

The Centrality of Prayer Part 5

Characteristics of Canonical Prayer

In contrast, but not in contradiction to personal prayer, Canonical prayer has a more universal and timeless character inasmuch as God is its author. Also, in contrast to prayer that is more personal, the one praying is not just an individual but is praying as a human being. In other words, the one who is praying is doing so as a member of the human race, as the image of God.

Canonical prayer has nothing in it that does not concern every human being and by nature includes all the possible concerns found in individual prayer. This inclusion does not make individual or personal prayer superfluous but underscores its relative importance when compared to Biblical prayers. Remember what was said earlier in these musings on prayer. When contrasting canonical prayer with “personal” or “individual” prayer, we do not mean that individuals are not personally praying but only that the individual prays as a human being and not just as an isolated person with individual needs. Ultimately, the need of every person is the same and this is encompassed in this mode of prayer. What is the need? To offer oneself to God, not just as a “fallen” creature but as the pristine Image of God which exists before the expulsion from Eden and after it.

Canonical prayer is often, though not exclusively, expressed in the first-person plural, “we,” “our,” as in “*Our Father*.” This kind of prayer also favors sacred, liturgical, and universal language that applies to more than just one individual. It may be instructive here to remember that God so loved the *world* and Jesus is coming again to save his *bride* the *Church*. God saves the Community. Of course, it goes without saying that communities are composed of individuals, but let us stay with the Biblical emphasis, since we are safer there! When one prays thus, one is praying in behalf of all and for all and not just oneself; the community is included.

Two examples of this mode of prayer, both of which have been mentioned, are the Lord’s Prayer and the entire Book of Psalms or the Psalter. These are foundational and the backbone of all prayers in the Church. These form the models for the many other prayers which are found in the rich prayer and Liturgical Tradition of the Orthodox Church. These are truly standard. The Psalms are recited weekly in monasteries. Specific Psalms are said at the beginning of Matins and Vespers in local parishes and individuals may recite the Psalms in their daily devotions and prayer times. Their influence is everywhere. Notice the Great Doxology; though it is not one of the Psalms, it is so Psalm-like, that when it is recited one feels as though one is standing on the shoulders of the Prophet David himself!

Please find below a chart with the Traditional breakdown of the Book of Psalms as it has been received in the Orthodox Tradition, along with suggestions on how one can begin to pray the Psalms daily.

Note that according to this chart, the Psalter is divided into 20 sections called Kathismata. Each Kathisma has 3 stases. One could read 1 Kathisma each day and complete the recitation of the Psalter in 20 days. This could be done in one sitting (*Kathistimi* means “to sit”), or one could recite one stasis in the morning, one stasis in the afternoon, and one in the evening, to complete the reading in 20 days. If this is too much, one could read one stasis in the morning and one in the evening, finishing in 30 days. Or one stasis could be read each day and then one would finish the Psalter in 60 days. You can imagine that there are different possibilities. Experiment with these and find an approach that works for you. Quantity is not as important as consistency and regularity.

Here are some recommendations for using the Psalter in Prayer:

1. Read from the Psalter each day.
2. If you can, read at least one complete Psalm (even Psalm 119).
3. Recite the text quietly to yourself, as audibility is important (This is Biblical meditation Ps. 1:2). From the Biblical point of view, hearing is believing (Rom. 10:17).
4. Read the Psalter as a book in order and do not jump around. It is meant to be read this way; there is an overarching movement.
5. Go through the Psalms from beginning to end again and again. Repetition is key. It is not possible to read it too many times.

Hebrew Numbering of Psalms (as found in most English translations)			Kathisma	Greek Numbering of Psalms (as found in the Orthodox Study Bible)		
Stasis 1	Stasis 2	Stasis 3		Stasis 1	Stasis 2	Stasis 3
1-3	4-6	7-8	I	1-3	4-6	7-8
9-11	12-14	15-17	II	9-10	11-13	14-16
18	19-21	22-24	III	17	18-20	21-23
25-27	28-30	31-32	IV	24-26	27-29	30-31
33-34	35-36	37	V	32-33	34-35	36
38-40	41-43	44-46	VI	37-39	40-42	43-45
47-49	50-51	52-55	VII	46-48	49-50	51-54
56-58	59-61	62-64	VIII	55-57	58-60	61-63
65-67	68	69-70	IX	64-66	67	68-69
71-72	73-74	75-77	X	70-71	72-73	74-76
78	79-81	82-85	XI	77	78-80	81-84
86-88	89	90-91	XII	85-87	88	89-90
92-94	95-97	98-101	XIII	91-93	94-96	97-100
102-103	104	105	XIV	101-102	103	104
106	107	108-109	XV	105	106	107-108
110-112	113-116:9	116:10-118	XVI	109-111	112-114	115-117
119:1-72	119:73-131	119:132-176	XVII	118:1-72	118:73-131	118:132-176
120-124	125-129	130-134	XVIII	119-123	124-128	129-133
135-137	138-140	141-143	XIX	134-136	137-139	140-142
144-145	146-147	148-150	XX	143-144	145-147	148-150

Adapted from <https://www.oca.org/liturgics/outlines/the-division-of-the-psalter-into-kathismas>