



## Spirituality and Contemplation of the Oblate: A Christian Orthodox approach

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Spirituality in the Orthodox Church means the everyday activity of life in communion with God. The term spirituality refers not merely to the activity of man's spirit alone, his mind, heart and soul, but it refers as well to the whole of man's life as inspired and guided by the Spirit of God. Every act of a Christian must be a spiritual act. Every thought must be spiritual, every word, every deed, every activity of the body, every action of the person. This means that all that a person thinks, says and does must be inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit so that the will of God the Father might be accomplished as revealed and taught by Jesus Christ the Son of God.

*... whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).*

Doing all things to the glory of God is the meaning and substance of life for a human being. This "doing" is what Christian spirituality is about.

Christian spirituality is centered in God; in fact, its very goal is communion with God, which is attainable through the accomplishment of His will. To be what God wants us to be and to do what God want us to do is the sole meaning of our human existence. The fulfillment of the prayer "Thy will be done" is the heart and soul of all spiritual effort and activity.

In the Old Testament law, it is written:

*I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy (Lev 11:44).*

In the New Testament, the first letter of Saint Peter refers to this fundamental command of God.

*... as He who called you is holy, be holy yourself in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet 1:16).*

That human beings should be holy by sharing in happiness of God Himself is the meaning of union with God. All are "called to be saints" (*Rom 1:7*) by becoming "partakers of the nature of God" (*2 Pet 1:1*). This is what Jesus meant when He said in Sermon on the Mount, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt 5:48*).



The teaching that man must be holy and perfect like God Himself through the accomplishment of the will of God is the central teaching of the Orthodox Christian faith. This teaching has been stated in many different ways in the Orthodox spiritual tradition. Saint Maximus the Confessor (7th Century) said it this way: "Man is called to become by divine grace all that God Himself is by nature." This means very simply that God wills and helps His creatures to be like He is, and that is the purpose of their being and life. As God is holy, man must be holy. As God is perfect, man must be perfect, pure, merciful, patient, kind, gentle, free, self-determining, ever-existing, and always, for eternity, the absolute superabundant realization of everything good in inexhaustible fullness and richness ... so man must be this way as well, ever growing and developing in divine perfection and virtue for all eternity by the will and power of God Himself. The perfection of man is his growth in the unending perfection of God.

Christian spirituality is centered in Christ. Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God who was born as a man of the Virgin Mary in order to give man eternal life in communion with God His Father.

In Jesus Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (*Col 2:9*). In Him is the "fullness" of "grace and truth" (*Jn 1:16-17*) and "all the fullness of God" (*Col 1:19*). When one sees and knows Jesus, one sees and knows God the Father (*Jn 8:19, 14:7-9*). When one is in communion with Jesus, one is in abiding union with God (*cf. Jn 17, Eph 2, Rom 8, 1 Jn 1*).

The goal of human life is to be continually "in Christ." When one is "in Christ," according to St John, one does God's will and cannot sin.

*You know that He (Jesus) appeared to take away sins, and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has either seen Him or knows Him. ... he who does right is righteous, as He is righteous. ... No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil; whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother (1 Jn 3:4-10).*

Jesus Christ is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (*Jn 14:6*). He speaks the words of God. He does the work of God. The person who obeys Christ and follows His way and does what He does, loves God and accomplishes His will. To do this is the essence of spiritual life. Jesus has come that we may be like Him and do in our own lives, by His grace, what He Himself has done.

*Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father (Jn 14:12)*



A person can abide in Christ, accomplish His: commandments and be in communion with God the Father only by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in his life. Spiritual life is life in and by the Holy Spirit of God.

*If you love me (says Christ), you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you (Jn 14:15-17). When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. ...He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine ... (Jn 16:12-15).*

The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent into the world through Christ so that human persons can fulfill God's will in their lives and be like Christ. The spiritual fathers of the Orthodox Church say that the Holy Spirit makes people to be "christs," that is, the "anointed" children of God. This also is the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament writings:

*But you have been anointed by the Holy One and you know all things ... and the unction [chrisma] you have received from Him abides in you ... His anointing teaches you about everything and is true and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in Him. [...] And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us. [...] By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His own Spirit (1 Jn 2:20-27, 3:24, 4:13).*

This teaching of Saint John is the same teaching as that of Saint Paul.

*... God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. [...] Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit which dwells in you ... for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 5:5, 8:1ff; cf. 1 Cor 2, 6, 12-14; Gal 5).*

It is the classical teaching of the Orthodox Church, made popular in recent times by St Seraphim of Sarov (19th c.), that the very essence of Christian spiritual life, the very essence of life itself, is the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God." Without the Holy Spirit, there is no true life for man.

*In spite of our sinfulness, in spite of the darkness surrounding our souls, the Grace of the Holy Spirit, conferred by baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, still shines in our hearts with the inextinguishable light of Christ ... and when the sinner turns to the way of repentance the light smooths away every trace of the sins committed, clothing the former sinner in the garments of incorruption, spun of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. It is this*



*acquisition of the Holy Spirit about which I have been speaking. ... (St Seraphim of Sarov, Conversation with Motovilov).*

It is the teaching of the Orthodox Church that every virtue and good thing may be attained primarily through prayer. Prayer is a form of contemplation, which unifies the mind and the heart within the soul. Without prayer there is no spiritual life. As the Russian bishop Theophan the Recluse has said, *“If you are not successful in your prayer, you shall not be successful in anything, for prayer is the root of everything.”* (Theophan the Recluse, 19<sup>th</sup> c., *The Art of Prayer*, Igumen Chariton, Ed.)

*And when you pray you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, as they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Mt. 6:5-6)*

Prayer must be in secret. This is the first rule given by Christ. The person who prays must do so in such a way that he would not be seen by men to be praying. In the spiritual tradition of the Church, the words of Christ “go into your room” have been interpreted in two ways. First of all, they have been understood to be a literal commandment. The praying person must close himself off physically during times of prayer in order to pray secretly and to avoid being seen.

Secondly, these words of Christ have been interpreted to mean that the praying person must enter within himself, praying secretly in his mind and heart at all times, without displaying his interior prayer to others. Thus the “room” which one must “go into” is the “room of the soul.”

*The room of the soul is the body; our doors are the five bodily senses. The soul enters its room when the mind does not wander here and there roaming among the things and affairs of the world, but stays within, in our heart. Our senses become closed and remain closed when we do not let them be passionately attached to external sensory things and in this way our mind remains free from every worldly attachment, and through secret mental prayer unites with God its Father. God who sees all secret things sees mental prayer and rewards it openly with great gifts. For that prayer is true and perfect which fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual gifts. (St. Gregory Palamas, 14<sup>th</sup> c., *How All Christians Must Pray Without Ceasing*)*

Thus, in the spiritual tradition of the Christian teachers of prayer, the unification of the mind and the heart within the soul is seen to be the fulfillment of the basic condition of prayer as commanded by Christ. (Cf. *The Art of Prayer*, Igumen Chariton, Ed.)

*And in prayer, do not heap up empty, as the heathen do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. (Mt 6:7-8)*



God knows the needs of His people. Man prays in order to unite his mind and heart with God. He prays in order that God's will would be done in his life. He prays so that whatever he needs from God would be given. He prays so that he would consciously and with full awareness express the fact that all that he is, has and does is dependant on God. It is man who needs to pray, and not God who needs man's prayers.

True Christian prayer must be brief; it must be simple and regular. It must not be many-worded. Indeed it need not have words at all. It may be the totally silent inner attitude of the soul before God, the fulfillment of the words of the psalmist: *Commune with your hearts... and be silent. Be still, and know that I am God.* (Ps. 4:4, 46:10)

The teaching about brevity and silence in prayer is found in all the spiritual teachers. St. Dimitry of Rostov sums up this teaching when he says that the publican prayer only "God be merciful to me a sinner" and was justified; the repentant thief prayed only "Remember me..." and received paradise; and the prodigal son and the tax-collector Zacchaeus, said nothing at all, and received the mercy of the Father and the forgiveness of Christ. (St. Dimitry of Rostov 17<sup>th</sup> c., *The Art of Prayer*, Igumen Chariton, Ed.)

In praying to His Father, Jesus prayed for His people, (*cf John 17*) He Himself is the only competent intercessor for men before God.

*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave Himself as a ransom for all. (I Timothy 2-3)*

Jesus in His resurrected glory prays eternally to His Father on behalf of His creatures.

*...He holds His priesthood permanently because He continues forever. Consequently He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make inter-cession for them.*

*For Christ has entered, not a sanctuary made with hands . . . but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Hebrews 7:24-25; 9:24)*

In and through Christ, Christians become competent to intercede before God. In the name of Jesus, Christians are commanded and empowered to pray for each other and for all creation: "on behalf of all and for all." (*Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*)

*First of all I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions,...This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (I Timothy 2:1-4)*

*Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power In its effects. Elijah was a man of like natures*



*with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain and...it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit. (James 5:16-18)*

Intercessory prayers can be made for every "good gift" from God for the sake of the salvation of others. Such prayers can include petitions for every kind of blessing, both for the body and the soul. They can be made for the inspiration and instruction of men, as well as for their healing and salvation. Whatever one can ask for oneself, one can ask for all men. Whatever one does ask for oneself should be entreated for all. "It is right to pray not only for one's own purification, but for the purification of every man..." (*St. Nilus of Sinai, 5th c., Texts on Prayer*)

To understand intercessory prayer, one must remember the eternal providence of God. One must grasp the fact that God knows all things eternally and takes into consideration each act of man in His overall plan. With this perspective one can then see that even before the creation of the world, God has heard, or rather, more accurately, eternally hears, the cries of His people. He considers man's prayers in all that He does in His dealings with men. Thus it is the case that God does not wait to see what we do or how we will pray. He considers our actions and prayers from the perspective of eternity. And in the light of our desires and deeds He sees that "all things work together for good for those who love God." (*Romans 8:28*)

If we understand this we can see how our prayers are considered by God, for ourselves and for others. We can understand as well how we can pray even for those who are dead, whose lives on this earth are over and done. For the Lord does not hear our prayers "after" something is finished, because for God there is no "after" at all. God knows what we ask before we even ask it, for He knows all of man's life in one divine act of all-embracing vision and knowledge. Thus all of our prayers, even for those who are dead, are heard and considered by God before we even make them. If we fail to pray, this too is known to God, and it takes its effect in God's plan of salvation. Therefore we have to "pray for one another" and our prayer will have "great power in its effects" through the eternal and providential action of God.

In his letter to the Romans St. Paul instructs Christians to "be constant in prayer." (*Romans 12:12*) In his first letter to the Thessalonians he says simply, "pray without ceasing." (*I Thessalonians 5:17*)

These two commands of the apostle have been interpreted in the Orthodox tradition in two different ways. The first way, mentioned by St. John Chrysostom and St. Dimitry of Rostov, is that Christians should have regular times for prayer which they never skip - "in the evening and the morning and at noon day" (*Psalms 55:17*) - and then in between they should always remember God and do all things to His glory (*cf. I Corinthians 10:31*), offering up supplications and petitions as the need may arise, praising and thanking when the occasion requires it. Such is the normal way that all Christians must live.

*Prepare for your set times of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul, and you will soon make progress. (St. John of the Ladder, Step 28)*



The set times of prayer are very important, and should not be put aside for any reason, even when one prays continuously in his heart. This is the teaching and practice of the saints. Each person desiring to live the spiritual life should have his own rule of prayer. It should be brief and regular, such that it could be kept in all conditions and circumstances. In this set rule of prayer, the prayers of the Church should be used, the Lord's Prayer and those from the prayer book. This gives discipline in prayer and provides instruction and inspiration in prayer, which is perfectly trustworthy and sound, having demonstrated its power in the lives of the saints. A person who does not follow a set rule of prayer using the traditional prayers of the Church runs the great risk of impoverishing his prayer and reducing its dimensions and scope to the limited perspective of his own individual desires and needs.

When praying with a set rule of prayer, the spiritual teachers tell us to put our whole mind and heart into the meaning of the words, not merely "saying prayers," which is not prayer at all, but genuinely praying through personal attention and fervor. They tell us to allow our mind not to wander from the words of the prayer, but to use the given words as the basis of our own personal devotion, even allowing our mind to go beyond the given words to our own words, or to no words in the prayer of silence, if the Lord leads us this way. They also tell beginners - and St. Dimitry of Rostov says that we are all beginners, no matter how advanced - never to go back and repeat prayers done poorly. They tell us rather to put ourselves at the mercy of God, and to try to do better the next time. This method reduces the possibility of thinking that God hears our prayers according to the perfection of our performance and not according to the greatness of His mercy, and safeguards against both pride and despair. It gives humility and hope, and keeps us always forging ahead. (*cf. Luke 9:62, Philippians 3:13-15*)

Thus when one finishes his rule of prayer, however well or poorly he has done it, he should say Amen, and go about his business of living in Christ, remembering God and doing His will until the next time comes for the rule of prayer to be done. Then he should do it as well as he can, beginning all over again.

The second way of interpreting the teachings about unceasing prayer is that men should actually pray with conscious awareness at every moment of their lives, and even in their unconscious selves while their bodies are sleeping. This understanding of "unceasing prayer" was developed in the monastic tradition, but then spread rapidly throughout the whole membership of the church. It became very popular in recent times, mostly through the appearance of the book by the anonymous Russian peasant called *The Way of the Pilgrim*.

The search for active "unceasing prayer" has its source not only in the instruction of Saint Paul, but also in the literal interpretation of such words of the psalmist:

*I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continuously be in my mouth. (Psalm 34:1)*

And of the Song of Solomon:

*I slept, but my heart was awake. (Song 5:2)*



The method of "unceasing prayer" is to have a brief prayer verse, usually the Jesus Prayer which is repeated over and over, literally hundreds of times throughout the day and night, until it becomes perpetually implanted in the heart as a "bubbling spring," a continual presence in the soul calling out to the Lord. (cf. *Theophan the Recluse, 19th c., The Art of Prayer*) It is often, but not necessarily, connected with one's breathing, so much so that it is uttered "with every breath." (*St. Gregory the Theologian; St. John Chrysostom*) It begins by being said vocally, silently with the lips, and then it becomes wholly mental. The claim is made that one can continue this "unceasing prayer" even while engaged in the normal activities of life, while reading or writing, and even while sleeping, thus the "body sleeps," but the "heart is awake." Then, whenever one's attention to the affairs of life ceases, or when one awakes from one's bed, one finds that the prayer is continuing itself.

The prayer is also known to break through one's consciousness with power in times of temptation or stress, appearing, as it were, of its own accord. (cf. *The Art of Prayer, Igumen Chariton, ed.*)

*We are not commanded to work, keep vigil or fast without ceasing, but we are commanded to pray without ceasing. For...prayer purifies, and strengthens the mind, which was created to pray...and to fight the demons for the protection of all the powers of the soul. (Evagrius of Pontus, 4th c.)*

*He who has entered his room (i.e. his heart) and prays without ceasing has included in this all prayer everywhere. (St. Mark the Ascetic, 4th c., Direction from Discourses)*

*Let no one think, my brother Christians that it is the duty only of priests and monks to pray without ceasing, and not of laymen. No, no; it is the duty of all Christians to remain always in prayer.*

*...bear in mind the method of prayer - how it is possible to pray without ceasing, namely by praying in the mind. And this we can do always if we wish. For when we sit down to work with our hands, when we walk, when we eat, when we drink we can always pray mentally and practice this mental prayer - the true prayer pleasing to God.*

*Blessed are those who acquire this heavenly habit, for by it they overcome every temptation...*

*This practice of inner prayer tames the passions...by it the dew of the Holy Spirit is brought down into the heart...*

*This mental prayer is the light which illumines man's soul and inflames his heart with the fire of love for God. It is the chain linking God with man and man with God. Oh, the incomparable blessing of mental prayer. It allows a man constantly to converse with God.*

*And what other and greater rewards can you wish than this, when...you are always before the face of God, constantly conversing with Him - conversing with God, without whom no person*





*can ever be blessed, either here or in the life still to come. (St. Gregory Palamas, 14th c., How All Christians In General Must Pray Without Ceasing)*

The most normal form of unceasing prayer in the Orthodox tradition is the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer is the form of invocation used by those practicing mental prayer, also called the "prayer of the heart." The words of the prayer most usually said are "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." The choice of this particular verse has a theological and spiritual meaning.

First of all, it is centered on the name of Jesus because this is the name of Him whom "God has highly exalted," the name given to the Lord by God Himself (*Luke 1:31*), the "name which is above every name." (*Philippians 2:9-10, cf Ephesians 1:21*)

*...for there is no other name given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)*

All prayer for Christians must be performed in the name of Jesus: "if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." (*John 14:13-14*)

The fact that the prayer is addressed to Jesus as Lord and Christ and Son of God is because this is the center of the entire faith revealed by God in the Spirit.

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"*

*Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."*

*And Jesus answered, "Blessed are you...for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven...and on this rock I will build my Church..." (Matthew 16:16-18)*

That Jesus is the Christ, and that the Christ is Lord is the essence of the Christian faith and the foundation of the Christian church. To believe and proclaim this is granted by the Holy Spirit.

*...no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. (I Corinthians 12:3)*

*... every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:11)*

In calling Jesus the Son of God is to acknowledge God as His Father. To do this is, at the same time, to have God as one's own Father, and this too is granted by the indwelling Spirit.

*And when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:4-6)*



*When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God ... (Romans 8:15-16)*

Thus, to pray "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" is already to be a child of God, and already to be certain that the Holy Spirit is in you. In this way, the Jesus Prayer brings the Spirit of God into the heart of man.

"Have mercy on me a sinner" is the publican's prayer. When uttered with humble conviction it brings divine justification. (*cf. Luke 18:9-14*) Generally speaking, divine mercy is what man needs most of all. It is for this reason that the numberless repetition of the request for the Lord's mercy is found everywhere in the prayers of, the Church.

And finally, all men are sinners. To know this is a fact, and to confess it with faith is to be justified and forgiven by God. (*cf. Romans 3:10-12, Psalm 14:1-3*)

The Jesus Prayer basically is used in three different ways. First as the verse used for the "prayer of the heart" in silence in the hesychast method of prayer. Second as the continual mental and unceasing prayer of the faithful outside the hesychast tradition. And third as the brief ejaculatory prayer used to ward off temptations. Of course, in the actual life of a person these three uses of the prayer are often interrelated and combined.

In the hesychast method of prayer the person sits alone in a bodily position with his head bowed and his eyes directed toward his chest or his stomach. He continually repeats the prayer with each aspiration and breath, placing his "mind in his heart" by concentrated attention. He empties his mind of all rational thoughts and discursive reasoning, and also voids his mind of every picture and image. Then, without thought or imagination, but with all proper attention and concentration he rhythmically repeats the Jesus Prayer in silence - hesychia means silence - and through this method of contemplative prayer is united to God by the indwelling of Christ in the Spirit. According to the fathers, such a prayer, when faithfully practiced within the total life of the Church, brings the experience of the uncreated divine light of God and unspeakable joy to the soul. Its purpose is to make man a servant of God.

*...the mind when it unites with the heart is filled with unspeakable joy and delight. Then a man sees that the Kingdom of heaven is truly within us.*

*When you enter the place of the heart...give thanks to God, and praising His mercy, keep always to this activity, and it will teach you things which you will learn in no other way.*

*...when your mind becomes established in the heart, it must not remain idle, but it should constantly repeat the prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!" and never cease.*

*For this practice, keeping the mind from dreaming, renders it invincible against all suggestions*



*of the devil and every day leads it more and more to love and longing for God. (St. Nicephorus, 14th c., Discourse on Sobriety)*

To practice the hesychast method of prayer requires always and without exception the guidance of a spiritual guide, one must not use this method unless one is a person of genuine humility and sanity, filled with all wisdom and peace. To use this method without guidance or humble wisdom, is to court spiritual disaster, for the temptations that come with it are many. Indeed, the abuses of the method became so great in recent centuries that its use was greatly curtailed. Bishop Theophan tells that the bodily postures and breathing techniques were virtually forbidden in his time since, instead of gaining the Spirit of God, people succeeded only "in ruining their lungs." (*cf. The Art of Prayer, Igumen Chariton, ed.*)

Such abusive and abortive used of the method - itself something genuine and richly rewarding were already known in fourteenth century Byzantium when St. Gregory Palamas defended the tradition. And evidence exists from as early as the fourth century to show that even then people were using the prayer foolishly and to no avail by reducing it to a "thing in itself" and being captivated by its form without interest in its purpose. Indeed, the idolatrous interest in spiritual technique and in the pleasurable benefits of "spirituality" and "mysticism" are the constant temptations of the spiritual life - and the devil's most potent weapon. Bishop Theophan called such interest "spiritual hedonism"; John of the Cross (16th c. Spain) called it "spiritual gluttony" and "spiritual luxury." Thus, by way of example from various times and places, come the following admonitions.

*Those who refuse to work with their hands under the pretext that one should pray without ceasing, in reality do not pray either. Through idleness...they entangle the soul in a labyrinth of thoughts...and make it incapable of prayer. (St. Nilus of Sinai, 5th c., Texts on Prayer)*

*As long as you pay attention only to bodily posture for prayer and your mind cares only for the external beauty of the tabernacle (i.e. proper forms), know that you have not yet found the place of prayer and its blessed way is still far from you.*

*Know that in the midst of all spiritual joy and consolation, that it is still more necessary to serve God with devotion and fear. (St. Nilus of Sinai, Texts on Prayer)*

*It is natural for the mind to reject what is at hand and dream of something else to come ... to build fantasies and imaginings about achievements before he has attained them. Such a man is in considerable danger of losing what he has and falling into self-delusion and being deprived of good sense. He becomes only a dreamer and not a man of continual prayer (i.e. a hesychast). (St. Gregory of Sinai, 14th c., Texts on Commandments and Dogmas)*

*If you are truly practicing the continual prayer of silence, hoping to be with God and you see something sensory or spiritual, within or without, be it even the image of Christ, or an angel, or some saint, or if an image of light pervades your mind in no way accept it...always be displeased with such images, and keep your mind clear, without image or form...and you will suffer no*



*harm. It has often happened that such things, even when sent by God as a test before victory, have turned into harm for many...who have then done harm to others equally unwise...leading to pride and self-conceit.*

*For the fathers say that those who live rightly and are faultless in their behavior with other men...who seek God with obedience, questioning and wise humility...will always be protected from harm by the grace of Christ. (St. Gregory of Sinai, Instructions to Hesychasts)*

The use of the Jesus Prayer outside the hesychast method for unceasing prayer is to repeat the prayer constantly and continually, whatever one is doing, without the employment of any particular bodily postures or breathing techniques. This is the way taught by St. Gregory Palamas in his short discourse about how unceasing mental prayer is the duty of all Christians. Anyone can do this, whatever his occupation or position in life. This also is shown in *The Way of the Pilgrim*.

The purpose and results of this method of prayer are those generally of all prayer: that men might be continually united with God by unceasing remembrance of His presence and perpetual invocation of His name, so that one might always serve Him and all men with the virtues of Christ and the fruits of the Spirit.

The third method of using the Jesus Prayer is to have it always ready for moments of temptation. In this way, as St. John Climacus has said, you can "flog your enemies, i.e. the temptations, with the name of Jesus for there is no stronger weapon in heaven or on earth." (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 21*) This method works best when one practices the prayer without ceasing, joining "to every breath a sober invocation of Jesus' name." (*Evagrius of Pontus*) When one practices the continual "prayer of the heart," and when the temptations to sin enter the heart, they are met by the prayer and are defeated by grace.

Man cannot live in this world without being tempted. When temptation comes to a person, there are only three possible results. Either the person immediately yields to the temptation and sins, or he tries to ward off the temptation by the power of his will, and is ultimately defeated after great vexation and strife. Or else he fights off the temptation by the power of Christ in his heart which is present only by prayer. This does not mean that he "prays the temptation away." Or that God miraculously and magically descends to deliver him. It means rather that his soul is so filled with the grace and the power of God that the temptation can have no effect. It is in this sense that the Apostle John has written: "no one who abides in Christ sins." (*1 John 3:6*)

*He who sins is of the devil...The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sins; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin for he is born of God. By this may be seen who are children of God, and who are children of the devil. (1 John 3:8-10)*



*One becomes a child of God, born of God in the Church through baptism. One continues as a child of God and does not sin only by continual prayer: the remembrance of God, the abiding in Him, the calling upon His name without ceasing in the soul. The third use of the Jesus Prayer, like the first two, is to accomplish this end: that man might not sin.*

Liturgical prayer is not simply the prayers of individual Christians joined into one. It is not a corporate "prayer service" of many persons together. It is rather the official prayer of the Church formally assembled; the prayer of Christ in the Church offering His "body" and "bride" to the Father in the Spirit. It is the Church's participation in Christ's perpetual prayer in the presence of God in the Kingdom of heaven. (cf. *Hebrews 7:24-25, 9:24*) The model of liturgical prayer is in the book of Revelation, and not in the gospel events of Jerusalem or Galilee.

In the Orthodox Church there is no tradition of corporate prayer, which is not liturgical. Some consider this a lack, but most likely it is based on Christ's teaching that the prayer of individuals should be done "in secret." (*Matthew 6:5-6*) This guards against vain repetition and the expression of personal petitions, which are meaningless to others. It also protects persons from being subjected to the superficialities and shallowness of those, who instead of praying, merely express the opinions and desires of their own minds and hearts.

When a person participates in the liturgical prayer of the Church, he can only do so effectively to the extent that he prays by himself, at home, and in his own mind and heart. The one who "prays without ceasing" is the one who offers and receives most in liturgical prayer.

When one participates in the liturgical prayer of the Church, he should make every effort to join himself fully with all the members of the body. He should not "say his own prayers" in church, but should pray "with the Church." This does not mean that he forgets his own needs and desires, depersonalizing himself and becoming but one more voice in the crowd. It means rather that he should unite his own person, his own needs and desires, all of his life with those who are present, with the church throughout the world, with the angels and saints, indeed with Christ Himself in the one great "divine" and "heavenly liturgy" of all creation before God.

Practically this means that one who participates in liturgical prayer should put his whole being, his whole mind and heart, into each prayer and petition and liturgical action, making it come alive in himself. If each person does this, then the liturgical exclamations become genuine and true, and the whole assembly as one body will glorify God with "one mouth, one mind and one heart."

Meditation differs from prayer, even from silent prayer, in that meditation is thought about God and contemplation of His word and His works.

Meditation normally begins by reading from the holy Scriptures, the Word of God. This is called in the spiritual tradition *lectio divina*. It is the slow and attentive reading of the Bible, or



perhaps the writings of the church fathers and saints, not for the purpose of gaining information, but for the purpose of communion with God.

Such meditative reading may be of the sort where the person tries, with the power of his thought and imagination, to enter into the event about which he is reading in order to become its contemporary participant. Or, it can be of the sort where the person merely reads and listens in silence, without imagination or rational thought, in order to let the Word of God enter his mind and heart in order to remain there, to bring forth its fruit at the appointed time.

Psalmody, done either alone or in the churchly assembly, exists for this latter purpose. When reading or chanting the psalms, the person does not try to think about each word and phrase. Rather he cuts off all reasoning, and opens his heart to the Lord, uniting "his mouth with his mind," (*St Benedict*) and allowing the Word of God to be planted within him to blossom in his soul with the fruits of the Spirit. This also is the case with churchly hymnology. It is sung for the glory of God and the edification and expansion of the soul through the contemplation of the Lord in His words and works of salvation, much more than for any intellectual instruction. This type of meditation is especially advised in times of despondency.

There is also the type of meditation and contemplation done totally in silence, without any words or images or thoughtful activity at all, not even psalmody. The person merely sits in silence, often in the presence of holy icons, and emptying his mind of all thoughts, imaginations and desires, listens to God in silence, the divine "language of the Kingdom of heaven." (*St. Isaac of Syria*) This type of meditation, for a person of unceasing prayer, will be the "prayer of silence," with the "bubbling spring" of the Jesus Prayer as its only foundation and background. In such contemplative prayer and prayerful contemplation, the spirit of man becomes one with the Spirit of God. (*cf. I Corinthians 6:17*)

In the life of an Orthodox Christian, spirituality is of utter importance. The Orthodox Christian is called to follow the teachings of prayer and contemplation given by Holy Scripture as well as the Fathers. Thus, everyone is called to oblate his life to Christ and the Church, and to fully participate in the Life of the Church.

This participation begins from young age, when the Orthodox Faith, as if a treasure, is handed down from one generation to the next. The small family church is where it all begins. The Orthodox family begins each day together in prayer, glorifying the very name of God and giving thanks for the gift of life. A reading of the Scripture may also be part of the morning prayers of a family. Throughout the day the Orthodox prays God for different occasions: at the beginning and end of a meal, before work and after its completion, in thanksgiving for the answer to a prayer. The day ends also with a prayer, usually done by the family together, thanking God for all good things, and asking forgiveness for our own iniquities and sins.

In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the monastery is a place outside this world, where those who gave up their life for the sake of Christ continually pray for the salvation of the



world. The monks live like angels, and a life of prayer and contemplation. The question, which arises, is: Is it possible for a layman to live this kind of life as well?

The answer is yes, certainly, albeit in a very different way. The Family is in fact the abode of the monastery church where the community gathers to offer prayers of thanksgiving and blessing to God. It is the house, which becomes a small monastic community of people – the family – united in prayer and contemplation of Christ at given times during the daily cycle. The Liturgy is essentially what makes this possible.

The Ordo, or Typikon, of the Orthodox Liturgy has evolved for many centuries, taking more and more from the monastic tradition. Today, there is no significant difference between the liturgies of monasteries and parishes. The Holy Office is the same, with the same cycle and the same prayers and hymns. In most cases, even the melodies are the same. This evolution in fact shows the attachment of the church as a whole to the monastic tradition, an attachment of trust in the experience of the monk's spiritual life – an example for all Christians.

*And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. (Mt. 19:29)*

The Orthodox Christian is called to sacrifice his own life, and take up his cross and follow Christ. This may only be possible, by the grace of God, through a spiritual life of communion. The Orthodox Christian therefore is called to become an oblate to Christ, to the Church – the Body of Christ. It is through this oblation, that all Christians are united, as St. Cyprian of Carthage said, like the particles of wheat flour by the water of the Holy Spirit, to make the Eucharistic Bread of Life, the very Body of God, thus becoming part of God and acquire the true vision of His ineffable beauty and divinity.