, when you finish your prayers, do not immediately go off to any sort of work, but remain and think at least a little about what you have just finished and what now lies before you. If some feeling was given to you during prayer, keep it after you pray. If you completed your prayer rule in the true spirit of prayer, then you will not wish to quickly go about other work; this is a property of prayer. Thus our ancestors said when they returned from Constantinople: "he who has tasted sweet things does not desire bitter things". So it is with each person who has prayed well during his prayers. One should recognize that tasting this sweetness of prayer is the very goal of praying, and if praying leads to a prayerful spirit, then it is exactly through such a tasting.

If you will follow these few rules, then you will quickly see the fruit of prayerful labor. And he who fulfills them already without this instruction, of course, is already tasting this fruit. All praying leaves prayer in the soul - continual prayer in this manner gives it root, and patience in this work establishes a prayerful spirit. May God grant this to you by the prayers of our All-pure Mistress, the Theotokos!

I have given you initial basic instruction in the ways of raising up in yourselves a prayerful spirit, that is, how to pray in a way appropriate to the meaning of prayer - at home in the morning and the evening, and here in the temple. But this is not yet everything. Tomorrow, if God helps, I will teach you a second method. Amen.

Translated from the Russian by Rev. Fr. Michael van Opstall – January 2007

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Theophan the Recluse, On Prayer, Homily 2

Written by Theophan the Recluse
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Yesterday I showed you one method of establishing a prayerful spirit in yourselves [see homily 1], namely, how to pray in a way which corresponds to the meaning of the prayers. But this is only the beginning of the art (science) of prayer and it is necessary to go further. Consider the study of language, for example. First one studies words and phrases from books. But this is not sufficient, one must go further, and truly reach the point where he can correctly form phrases in the given language without the aid of the textbook. It is the same in the work of prayer. We get used to praying with prayer books, praying using prepared prayers given to us by the Lord and the Holy Fathers who were successful in prayer. But we should not stop at that, we need to continue on, and having accustomed ourselves to making petition to God for help with our minds and hearts, we must attempt to ascend to Him. We must strive to reach the point where our soul by itself begins speaking, so to speak, in a prayerful conversation with God and by itself ascends to Him and opens itself to Him and confesses what is in it and what it desires.

The soul must be taught how to ascend to God and open itself to Him. I will briefly instruct you how one should proceed in order to succeed in this art.

The skill of praying with piety, attention, and feeling according to a prayer book itself leads to this higher level. In the same way that water flows out of a bowl that is overfilled, so the soul which is filled with holy feelings by prayer begins by itself to spill out its prayer to God. But when pursuing this goal, there are particular steps which each person on this path must take.

Why is it, you ask, that one can pray for so many years with a prayer book, and still not have prayer in his heart? I think the reason is that people only spend a little time lifting themselves up to God when they complete their prayer rule, and in other times, they do not remember God. For example, they finish their morning prayers, and think that their relation to God is fulfilled by them; then the whole day passes in work, and such a person does not attend to God. Then in the evening, the thought returns to him that he must quickly stand at prayer and complete his evening rule. In this case, it happens that even if the Lord grants a person spiritual feelings at the time of the morning prayer, the bustle and business of the day drowns them out. As a result, it happens that one does not often feel like praying, and cannot get control of himself even to soften his heart a little bit. In such an atmosphere, prayer develops and ripens poorly. This problem (is it not ubiquitous?) needs to be corrected, that is, one must ensure that the soul does not only make petition to God when standing in prayer, but during the whole day, as much as possible, one must unceasingly ascend to Him and remain with Him.

In order to begin this task, one must first, during the course of the day, cry out to God more often, even if only with a few words, according to need and the work of the day. Beginning anything, for example, say "Bless, O Lord!" When you finish something, say, "Glory to Thee, O Lord", and not only with your lips, but with feeling in your heart. If passions arise, say, "Save me, O Lord, I am perishing." If the darkness of disturbing

thoughts comes up, cry out: "Lead my soul out of prison." If dishonest deeds present themselves and sin leads you to them, pray, "Set me, O Lord, in the way", or "do not give up my feet to stumbling." If sin takes hold of you and leads you to despair, cry out with the voice of the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Do this in every circumstance, or simply say often, "Lord, have mercy", "Most Holy Theotokos save us", "Holy Angel, my guardian, protect me", or other such words. Say such prayers as often as possible, always making the effort for them come from your heart, as if squeezed out of it. When we do this, we will frequently ascend to God in our hearts, making frequent petitions and prayers. Such increased frequency will bring about the habit of mental conversation with God.

But in order for the soul to begin crying out in this way, one must first teach the soul to ascribe everything to the glory of God, all of its works, whether great and small. This is the second way of teaching the soul to turn to God more often during the day, for if we apply ourselves to fulfill the apostolic commandment, that is, do all things for the glory of God, even "if we eat or drink" ([1 Cor 10.31](#)), then we will ceaselessly remember God in all that we do. Our remembrance of God will be accomplished not simply, but with care, so that in no case we would act wrongly and offend God by any deed. This will help us to turn to God with fear, prayerfully asking for help and understanding. Since we are almost always doing something, we will always be turning to God in prayer. Consequently, the art of raising up the heart in unceasing prayer to God will develop within our souls.

In order for the soul to do all things as they should be done, that is to the glory of God, one must prepare from the early morning, from the very beginning of the day, before "a man goes forth unto his work, and unto his labors until evening" ([Ps. 103](#)). This inclination leads to the contemplation of God, and this the third way of teaching the soul to turn frequently to God. Contemplation of God is the pious reflection on divine properties and actions, and about our necessary response to them. It means to reflect on God's goodness, righteous judgment, wisdom, omnipotence, omnipresence, knowledge of all things, about creation and industry, about the working of Salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ, about grace and the word of God, about the holy mysteries and about the Kingdom of Heaven. If you start to reflect on any one of these things, your soul will immediately be filled with pious feeling toward God. Consider, for example, the goodness of God, and you will see that you are surrounded by God's mercies, both physical and spiritual, and that you would have to be a stone not to fall down before God pouring out feelings of thanksgiving. Consider the omnipresence of God, and you will understand that you are always before God, and God is before you, and thus you cannot avoid being filled with pious fear. Consider the knowledge God has of all things, and you will realize, that nothing inside of you is hidden from the eye of God, and will set yourself to be strictly attentive to the movements of your heart and mind, in order not to offend the all-seeing God in any way. Consider the righteousness of God, and you will believe that not one evil deed remains unpunished. As a result you will firmly set yourself to cleansing all of your sins in a heartfelt way before God with brokenness and repentance. Thus, whatever property or action of God on which you reflect, that reflection will fill your soul with pious feelings and inclinations towards God. It will align all of your human substance towards God, and it is therefore the most direct means of

teaching the soul to ascend to God. The most useful and comfortable time for this is morning, when the soul is not yet burdened with many worries and work issues. Specifically, the best time is after morning prayers. Finish your prayers, sit down, and with thoughts cleansed by prayer, begin to think now about one divine aspect, and tomorrow about another, and incline your soul to this aspect. "Come", says St. Dimitri of Rostov, "come, holy contemplation of God, and let us immerse ourselves in contemplation of the great works of God", and he passed mentally through the works of providence and creation, or the miracles of our Lord and Savior, or His sufferings, or something else, and warmed up his heart, and began to pour out his soul in prayer. Everyone can do the same. The work is small; one only needs desire and resolve, but the fruits are many.

Here are three means, other than the prayer rule, by which one can teach the soul to ascend prayerfully to God: first, dedicate some time in the morning to the contemplation of God; second, turn every action to the glory of God, and third, often turn to God with short prayers. When contemplation of God goes well in the morning, it leaves a deep inclination toward thinking about God. Thinking about God makes the soul carefully order all of its actions, interior and exterior, and turn them to the glory of God. At the same time, this sets up a state in the soul that it often will be moved by prayerful cries to God. These three: contemplation of God, doing all to the glory of God, and frequent short prayers are the most active weapons of mental prayer and prayer of the heart. Each of them raises the soul to God. He who decides to practice these quickly attains the habit of ascending to God in his heart. The labor put into these leads to the heights. The higher one ascends on a mountain, the freer and easier he breathes. Thus it is also here: the more one does these exercises, the higher his soul ascends, and the higher the soul ascends, the more freely prayer can act in it. Our soul by nature is the abode of the higher divine world. Our soul should always be in this world by thoughts and feelings of the heart. But the baggage of worldly thoughts and passions leads and pulls the soul down. These methods separate the soul little by little from the earth, and then completely pull it away. When they have completely pulled the soul from the earth, then the soul lives in its own region, and will happily live on high. Here in heart and mind, and later in actual substance it will be vouchsafed to be before the face of God in the choirs of the angels and the saints. May God grant this to all of you through his grace. Amen.

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Theophan the Recluse, On Prayer, Homily 3

Written by Theophan the Recluse
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I have explained to you briefly two aspects or two levels of prayer, namely: prayer which is read, when we pray to God with the prayers of others, and one's mental prayer, where we ascend mentally to God through contemplation of God, dedicating all to God, and often crying out to Him from our hearts.[1](#)

But this is still not all. There is a third aspect or level of prayer, which makes up true prayer, and for which the first two aspects are only preparation. This is the unceasing turning of the mind and heart to God, accompanied by interior warmth or burning of the spirit. This is the limit to which prayer should aspire, and the goal which every prayerful laborer should have in mind, so that he does not work uselessly in the work of prayer.

Remember how the Word of God talks about prayer: "Be vigilant and pray," says the Lord ([Matt 26.41](#)). "Be sober and bold," teaches the apostle Peter ([1 Pet 5.8](#)). "Be patient in prayer, and be bold in it" ([Col 4.2](#)). "Pray without ceasing" ([1 Thess 5.17](#)). "Pray with all prayer and petition at all times in the spirit" ([Eph 6.18](#)), the apostle Paul commands, explaining in other places the reason to be this way. "Because", he says, "our life is hidden with Christ in God, and because the Spirit of God lives in us, in which we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" ([1 Cor 3.16](#)) From these instructions and commands it is impossible not to see that prayer is not something done once, and in an interrupted way, but is a state of the spirit, constant and unceasing, just like our breathing and heartbeat.

I will explain this to you by examples. The sun is in the middle, and all of our planets go around it, all are drawn in toward it, and all turn some side of themselves towards it. What the sun is in the material world, God is in the spiritual world - the rational sun. Bring your thoughts to heaven, and what will you see there? Angels, who, according to the word of the Lord, ever see the face of their heavenly Father. All bodiless spirits and all saints in heaven and turned towards God, all direct their mental eyes toward Him, and do not wish to turn away from Him, because of the ineffable blessedness which flows from this vision of the face of God. But what the Angels and saints do in the heavens, we should learn to do on earth: get used to the angelic, unceasing standing before God in our hearts. Only he who reaches this state is a true man of prayer. How can we attain this great good thing?

I will answer this briefly as follows: one must labor in prayer without hesitation, zealously, hopefully, trying to obtain a burning spirit through sober attention to God, as if it were the promised land. Work in prayer, and praying about everything, pray even more about this limit of prayer - a burning spirit - and you will truly attain that which you seek. We are assured of this by St. Makarios of Egypt, who labored and tasted the fruit of prayer. "If", he says, "you do not have prayer, work at prayer, and the Lord, seeing your labor, and seeing how you are patient in the labor and wholeheartedly desire this good thing, will grant you this prayer (Conversation 19)". The labor has this as its only end. When the fire is kindled, about which the Lord speaks: "I have come to bring fire

upon the earth, and what is it to Me if it were already kindled?" ([Luke 12.49](#)) - then the work comes to an end. Prayer becomes easier and freer.

Do not think that we are talking about something very lofty which is an unattainable state for living people. No. It truly is a lofty state, but attainable by all. Does not everyone at some time feel warmth in their hearts in prayer, when the soul separates itself from all things and deeply enters into itself and prays hotly to God? This movement of the prayerful spirit, although it was once only temporary, must be made into a constant state, and it will reach the limits of prayer.

The means to this, as I have said, is the work of prayer. When one rubs two sticks together, they warm up and catch fire. Similarly, when the soul is rubbed in the work of prayer, it eventually leads to prayerful fire. The work of prayer consists of a proper completion of the two types of prayer of which I have already spoken, namely - pious, attentive, and feeling completion of our usual prayers, and then training of the soul to frequently ascend to God through divine contemplation, turning of all things to the glory of God, and frequent crying to God from the heart. We pray in the morning and the evening: there is a great distance between them. If we only turn to God at these times, then even if we pray whole-heartedly, during the day or night, everything will fall apart, and when it is time again to pray, the soul will feel cold and empty, as before. One can pray again whole-heartedly, but if you become cold and fall apart again, what use is it? This is just building and destroying, building and destroying; it is only labor. If now we resolve not only to pray with attention and feeling in the morning and the evening, but also to spend every day in contemplation of God, doing all things to the glory of God, and frequently calling to God from our hearts with short words of prayer, then this long period between morning and evening prayers and from evening to morning prayers will be filled with frequent turnings to God and pure prayerful actions. Although this prayer is not yet unceasing, it is still prayer repeated very frequently, and the more often it is repeated, the closer it comes to being constant. All of this work is towards this final and necessary goal. For if we resolve to do this work every day, without fail, without hesitation, look, what will become of our souls?

The fear of God is born from divine contemplation. For the fear of God is in and of itself the attainment of pious thought and the perception of God's eternal perfection and action. From turning all of our works to the glory of God, we obtain a constant remembrance of God, or in other words, walking before God. Walking before God consists of doing nothing without remembering that you are in the presence of God. Finally, from frequent calling out to God, or from frequent pious movements toward God in our hearts we will constantly call upon the name of God with warmth and love. When these three things: the fear of God, the remembrance of God, or walking before God, and this turning of the heart toward God with love (loving repetition of the sweet name of the Lord in the heart) then certainly the spiritual fire of which I spoke earlier will catch in the heart, and it will bring with it profound peace, constant sobriety, and living boldness. At that point, a man enters into that state where he needs no longer to desire anything greater or unnecessary on earth, and which is truly the beginning of the blessed state which awaits all in the future. Here, in fact, that which the apostle said is fulfilled: "our life is hidden with Christ in God" ([Col 3.3](#)).

Add these three things to your prayerful work. They are at the same time the reward for labor and the key to the hidden temple of the Kingdom of Heaven. Having opened the doors, go inside, approach the foot of the throne of God and you will be vouchsafed a good word and an embrace from the heavenly Father, and from the depth of your being you will say: "O Lord, O Lord! Who is like Thee?" Pray about this in your work of prayer, and let each one cry out, "when will I come and appear before Thy face, O Lord? My face has sought Thee; I seek, O Lord, Thy face."

I will briefly answer him who wants to know how these three things: fear of God, remembrance of God, and this loving, constant calling on the name of God, are perfected: begin to seek them, and the work itself will teach you how to find its perfection. Hold to only one law: cast aside everything that gets in the way of these things, and earnestly seek out that which aids them. The work itself will teach you how to tell which things are which. I add to this only the following instruction:

When you begin to be contained in your heart as you are contained in your body, surrounded by warmth on all sides, or when you begin to conduct yourself as you conduct yourself around some important person, that is, with fear and attention so that you would not offend him, regardless of your desire to walk and act freely, or if you see, that your soul is beginning to remain with the Lord as a wife with her beloved husband, then know, that the Visitor of our souls is near, at the doors, and He will enter in and feast with you within yourself.

And these few signs, I think, are enough for zealous seekers. All of this is said only with the goal that those of you who pray wholeheartedly would know the limit of prayer, and having worked only a little and obtained only a little you would not think that you have obtained everything. Do not weaken your labor because of this, and thus put a limit on your further progress in the steps of prayer. Just as markers are placed on the sides of large roads so that those passing by them would know how far they have gone and how far remains, so in the spiritual life there are certain signs which indicate the degree of perfection of a life, which are also there, so that those who are zealous for perfection do not stop halfway and deprive themselves of the fruits of their labor, because they know how far they have come and how far remains to go. The fruit may be only a few turns away.

I conclude my word with the serious prayer, that the Lord would give you reason in all things, that you may become a perfect man, in the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ. Amen.

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Theophan the Recluse, On Prayer, Homily 4

Written by Theophan the Recluse
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Three times I have spoken to you about prayer¹: about how to read prayers with attention, about how to ascend to God mentally and in your heart, and how to stand constantly before God with a burning spirit. The Lord instructed us in various degrees and types of prayer, so that each, according to his strength, could be a partaker in the goodness of prayer. For the work of prayer is a great work. It is, as I have said, the testimony of the spiritual life, and also the food of the spiritual life. Therefore one must work towards perfection in prayer more than all other things.

I have reminded you how to succeed in each type of prayer. Now I want to remind you, as a warning, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in prayer, if we do not at the same time work on other virtues.

If we compare prayer to a perfume, and the soul to a bottle for perfume, then we will understand that as perfume does not keep its fragrance in a container full of holes, also the soul cannot continue to pray if there is a lack of virtue. If we compare someone who prays to the whole body, then we see the following lesson: as it is impossible for a man without legs to walk, even if the rest of his body is healthy, so it is impossible to approach God, or reach God in prayer, without active virtue. Look in the apostolic teachings, and you will see that in them prayer does not stand alone, but together with a whole host of virtues. For example, the apostle Paul arms a Christian in spiritual battle and dresses him in the full armor of God. Look at what this is: The belt is truth, the armor is righteousness, the shoes are the gospel of peace, the shield is faith, the helmet is hope, the sword is the word of God ([Eph 6.14-17](#)). Such weapons! After all of this he places his warrior in prayer as if in some sort of fortress: "pray at all times in the spirit with all sorts of prayer and petition" ([Eph 6.18](#)). It is, of course, possible for prayer alone to defeat all enemies, but in order to be strong in prayer, one must be successful in faith, hope, truth, righteousness, and all the rest. In another place, the same apostle adorns the soul with bridal clothing as the bride of Christ, saying, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. 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" ([Col 3.12-16](#)). In many other places in the word of God, prayer is bound up tightly with all the other virtues, as their queen, after which they all strive, and which draws all of them after itself, or even better, as their fragrant flower. As it is necessary for a flower to be covered with leaves as well as having a stem, branches and root, in order to attract attention, it is also necessary for prayer to be accompanied by other good spiritual inclinations and labors in order to blossom like a flower in the soul; faith is

the root, active love is like a stem and branches, and labors of a spiritual-physical nature are like leaves. When such a holy tree is planted in the soul, then in the morning, and in the evening, and during the course of the day, according to its state, the flowers of prayer will freely blossom and fill all of our inner chambers with fragrance.

I remind you of all of this, so that no one would think: "I labor in prayer, and that is enough". No - one must work and be zealous for all things together, both praying and working at all the virtues. It is true that it is impossible to succeed in virtues without prayer, but it is also necessary to work at the virtues while praying, so that the prayer can show its cooperation in these virtues. In order to succeed in prayer, one must pray, but the labor of prayer should be used as the means to virtues. One must be concerned about all things, and always strive to be on the right side. The same thing happens in a clock. A clock works properly and shows the correct time only when all of the gears and other parts inside are complete and in their correct place, and joined together properly. This is the same in our inner spiritual mechanism: the striving of the soul will be true like an arrow, directed straight toward God, when all other parts of the soul are whole and are established in their correct places, so to speak, put in place by virtue.

I will teach you what sort of virtues should surround your prayer, or what sort of prayerful, virtuous life a Christian should plant in himself, not in my own words, but in the words of the holy hierarch Dimitri of Rostov, who briefly lists these things in the following instructions (from Christian Spiritual Instruction, part 1, p. 288):

1. When you wake up, let your first thought be about God, your first word be a prayer to God your creator and keeper of your life, Who is always able to give life or destroy it, who can strike with illness and heal, and who can save or destroy.
2. Bow and give thanks to God Who raised you from sleep, and Who did not allow you to perish in your sins, but with long-suffering awaited your repentance.
3. Make a start for better things, saying with the Psalmist: "I said, now I have made a beginning" ([Ps. 76.11](#)) For no one completes the path to heaven except he who makes a good beginning everyday.
4. From the morning pray like the Seraphim, act like the Cherubim, and be surrounded with angels.
5. Do not waste time any longer. Do only those things which are necessary.
6. In all deeds and words, keep your mind in God; do not write anything in your mind except Christ, and let no image touch your pure heart except the pure image of Christ our God and Savior.
7. Awaken yourself to the love of God in all things, whenever you are able, especially say to yourself with the Psalmist: "in my meditation a fire was kindled" ([Ps. 38.4](#)).
8. You desire to love God, Whose visitation you always see and gaze upon with your interior eyes, therefore turn away from all evil deeds, words, and thoughts. Do, say, and think all things honorably, humbly, and with the fear of a son.
9. Let meekness with praise and humility with honor be together.

10. Let your words be quiet, humble, honorable, and useful. Let silence decide the words that you say. From henceforth, let no empty or rotten word escape your lips.
11. If something funny happens, allow yourself only a smile, and this not often.
12. You will fall into prodigality through anger, wrath, and arguing: keep yourself moderate in anger.
13. Always observe moderation in eating and drinking.
14. Be condescending in all things, and God will bless you, and people will praise you.
15. You must pray about your death, which is the end of all things.

See what sort of wonderful life is taught to the praying Christian. It is true that in one place we have spoken more about prayer, that is, of mental and heart-felt turning to God, but in another place, other virtues have been mentioned, and yet without all of them together, it is impossible to get a foothold in prayer. Let everyone strive in knowledge: standing in prayer and exercising is according to your instruction. How can you stand to pray if you are weighed down with intemperance, or carried away with anger, or if you do not stand in peace, or you are distracted by work and lack of attention and so on? If we are to avoid these things, then we are to strive to attain the opposite: that is, virtue. For this reason, St. John of the Ladder speaks of prayer, saying that it is the mother and the daughter of virtues.

Hearing this, some might say, "what great demands! What a heavy burden! Where can I ever find time and the strength?" But be strong, brethren! Very little is necessary, and one must only take up one thing: zeal for God and salvation in Him in your soul. By its nature, the soul has much good in it and it is only misdirected into all evil things. As soon as zeal for salvation and the pleasing of God is born in one's soul, all of the goodness gathers around this zeal, and immediately no small amount of good appears in the soul. Then zeal, strengthened by the grace of God, with the help of this initial good, begins to find more goodness, and enriches itself with it, and all begins to grow by degrees. Zeal itself has the beginnings of prayer already. It is fed at first by natural virtue, and then begins to feed on the works of virtue that it engendered, and grows and becomes strong, and blossoms and begins to sing and hymn God with a harmonious and prayerful song in the heart.

May the Lord help you succeed in this. Amen.

Translated from the Russian by Rev. Fr. Michael van Opstall – January 2007

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