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Theophan the Recluse, Homily 3 on Prayer

From Monachos.net

*Third Homily on Prayer – St Theophan the Recluse
Delivered 29 November, 1864*

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

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

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

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

I will answer this briefly as follows: one must labor in prayer without hesitation, zealously, hopefully, trying to obtain a burning spirit through sober attention to God, as if it were the promised land. Work in prayer, and praying about everything, pray even more about this limit of prayer - a burning spirit - and you will truly attain that which you seek. We are assured of this by St. Makarios of Egypt, who labored and tasted the fruit of prayer. "If", he says, "you do not have prayer, work at prayer, and the Lord, seeing your labor, and seeing how you are patient in the labor and wholeheartedly desire this good thing, will grant you this prayer (*Conversation 19*)". The labor has this as its only end. When the fire is kindled, about which the Lord speaks: "I have come to bring fire upon the earth, and what is it to Me if it were already kindled?" (Luke 12.49 [↗](#)) - then the work comes to an end. Prayer becomes easier and freer.

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

The means to this, as I have said, is the work of prayer. When one rubs two sticks together, they warm up and catch fire. Similarly, when the soul is rubbed in the work of prayer, it eventually leads to prayerful fire. The work of prayer consists of a proper



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

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

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

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

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

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

to go. The fruit may be only a few turns away.

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

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

References

1. ↑ See the previous two homilies in this series: homily 1 and homily 2.

Theophan's four homilies on prayer

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