

The Centrality of Prayer Part 2

Personal Prayer

Prayer is an interaction between God and the believer. It is in fact a conversation, one which is initiated by God. Prayer proceeds from and is founded on love of God and neighbor. Remember the words of 1 John 16-19: “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ... We love *because he first loved us*”. He initiates this conversation of love and we respond. God speaks to us in creation (Psalm 19:1-6) and in his Law (Psalm 7-14) and we speak to him as creatures through the Word He gives. We give back to him what he has given to us. This principle is found clearly in the Divine Liturgy: “Thine own of thine own we offer unto Thee in behalf of all and for all”. The bread and the wine come from God’s earth - which he gave - and are offered back to God, and are then Sanctified by the Holy Spirit of God and become for us the Body and Blood of the Christ - whom the Father gives “for the life of the world and its salvation”. In other words, what God wants us to give to Him is given and provided by Him. This is true of the words we offer up in prayer during the Liturgy. These words, these prayers, are given through the Holy Spirit and we put them in our mouths and in our ears. What God gives in love we give back in love to Him. Because God is Holy, this is a Holy gift, indeed a Holy conversation of Prayer from beginning to end! This is perfection!

We can speak of at least three different modes or forms of prayer. 1. Individual or Personal Prayer. 2. Canonical Prayer or recitation of Scripture, and 3. Ceaseless Prayer or Prayer of the heart. We will describe and speak of the value of each of these in turn.

Individual/Personal Prayer

This form of prayer is the direct manifestation and expression which comes out of our individual situation in a particular place at a particular time. This prayer is the prayer of I, Me, and My. This kind of prayer is natural, as it is an expression of the desires, fears, hopes and yes, gratitude, thankfulness, and praise that we have as individuals. The reason for these prayers is found in our nature as individuals who, in the nature of things, differ from other individuals. We all have individual needs and circumstances. Indeed, at the Liturgy the Priest prays these words:

*“Therefore, O Master, do thou thyself distribute these gifts here spread forth, unto all of us for good, **according to the individual need of each**: voyage with those who sail by sea; journey with those who travel by land and air; heal the sick, thou who art the Physician of our souls and bodies...”*

Personal prayer has the benefit of not just seeking to acquire something from God but more importantly to help purify our souls by breaking us out of a cycle of psychological confusion, allowing God to sweep out any dust which accumulates under the veil of our conscious awareness and blowing away unseen impediments which hinder us on our Path toward God. Here we present to God the difficult struggles, many disappointments, and the anxieties within us. In this kind of prayer, we are reorienting ourselves to God and moving away from self-

sufficiency. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed we are “forced” by our circumstances to recognize the fact that we have never really had any firm ground on which to stand other than God. After the situation which pushes us in this direction has passed, it is advisable to strive to maintain the commitment to God which was “forced” upon us during this difficult experience. This process can be aided by the other modes of prayer which will be dealt with later.

As has already been mentioned, all forms of prayer presuppose love, love from God to us and love from us to God. This is One love. Our love toward God in prayer assumes that we are fostering humility and truthfulness. What is love? Love is objectivity toward another human being. What is a human being? A human being, whether sinner or saint, is a creature made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Gen.1:26). Our feelings regarding our neighbor are immaterial; only this truth about him or her should motivate us in our interactions. Humility is objectivity toward ourselves and is based on the truth that we too are created in the image and likeness of God. This image, as such, is not greater or lesser in anyone. Of course, anyone of us may be out of balance and not be living up to this image which we are. Personal prayer itself can help reestablish our balance and help us regain the peace we may have lost in our interactions with others while also opening us to the grace of God and the wisdom that God wants to give us (James 1:5; 3:13-15).

Before ending this section on Personal prayer here are some final thoughts regarding the idea of thankfulness or praise which was mentioned above. Praise is not just recognizing the fact that God is the Source of all good things but recognizing that God has power to turn the table on all evil. In the Liturgy the priest recites the following prayer to God our Father: “Establish the good in thy goodness, and make good the evil, by thy benevolence”. Our God is worthy to be praised in the midst of our individual concerns and daily lives!

Fr. Herman R. Acker
March 2020