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# *On Prayer*



St Elisabeth  
Convent

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Minsk  
St Elisabeth Convent  
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## ON PRAYER

*Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).*

*But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly (Matthew 6:6).*

*...Pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (James 5:16).*

*Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41).*

*Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice (Ps. 141:2).*

How should we choose our prayer rule?

In moments of inspiration we can pray all night long, but this state can't be permanent. There are work days when we have to force ourselves to pray and make efforts. That is why it is important to judge our strength and include as many prayers in our prayer rule as we can read, even in the hardest and most trying moments of our spiritual development. It's essential for us to understand what we read to prevent our thoughts wandering, so the words of prayers can inspire us and nourish our minds and hearts. True, when we struggle with our weary flesh, struggle with a prayerless state, we

need to be zealous and work hard. A Christian is formed and a soldier of Christ grows during this warfare.

If you have an opportunity, take the advice of someone who is more experienced in spiritual life before choosing a prayer rule. You should take into account the specifics of your inner world and the prayers whose words and thoughts your heart responds to particularly. Our prayer rule is determined by our lives, it's like a lifebuoy that keeps us afloat.

When the grace of the Holy Spirit and the Lord work in us, this makes our whole life into a prayer. In the periods when we lose this grace we must bring ourselves to read our prayer rule – this backbone of prayer. At these difficult moments of life a prayer rule nourishes our hearts and minds.

Why not put pews in churches? Parishes can do that. What's wrong with that?

Do you mean putting in benches like in Catholic churches? Don't we stand in front of the Almighty? There are both benches and chairs in case someone is ill. Sometimes we need to stand. Such is the tradition in Orthodoxy. We usually sit down at concerts or in cinemas.

Now we're sitting down at the meeting because we're tired of running about all day long. If we begin to pray, we stand up. If we pray while sitting, something will be wrong with it. If you have no strength to stand, then, all right, you can sit on a bench.

Orthodox services are long and 'challenging'. Inevitably we struggle with our flesh and get tired during these services. We struggle with our fallen nature, 'win back' our minds and hearts for prayer. It's a life and death struggle. We must resist in front of God.

As for microphones, we need them in order to hear services better. We thank God for the opportunity to make prayer sound louder.

If a parish wishes to put in more benches, it is in the power of the rector and the parish council. I think that is possible. But it is better to learn to stand in front of God.

May any person and in any situation glorify God or only those who have glorified His Name by laying down their lives for their friends?

Any human being can glorify God. The Lord accepts everybody. He who is virtually drowning in the mire of sin but nevertheless remembers Divine beauty and glorifies God is closest to God, because this is an exploit.

Thoughts keep haunting me during prayer and disturbing me. How can I learn to protect my mind from them?

You should control yourself all the time. As soon as you feel an inflow of thoughts, you need to stop, ask for God's forgiveness and continue your reading. This fight with thoughts may take up many years.

When you pray, you'll be disturbed the whole time. If you remember, in the Soviet Union the Voice of America radio broadcasts were often jammed. While listening, you could suddenly stop hearing the signal broadcast by this station and had to search for that wavelength on your radio again to tune back into the programme. It is the same with prayer: thoughts rush into your mind - and you get carried away, you hear noise in your head, so you have to return, search for the right

‘wavelength’, and then stand up and start praying again. I think that if you reproach yourself continuously, if you constantly implore God to give you humility, patience and attention, then you’ll master all this – the Lord will give you all these things.

‘I was in the spirit’, the apostles used to say. This means absolute detachment from all worldly things and a state of sublime standing before God. The state of prayer where the prayer is repeated without ceasing allows you to concentrate your mind in the heart and become conscious of God’s close presence. This spiritual labour resembles meditation, in which the key words are the words of prayer. Today meditation is widely used for therapeutic relaxation and helps people quit their internal self-dialogue and enter into the state of quiescence and inner stillness aimed at healing our obsession with worldly problems, enabling us to see them in a different light and solving them successfully. Why does one Orthodox booklet call meditation a sin which must necessarily be mentioned at a Confession?

You have a completely wrong understanding of prayer. There is no meditation in Orthodoxy; Orthodoxy rejects and doesn’t accept it. That is one of the fundamental differences between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

In my judgement, in Catholicism a believer strives to focus on his feelings and trust them. The Orthodox practice is radically different.

We can be ‘in the spirit’ even while doing routine, everyday work. The Elder Silouan said: ‘I was serving my neighbours

in the refectory and saw God for the second time.’ He didn’t meditate – he was just lovingly laying the table and feeding his brethren.

When someone focuses his mind and attention on prayer in order to comprehend its meaning, that is one thing. But when he repeats the Jesus Prayer over and over again without noticing the problems of his neighbours, without seeing anyone or anything except his prayer and his ‘spirituality’, this is spiritual death. Very often after reading a book on prayer, people begin to ‘perform prayer’ and they fall into a state of delusion, which is very dangerous.

We need the permanent memory of God in order to seek beauty and not to sink into the mire of sin.

Meditation is when we want to break through into heaven ourselves. Whenever you try to break through into heaven, you meet the devil who’s sure to deceive you. True prayer must make us humble. ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’ – this is how a man asks God to forgive him. He doesn’t pray in order to ‘fly up to heaven’ – it would be a delusion, a disease. Each of us is infected with it at the first stage: you have felt something special during prayer; but this state has disappeared, and you yearn to have it again: ‘I had a deep sense of joy when I prayed; but now I feel bad.’ Can it be that this prayer (when you feel bad and pray) brings you many more benefits?

We don’t adjust our spiritual life to our states and feelings. We beg ‘Lord forgive me!’ We pray while the enemy penetrates into our hearts through our thoughts, trying to defile and profane everything and show human ugliness. That is why we need Divine help, and we turn to Him, ‘Lord help me!’

As for ‘performing prayer’... An ascetic prays for the entire world, and some can misinterpret this by thinking that



he meditates like a Hindu and ‘travels to the astral plane’. In reality the ascetic tearfully prays for the whole world, for all people who are afflicted and tormented. These words are not mere formulas — there is love and compassion in them. That is the fundamental difference between prayer and meditation. Self-concentration and focusing on your internal capabilities only increases pride. We must think, ‘A dog is better than me’, as St Silouan of Mt Athos taught – and only then will we have true prayer.

Apart from morning and evening prayers, I always read the Gospel, three or four psalms, the akathist hymn to the Mother of God, and prayers to saints. I recently learned that we should ask for a priest’s blessing before reading the Psalter and akathists. Should I continue reading them or ask for a priest’s blessing first?

God bless you. Please read them. However, take care not to neglect your household duties and your nearest and dearest ones. If your loved ones are around you, you must find time for them in addition to your prayer rule. That is a delicate question. Sometimes people want to pray, have a thirst for prayer – and glory to God! At the same time, you should find time to speak with those who are near you and may need your attention and help. I know this from my own experience. I had a period when grace touched me: I had a family and children to care for, but I seemed to live in an absolutely different realm! It was very hard for me to ‘come back down to earth’. Of course, you are welcome to read these things with the priest’s blessing, but it shouldn’t be to the detriment of anyone else. If you read and pray for your loved ones with

faith, then they will certainly benefit from this a lot, too. But you should act with careful consideration.

Is it possible to make an old dream of many Orthodox come true: namely to introduce Belarusian on a level with Church Slavonic in services? And how can it be implemented?

Those who wish to pray in Belarusian are welcome to do it. Fr George at the Sts Peter and Paul Cathedral in Minsk serves in Belarusian occasionally. Most of our people use Church Slavonic, though. This language unites Slavic peoples. It was given to us by God in ancient times, when our peoples and Holy Rus’ were enlightened. White Rus’ is a part of Holy Rus’. Our holy ancestors prayed in Old Slavonic. It is a very meaningful language and, most importantly, it is not cluttered up with modern slang, which anyone can hear in markets, shops and bars today...

This language is for the Church. It is sanctified. When I began to go to church, I didn’t understand much, like you, and I wanted to have everything ‘in Russian’ too. All of a sudden the depth of Church Slavonic touched me at one point. It is something indescribable. I began to understand everything at a far deeper level than I could understand in Russian. It was a miracle I will never forget. We read the Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete in Church Slavonic. It sounds very different in modern Russian. Though it is read in Russian in some churches, it lacks poetry and music. Now you can get whatever you wish. For example, you can find the Gospel in Belarusian. Everybody has freedom, you only need to pray. So I believe that your dream has already come true. There is no need to dream here – just pray!

### What is stronger: the Psalter or the Gospel?

St David foresaw the Gospel and Christ in the spirit with his Psalter. The Gospel is the very life of Christ, it's the Word of the Lord Himself. Of course, we should read both the Psalter and the Gospel – the more the better – with attention and humility.

Our mind still doesn't understand nor accept the words of Christ about freedom in God. We tend to complicate things, see, weigh up and judge everything from a human point of view, while the Lord says simply, *Follow Me* (Matthew 4:19). When people stand up and follow Christ, their lives change.

### How can we learn to pray attentively?

You should feel where your heart is and where your mind is. Look into yourself closely. Human mind can keep wandering around rubbish dumps of all kinds even while someone is in church.

That is why it is important for us to learn to 'bring together' our hearts and minds, becoming 'whole' and not divided. Concentration in prayer means a continuous struggle with your 'wandering' and your inattention. 'Give blood, and receive the spirit', this is what the Holy Fathers taught us to do.

All of us must have had moments when we were praying attentively in extreme situations. One day I was told that my most loved ones would soon die, and then I prayed with all due attention. At that time no one distracted my mind. It was like seeing a wall in front of me with a small opening in it, and I had to speak to God through that opening, or else it would be too late. I was strained to the utmost. This tension cannot last long because it takes up all your strength.

The more seriously you take your prayer and the more a conversation with God means to you, the more attentively

you pray. Words of prayer should reach your heart and not remain only in your mind. So it's vital to unite your mind with your heart. That is not to say that you need to 'find some spot'; rather, you should attain such wholeness when you stand and belong to God fully – every cell, every hair, and every bone of yours belongs to Him. There is no one except God. If you pray this way if only for a few minutes, you will acquire this habit. Try!

### May I pray for an abundant harvest?

Please do! It is good when you work land and grow something – it is the life of God. However, you should work within reasonable limits and not to the detriment of your spiritual advancement, so as not to be fit to drop and unable to go to church. Otherwise you risk transforming the best things to bad ones.

### What is the Prayer of Gethsemane?

The Prayer of Gethsemane is the Saviour's prayer before His Passion on the Cross: *Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me: nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done* (Luke 22:42). He turned to the Heavenly Father and humanly begged Him to save Him from this suffering, from these torments, because His sinless Flesh did not want to suffer and die. Being an obedient Son of His Heavenly Father, Jesus said, *Nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done*.

The Prayer of Gethsemane is our life, when we want to do things our own way and at the same time say to God, 'May Thy will be done, not mine!'

Of course, that is not the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, where the Lord prayed so He could suffer for the sins of mankind, but still, it is our 'little Gethsemane'.

We suffer for our sins; but if we do so voluntarily like the Good Thief, then we can hear the words of Christ, *Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise* (Luke 23:43). When we begin to grumble, 'What for? Why? Why are others not suffering? Am I really worst of all?', we become frenzied, embittered, and our minds get clouded.

The Prayer of Gethsemane is the acceptance of the will of God in our salvation, the gratitude for all that we have from God despite the fact that sin stands in our way.

I find it hard to understand the meaning of some words in prayers, which is why I can't pray fervently and sincerely. May I replace these prayers with others in my prayer rule?

It is up to you to choose prayers for your prayer rule. If your heart doesn't respond to one or another prayer, then you're free to read a different prayer. Anyway, there must be a prayer rule, a foundation on which your relationship with God is built.

If you don't understand something in some prayers, you can ask competent people or read about it in books. There are so many prayers in the Church! The Church has been accumulating these priceless spiritual treasures for so many years that today you can find a prayer for any taste. Isn't it good? Read the prayer to which your soul responds. You also need to read the Gospel, if only a little at a time every day. It is the Word of God.

My father is ill – he is an alcoholic. I read the akathist hymn in front of the icon of the Mother of God the Inexhaustible Chalice, but I cannot

concentrate on the words of the prayer. When I read the Gospel or the Psalter, my mind is not distracted. May I read the Gospel and the Psalter instead of the akathist?

We try and see what increases our attention and concentration. If you feel that the Gospel and the Psalter are best for you, then you are welcome to read them both.

Sometimes we get used to something and get tired of some prayers. Keep searching: there is a lot of spiritual nourishment. The main thing is that the words we read must touch both our minds and our hearts. This calls for a bit of inner self-discipline.

If we lack time, would it be more reasonable to read one prayer attentively in front of an icon rather than read the whole prayer rule inattentively on the run?

I assume you mean praying on a bus. It is necessary to get into the way of praying at any time and every hour. If you have had no time, overslept or had no strength to get up earlier, then just read several prayers in front of an icon and go to work, but continue your prayer rule during your journey.

If our mind is idle, then some thoughts and memories will enter it and we will arrive at work without the help, which we would get from prayer. Therefore, in my opinion we must learn to concentrate on prayer and be alone with God even when you are surrounded by people. It is a very good experience and essential for us: being among people outwardly while standing before God and reading a prayer inwardly in our mind.

Of course, it would be very good to pray like the Publican in the Gospel: God be merciful to me a sinner (Luke 18:13).



But we may decide that we have read one prayer and that is sufficient. We need to make efforts. The Apostle Paul says: *Pray without ceasing* (1 Thess. 5:17), which means keeping God in your memory permanently, standing before Christ in your mind's eye unceasingly, and always keeping yourselves in the grace and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God Himself Who abides in us.

What does 'counting your prayer beads as the evening prayer rule' mean?

It means that the evening prayers are replaced with reciting the Jesus Prayer a certain number of times, using prayer beads to count the prayers. Formerly people were illiterate and they could only prepare for Communion by repeating the Jesus Prayer; for example, a certain canon was equivalent to fifty Jesus Prayers, and the akathist was equivalent to one hundred prayers. So people could perform their entire rule using prayer beads if they had no books or didn't know how to read and write.

How do we pray for a mentally ill person so the Lord may enlighten him and have mercy on him? How many kathismas from the Psalter and how many chapters from the Gospel am I supposed to read? I began to read a lot at a time, but the person isn't any better and is still in hospital. Is there any point in making efforts and reading more? Or it is better when prayer gives you joy? Does the number of prayers matter, or will the Lord have mercy on him for one word, if He wills?

It is a very general question. Beyond all doubt, if you exert yourself to help this person, if you read many prayers, that is praiseworthy, and you show your love. However, you want your efforts to be crowned with success, while there has been no success so far; so your faith is probably weakening and you feel your strength is on the wane. So you ask whether you may reduce the number of your prayers.

To my mind, if you are not indifferent to that person, you must undertake a labour which is within your powers. Many justify themselves saying that they can utter one word from the bottom of their hearts. What if your heart is dead? The ice in your heart must be melted! What if your heart is covered with a thick crust? A small hole should be punched in it to let at least something spiritual enter it. You must put painstaking effort into this task.

Quantity transforms itself into quality. You read a lot and can understand nothing, but nevertheless you persevere and don't give up. After a time you will begin to notice that you have already heard some word. It may take you a year to get prepared to hear a single word. That's fine, too. If you hadn't read so much, you wouldn't have been able to hear it even in ten years.

Surely you need to work hard and that is unlikely to give you much joy. Will you really pray for someone who is ill to derive joy from it? What you need is selfless compassion towards him. Feeling pity for someone else inspires people to turn to the Almighty. Wives and mothers come to church and pray for their husbands and children. They read, for instance, the akathist hymn to the icon of the Inexhaustible Chalice, not only for their loved ones but also for themselves because by establishing contact with God they become true believers.

When one of our loved ones is unwell and doctors refuse

to help them, what shall we do? We run to church and meet God there – Divine grace touches us. This is a path towards God as well. Maybe the person in question won't be healed or even won't survive, but we remain in church because we have felt that God has touched us, that God is near and He helps us.

Can we assume that the more you pray for one or another person the sooner God will have mercy on him? Does God do this not for the number of prayers but for something else?

Our love for people is expressed by the fact that we make efforts and pray for them. God definitely hears us and helps our neighbours. However, we can pray all our lives without seeing any visible changes for the better. What we need to understand is that the very fact that we have prayed is the mercy of God both for us and for people in question.

Sometimes everything seems to fall into place once you have said a single prayer. It brings us consolation. Unfortunately, in some cases we won't see the fruit of our labours until the life of the age to come. You may pray for years, but the situation will only get worse. It is here that you should display your humility and faith. This is for very strong and spiritually gifted people – not everybody can bear this.

As we read in one saint's biography, an elder prayed for ten years, performing his huge prayer rule day in and day out, but there was not a single dewdrop in his heart. Nonetheless, the elder wasn't angry with God for not hearing him. That was how the Lord tested His servant. But, once faced with a state like this, we are at a loss and have no idea what to do. We must understand: we will have trials so we can grow spiritually if only a little bit, so we shouldn't pride

ourselves on our prayers but humble ourselves. We will face trials, we will be misunderstood, and will go through inner problems. All of this will indicate that now we can endure even greater sorrows.

Protestants teach that if someone has joined their cult and repented, then he will get the green light in all spheres, he will meet only success in all his undertakings and will only move forward. In Orthodoxy it is quite the reverse: the closer to God the more the tribulations. Only love for God can sustain us. There can be no human judgement any more here because we see that Christ doesn't lead us to dominion over the world; rather, He teaches us to be humble and patient and to love.

Why is it easy to pray for some people and difficult to pray for other people?

It is easy to pray for some people because we feel that they pray for us too. For example, it is easy to pray for the repose of Archpriest Nikolai Guryanov because he prays for all of us, while it is certainly difficult to pray for someone who has lived all his life without God.

As a priest I have conducted funeral services for quite a few reposed people and I noticed the following. Sometimes I stand by the coffin and feel weighed down, it is hard for me to pray and I can hardly utter the words; but when I stand by another coffin, I feel joy, relief and God's help.

When someone heeds our words and obeys us, we are able to help him because he is listening to us and trying to follow our advice. On the contrary, when someone doesn't listen to us and doesn't want to, it is much harder for us to do anything for him and speak with him! This applies to

spiritual life as well. If a person leads an attentive spiritual life, if his soul keeps vigil and is watchful all the time, then our prayer for him unites with God easily. If he is in unbelief and doubt, our prayer turns into a most laborious task because we ourselves have a hard time and, besides, have to bear our neighbour's heavy burden.

Notwithstanding this fact, it doesn't mean that such prayer is unnecessary. What if it benefits us more when it is difficult to pray for somebody? A prayer for our offender, for someone who doesn't love us, for our enemy may be vital for us so we can overcome our ego and break free from a certain sin.

Any prayer requires tremendous effort. If we find it extremely difficult to pray for some people, it indicates that we mustn't stop praying but must humbly bear this word for our neighbours before God.

I have read in the writings of the Holy Fathers and personally experienced the power of the Jesus Prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner', which burns off all passions, especially lust and gluttony, and is our most powerful and fastest weapon against enemies. But many, pleading modern times, human weakness and the possibility of falling into delusion, refuse to do this prayer. The weaker Christians are spiritually and physically, the stronger remedies they need to use if they really want to be healed from spiritual leprosy. How do contemporary monks and nuns keep purity of heart? Do they repeat the Jesus Prayer while performing their obediences and privately?

We need to pray without ceasing. Unfortunately, having read a book on the Jesus Prayer, people tend to approach this prayer from the end. They strive to attain the states described in the Lives of ascetics, which may cause serious diseases. People seek neither repentance, nor the protection from 'wandering thoughts' in prayer; instead, they expect instant results – some 'states' – from prayer. This indicates that their hearts are not humble. People demand some 'present' from God. A present from God is always an unexpected joy. That is the nature of converts. When they pray, they observe intently whether or not this prayer 'works' in one way or another. And here we may see a substitution of concepts. People fail to understand that prayer presupposes hard work. The Lord says, *It is not for you to know the times or the seasons* (Acts 1:7). What we must do is labour.

Of course, people should repeat the Jesus Prayer both in monasteries and elsewhere. It is short, so you can repeat it wherever you are. Some people, including even priests, say that the Jesus Prayer can bring those who do it into the state of spiritual delusion. In reality it can happen only if you begin to fantasize. However, when you have no alternative (everything is being destroyed around you and you can only call upon the Almighty), then naturally the Jesus Prayer is your shortest and safest path towards repentance.

Prayer is meant to foster attention and repentance in us. Unfortunately, we are still too sensual and we perceive this prayer accordingly. In spite of this the Jesus Prayer is vital for every Orthodox Christian because we invoke Christ, our Intercessor, in it.

Do we always have to ask for a priest's blessing to read the akathist hymn together by agreement with others<sup>1</sup>?

Most importantly, you should carry this undertaking through. If you've agreed with people that you'll read with them, then try not to let them down. You must assess your strength and decide whether or not you have time for this. Sadly, many people take on this rule and then don't read it.

It is a very good way of praying. I used to read the Psalter this way in the Caucasus about thirty years ago. There were twenty of us living in tents. I would read one kathisma a day – it was my duty. It teaches self-discipline and inspires you to pray for your family and friends.

The Psalter is read for them daily. But people very often overreach themselves and let the others down – in my view, that's a sin.

How ought we to read prayers at home: sitting or kneeling, aloud or to ourselves?

Some have aching legs, so they kneel down; others have zeal, so they stand stock-still despite pain in their feet; others can't stand on their feet, but they keep holding the holy book in their hands as they lie.

So how should we read: aloud or to ourselves? Our days are full of everyday chores. When we are tired and our thoughts are juggled together, it is hard for us to read the rule to the end silently. If we read aloud, we are more concentrated on the words of prayers. Therefore, perhaps it's better

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<sup>1</sup>The reading of prayers or the Psalter by more than person at the same time by mutual agreement (cf. Matthew 18:19-20).

for us converts to read aloud. But if the environment doesn't allow you to do so (for example, it annoys your nearest and dearest), then, of course, you should read quietly to yourself. God Who sees your circumstances will grant you attention. Another example: you have to read your rule while you're on a train. Of course, you won't stand up and start reading aloud. Maybe it wouldn't be bad to do it, but few have such courage. So it's good if you sit or lie down quietly and read your evening prayers. The Lord sees your circumstances very well. However, if you're lazy and just want to be closer to your pillow, that's another matter – it's called neglect.

I am often attacked by lustful thoughts when I pray in church or at home. How can I learn to resist them? How can I get rid of them?

Thoughts come to our minds to prevent us from being with God. As long as we don't accept them, don't converse with them and don't let them into our minds while continuing our prayer, it's not a sin.

Struggling with thoughts is the most intensive, invisible battle of every Christian. The enemy can't physically attack us (except for extreme cases) because the Lord doesn't allow him to do so. The devil acts through our thoughts, through our minds, and so we must train our minds not to wander, to avoid distractions and stay focused.

'You are where your mind is now', the holy elders used to say. So we must control our minds. As soon as a lustful thought comes into your mind, you need to chase it out and banish it through prayer and contempt.

We humans are dust. Look at your body and you will see veins, bones, blood... Where does lust come from? That is non-



sense. Without God the human body is dead, like a lump of clay.

If you didn't accept those thoughts, then there's no need to mention this at Confession or anywhere else. Some images may flicker before you, but you don't yield to them. But if you did accept them, and they keep tormenting you, disturbing you, you keep them in your mind, and they've already become your thoughts, that's a sin.

The spiritual father of St Silouan the Athonite told him, 'Don't let lustful thoughts in,' – and he never accepted them from that time on. True, thoughts won't leave us alone, but it doesn't depend on us and it's not our sin. These are the arrows with which the enemy tries to hit his target – our minds, from which thoughts proceed to our hearts. The enemy disturbs Christians this way. Blasphemous thoughts may attack you when you are coming up to the Chalice. Then you should banish them and say to yourself: 'They are not mine. I am going to the Chalice. Lord forgive me!'

What does praying to God during church services mean? After all, just listening, though attentively, to what is sung and read in church, is still not prayer, is it?

This is what joint prayer is like. All of this isn't sung and read just to provide a background. It is we who sing, read and participate in services. These are not mere words because all the liturgical books were compiled by the Holy Fathers. The liturgical year is a cycle, a circle symbolising eternity.

If you can't understand or hear, if people read in an indistinct manner or if you are in a state when it's hard to perceive the words of the service, then read the Jesus Prayer to avoid mind distractions.

How do we build a relationship with God in prayer? What should I pay attention to?

In order to learn to pray, you need to try and hear the words you read with your mind and heart. You should remember God as often as possible, keep in mind that He sees us, and ask for the Lord's blessing before doing anything. If you force yourself, if you make persistent efforts, then in time you'll develop a habit of prayer and won't be able to do anything without prayer. When Divine grace leaves you, you will feel it and suffer. This suffering will help you straighten your life and rectify your mistakes. He who forces himself for God's sake will enter the Heavenly Kingdom. *The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force* (Matthew 11:12), the Gospel proclaims. Referring to the lives of the saints whose memory we honour every day, e.g., St Seraphim of Sarov, we see that their path towards God was a thorny one, but it was a path towards light. No matter how difficult and narrow it may be at different points of our lives, eternal bliss awaits us. It is for the sake of this bliss that we should stint ourselves of something and submit ourselves to the highest goal – acquiring the Holy Spirit.

Although I've prayed for twelve years, I still don't have a living faith – everything comes from my mind, everything is lifeless. Does God hear my prayer, if I can't even hear myself?

Both God and demons can hear you. You don't seem to have worked enough. I think your soul wants a different relationship with God. It is suffering because everything is outward and superficial. This suffering, coupled with your



desire to hear a living word to God and His answer in your heart, will surely bear fruit. It may not happen straightaway and you may have to toil for a long time, but the prayers you've been reading for twelve years ('fruitlessly', as you think) are sure to lead you to a new relationship with God. You only need to be patient and not to stop your prayer and the labour that you've already done.

I'd like to improve my living conditions. May I ask God and the saints to help me with this? How am I supposed to ask?

This is precisely the way you should ask! First read your daily prayers and then say, 'Lord, if it is according to Thy will and if it is for my good, help me improve my living conditions.'

What does reading the Psalter or the Gospel for no particular reason and for someone else mean? What's the difference?

You are tired and don't feel like reading, but you do have a desire to help someone else. You overcome your physical fatigue, your sickness, and you take the Psalter and the Gospel in your hands and say, 'Lord, I'm powerless to help my neighbour by anything and have no energy, but now I will tear myself away from sleep and read for a minute despite my weakness. Please accept this little sacrifice of mine for the health (or the repose) of someone whom I hold dear and who means a lot to me.' I believe this sacrifice will be accepted by the Almighty. Of course, you should read for your own enlightenment too.

How do we improve the concentration of the mind and learn patience?

You need to continuously force yourself to do this and control yourself all the time. St Seraphim of Sarov used to carry stones on his back and say: "I'm tormenting him who's tormenting me.' Likewise, we need to feel the presence of God permanently.

Even half an hour or an hour of attentive prayer doesn't come easy to us. Schema-Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) used to say that if you manage to pray for two hours attentively and without distractions, your prayer is perfect.

How should I pray for my husband and son who are alcoholics?

Praying means spilling blood. Perhaps at this phase you're only reading prayers and not praying. Real prayer is the hardest possible labour in this world. In order to stay with God alone (so no one and nothing can distract your mind when you begin to speak with God in the words of prayer) you need to focus all your attention on prayer, renounce yourself and even die in some sense. The evil one won't allow you to keep your mind undistracted. Normal prayer exceeds human strength.

However, when you want to help your people in trouble – your husband and son – your heart will give birth to prayer and that will be your path towards God. After all, people begin to pray through sorrows. An illustrative example is the life of St Xenia of St Petersburg<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Holy Blessed Xenia of St Petersburg (born Xenia Grigorievna Petrova; between 1719 and 1730 - c. 1803) is a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church and a 'fool-for-Christ'.

Someone's husband has left the family, the marriage has fallen apart, and a person begins to pray. After a while you see that the person has gained something significantly more valuable: she meets God and sees all the events not from a human perspective but with gratitude and confidence in God. This thankfulness is for both sorrow and joy.

Why should God need to be praised perpetually – in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening?  
Why do we have to pray so much and so long?

God doesn't need anything because He has everything. Rather, we need this in order to tear ourselves away from earthly things and remember God because we've lost this memory.

When people lived in Paradise, they were nourished by the Lord through prayer. The only thing they needed to do was prayer. Having lost contact with God, people began to win their bread on earth and forgot the Bread from Heaven. Of course, we must force ourselves. Only then will our souls revive and be refined little by little. Naturally, it's a question of time.

What does it mean if you feel sorrow and tears appearing while you're praying for the repose of your relatives?

Sorrow and tears are a normal state during prayer. Perhaps your soul grieves and is tormented by the fact that your relatives weren't prepared enough for eternity and hadn't gained enough love of Christ. But here you should be cautious so as to avoid thinking highly of yourself and perceiving your own feelings as the barometer of spiritual life.

In addition, our souls may grieve because we didn't give enough love and care to our loved ones. Nevertheless, we

strive to overcome grief by our faith and hope; therefore, we pray so the love of Christ can cover both our relatives' sins and our own weaknesses.

How many chapters of the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ should Orthodox Christians read so their souls can be saved?

From one line to the whole Gospel. Daily reading of the Gospel is the norm of life of Christians. That's of prime importance for us. Whether two chapters or one chapter, a page or half a page – the main thing is to read regularly.

We try to enlighten our minds, hearts and all the parts of our bodies by the words of the Gospel and receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from this reading. When the Gospel is read in our homes, everything is blessed there. Little by little, as we become humbler, a deeper meaning of the words of the Gospel is revealed to us. It won't happen immediately. We need to 'enter' into the Gospel, let God into our lives, begin to live with Christ – only then will everything begin to change.

Sometimes I quarrel with my husband before reading morning or evening prayers. After that I am too ashamed to pray because I feel as if the Lord is angry with me and He doesn't need my worthless prayer. What should I do in a situation like this?

It is you and not the Lord who need prayers. Learn to pray. It is prayer that can bring peace back into your mind. It helps us struggle with our sins, passions, resentment, it reconciles us with the Creator and gives us strength.

Touching God through prayer is an opportunity to gain strength in order to overcome sins, resentment, and, of

course, make up with your husband. So we speak not of our worthiness or unworthiness, but of the help we must ask God for. The Saviour came to save mankind. If we say that we are unworthy of salvation, that's self-deception.

Pray and implore God as long as you have a desire. For the desire will then disappear. Yet you will have to pray and turn to God all the same, for the Saviour said: *without Me ye can do nothing* (John 5:15). The devil often suggests to people that they are 'unworthy' of praying, going to church, and taking Communion. He seeks to deceive us and lead us away from God by hook or by crook. The Lord says, *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you* (Matthew 7:7). Try not to be emotionally and mood-dependent.

I have two children (aged five and one and a half years old respectively). I often get very tired with them; when I put the younger one to bed in the evening, I can doze off before he falls asleep. When I finally force myself to stand up and pray, I can't concentrate and have a cold heart. Then I replace the evening prayers with the Rule of Venerable Seraphim of Sarov. Is it okay to do this?

Isn't the Rule of St Seraphim of Sarov a prayer? Your prayer rule should be commensurate with your possibilities and strength. You have a family and two small children whom you must put to bed. This takes a lot of energy and time. Don't be despondent because you're unable to perform your entire prayer rule. You can do domestic work and perceive it as your service. While putting the children to bed, you can sing a prayer or read something from the Gospel. I believe it will have

a salutary effect both on you and your children. You should try and find a suitable form of prayer. You can (mentally) be in Jerusalem while you're standing by the cooker. Likewise, while you are in church you can be 'at the dump' if your mind keeps wandering and there are dirty thoughts in it. Your life is devoted to serving your children and your husband. That is hard labour. Everything should be spiritualized by God's blessing, by turning to the Almighty for help. This is what your prayer should be like at present.

If someone doesn't want to sin but wants to control his thoughts, keeping in mind that God is near him and sees him, then can he do all of this without doing the Jesus Prayer?

It's hard for us to repeat the Jesus Prayer all the time verbally. It is possible to do everything for the glory of God, in the presence of God – and that will be the memory of God too. When you speak with your mother and other people, look at them as at the image and likeness of God. I think, if we keep our hearts and minds under control, if we don't turn our attention away, don't look around, judging others and wandering 'to the other end of the earth', then it's possible. It depends on your self-discipline, the labour of your inner man. If you have the desire to live with God, in God's presence, dedicating all your life to the service of Him and your neighbours, then I believe God will fulfil this desire. After all, we can't recite the Jesus Prayer twenty-four hours a day nonstop; but what we must do is remember God and seek His will permanently.

What is the mind? How do we understand 'mind in the words of prayer'?

You can read a prayer while thinking about outside matters. That's why we must be attentive, our minds should be sober without dreaming or wandering anywhere. Physically we can stand in church and be at a restaurant in our minds at the same time. By collecting our minds, hearts, and feelings through prayer, church services, the contact with God and Communion, we restore the unity of soul and mind that was once lost by human beings; we overcome the disunity that was caused by the fall of man.

It is important for us to find minutes in our everyday life and try to concentrate, try not only to 'read through' prayers but also comprehend their meaning so they can touch our hearts. We shouldn't get distracted by thoughts which very often come during prayer. The invisible, spiritual battle for our minds is going on. 'You are where your mind is now', the Holy Fathers used to say. So we must struggle for our minds. This is the work to create our inner temples.

What do the words 'the mind should enter the heart' mean? How should I understand them?

Man was made whole; this wholeness was distorted after the fall – our mind wanders, there is mental turmoil and melancholy, our heart is heavy – all this is caused by the fact that we can't control ourselves and we misuse our vital force. Spiritual life requires internal work so we can restore the wholeness of our souls. During prayer Christians try to control themselves all the time, to be attentive and not get distracted by extraneous thoughts. We must collect our thoughts and stay alone with God. It is important to prevent

our hearts, minds and bodies being relaxed, weak or distracted. That is why Christians try to unite the heart and head, to focus their minds so they can address God with their petitions with all their essence. People should unite their hearts and heads not only during prayer but also throughout their lives. Sometimes extraneous thoughts run through our minds and there is no peace of mind while we talk with someone. All of this prevents us from understanding and hearing even those people who are closest to us. Therefore, the struggle for our wholeness is vital.

May I read my evening prayers not before going to bed but before dinner – for example, at five o'clock? I often feel very sleepy after dinner. I have only to lie down for half an hour after dinner, and I fall asleep and don't read the rule until late at night when I wake up. Would it be appropriate for me to eat after reading the evening prayers?

The rule is for the man, and not vice versa. If you see that you don't have enough attention and energy to read your prayer rule properly at the end of the day before going to sleep, then I think you're right. What matters is not that you 'read through' your rule but that the words of the prayers touch your heart. It is very important for all of us to have a clear idea and understanding of prayer and the prayer rule. That means remembering God, speaking with Him, struggling with the world which strives to draw our attention away from the words we're going to say to God. It's good that you seek chances to be attentive; prayer can give you strength to live with God.



Can you give me some tips on what prayers I should read for the salvation of Russia and for the Russian nation?

St Seraphim of Sarov said, 'Acquire the spirit of peace, and thousands of souls around you will be saved.' We must live as Christians. There are lots of penitential prayers, in which we seek God's help. Prayer must become part of our lives. We shouldn't dream of some (even if the most beautiful) form of government of Russia, whether political or economic; rather, we should be mindful of how much someone who abides in the love of God, lives by the life of the Church, prays for all those around him, along with his city, his country and the whole planet (not only for Russia), can achieve. We can't limit the work of salvation to just one spot on the map. We speak of the whole Adam who is fallen, of every single human being, who went astray, who is tormented and dies without God in our days, whether he lives in Africa or Antarctica. If your soul feels the Spirit of God, it will surely pray because your soul will 'ache' and be filled with compassion for people; it will suffer because people fail to understand each other, don't see and hurt one another. This prayer of yours will be saving both for all of Russia and your neighbours.

Many books say that when we pray we should refrain from imagining any images of the Lord, the Mother of God or saints. I haven't yet found the description of what we should have in our minds during prayer anywhere. After all, we should understand that our words are directed to the Lord and not to the fathomless depths of the universe somehow. How can we catch this 'something' that

is right? Prayer is conversation with God, but, for instance, when we are in a mental dialogue with our colleagues, mothers, or husbands, we re-create mental images of those people.

We shouldn't let imagination into our prayer. We humans are sensual, passionate, and emotional, and we are easily impressed. There are rules that were given us by the Holy Fathers, which may help us build our relationship with God properly.

Indeed, we can't imagine a vacuum. We are aware that we stand before God, in the presence of Him Who knows every thought of ours. While praying, we try to concentrate on the words we pronounce. Our minds should be clear, and we must not turn these words into images and don't 'paint' them with earthly colours. This is why we are different from Roman Catholics: they visualise images and form 'pious mental pictures'. There are the meditations of Ignatius Loyola, a Catholic saint, where he stresses an intense focus on mental imagery. It is the realm of imagination and sensual perception. As for us Orthodox, we stand in front of the invisible God and seek to stay alone with Him, laying aside all earthly cares and all imagined images, even the very pious ones. We try to unite the mind and the heart in order to restore the internal unity (that was destroyed by sin) during prayer and lose touch with the temporary world of the senses.

Besides, there are icons. But they don't exist so we can examine them and conclude that they are 'smiling' at us or 'rebuking' us sternly. Icons are windows that transport us into the spiritual realm. Looking at icons, we turn to the prototypes, namely the saints, the Mother of God, and the Lord Himself. Icons are blessed by the Holy Church, they are painted according to the canons; they aren't products of the



painters' imagination – they are part of the Holy Tradition that the Church upholds and offers us so we can communicate with God and His saints through it. The same is true of photographs of those closest to us – we look at them and remember people, addressing those we hold dear and not the photograph itself. This applies to icons as well.

With that said, we should be reserved, always checking out our sensual and emotional impulses. We need to be conscious of our sinful nature on the one hand and of the greatness and incomprehensible love of God on the other hand. I believe that when you pray, when you make spiritual efforts, things will sort themselves out. The main thing is to avoid emotional outbursts, sensual experience and exaltation – everything should be simple and clear. Then there'll be no 'smart' questions and philosophical wanderings. God will be close to you, and your soul will live by this. What you need is sober-mindedness, composure, a peaceful heart and, of course, attention.

Please can you give me some tips on how I should develop my prayer rule, which prayers and at what time I should read? Occasionally I read akathists to the saints I venerate and who I pray to and read the evening prayers (not every day). Frankly, sometimes I have no energy after work. What should I do then? How should I read the Psalter and the Gospel?

In order to find the spiritual measure of your communion with God in prayer you need to look at your circumstances in life, conditions, and your possibilities. The quality of prayer should matter to you a lot; you can 'read through' many a prayer, but it'll be a purely outward experience, and no word

will enter your heart. And if you want to pray with attention and concentration, you need to find the golden mean – a rule that is within your powers today. Much depends on your routine, your workload, your physical tiredness, and the people who live with you. Sometimes there are straitened circumstances because if you live amid non-believers, it's very hard to pray openly and freely.

A creative approach to choosing a prayer rule is desirable. For example, your soul responds to akathists – they warm you up and you like them a lot; it means that you should use akathists and include them in your rule. After praying we need to feel our bond with God, while our hearts should be warm and melt after being frozen by sins, getting the strength we need for love. That's why it seems to me that the prayer rule should be chosen individually, judging by your state.

There are morning and evening prayers, selected by the Church to ensure that people start and finish each day by giving thanks to God, asking the Lord to give them strength, attention, patience, so that the Spirit of God would never leave them but inspire them to do good works. This is a collection of prayers written by holy men as the priceless Church heritage which is necessary for our salvation. We can also address God in our own words which spring up in our hearts - and that is fine too.

Everybody has his limit of time and energy. Clearly, we can't pray without ceasing: all of us need to rest, go to work, and perform our duties in this world. So you should choose a minimal rule to follow and gradually add something to this rule with slight modification.

It would be good if you could read the Gospel, the Epistles, and the Psalter on a daily basis. Reading spiritual books is a form of prayer too, it's thinking about God, and it fosters our spiritual development.

Seek and you shall find the prayers that are necessary for you today and to which your soul responds. The Jesus Prayer can be repeated at any time in any place. If you happen to have some spare minutes you can try to read it.

The memory of God and His presence in our lives are of paramount importance to us. By using a creative approach and making efforts you can determine the measure of prayer necessary for your spiritual life and development today.

Divine love is boundless and inexhaustible.



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