

Prayer as an Important Aspect of Our Spiritual Life

by: Monk Moses

The life of prayer, which we shall discuss, is one part of a much broader topic spiritual life in general the life in Christ, spiritual ascension, the way to sanctification and deification. Combined with personal inner purification and a regular sacramental life, a life of prayer will help significantly in the regeneration of the faithful during this difficult period in which we live.

The content of this discussion is not the property of the author. It consists primarily of material borrowed from the abundant resources bequeathed to us as an inheritance by the holy Fathers. Also included are precious morsels gathered eagerly from the spiritual dinner table of contemporary elders of Mt. Athos.

There are many stations or steps in the journey of prayerful spiritual ascent. We shall briefly address some of the more significant ones related to our topic.

Study is one of the very first steps. In the austere monastic rule of St. Pachomios one of the canons requires that novice monks be taught reading and writing by older monks, to assist them in their study of Sacred Scripture. Father Theodoros of Thebes, a disciple of St. Pachomios, made the following observation about his monastic life:

"Neither in our heart nor in our mouth had we anything other than the word of God alone, and we did not feel that we were living on earth but were celebrating in heaven."

The mind learns that with which it is preoccupied. If one is preoccupied during the entire day with the lives of others, he derives no benefit for himself. Through unbridled curiosity and idle discussion, particularly where the sins of others are addressed with satisfaction and interest, we stimulate and arouse our own passions. It has been observed that people who are scandalmongers, who gossip, and who defend morality by accusing others, usually have very serious problems themselves. Preoccupation with vain things and malicious conversations are to be avoided; they can totally incapacitate the spirit of prayer.

Study will help in our effort to pray by arousing our forgotten powers, by strengthening and invigorating us. In this vein Father Isaias instructs us:

"When you arise in the morning, before you begin your work, study the words of God. When you have the words of God as your constant companion, you will not be preoccupied with worldly matters, you will not be troubled, you will not sin."

St. Ephraim the Syrian, who incidentally was described by St. Gregory of Nyssa as having Sacred Scripture as his only nourishment, adds this:

"The words of God refresh the heat of the soul. Suckle the words of God like an infant so that you may grow."

For one who desires to live the life of prayer daily nourishment from Sacred Scripture is indispensable. Study of the Bible expedites the intervention of God in our life. And it is good for such study to precede prayer. In addition to Sacred Scripture, particularly Psalms, the life of the saint of the day and a selected ascetic text from the Fathers can provide relief from the confusion and distress of the day, and help us prepare to surrender to God. And let it be emphasized that God is not to be dealt with in a few minutes out of the entire twenty-four hour period. God is for the entire day. His abiding presence should accompany us continuously so that all our activities are a preparation for the sacred hours when we embrace God. And, in turn, these sacred hours of prayer will strengthen us for the struggles that follow.

Everything flows calmly under the watchful eye of God, who blesses and sanctifies us. And if we transgress he may intervene austere to bring us back to our senses. Let us, therefore, always remember him.

Liturgical books - the horologion, psalter, menaia, triodion, pentekostarion, parakletiki - are not only for the lectern in church but also for the prayer room in our home. These books offer great assistance to our spiritual life. It is a beautiful thing when one comes to love these books and makes them daily companions even if only for an abbreviated Orthros or a few hymns from Vespers, the Compline, or the Salutations to the Theotokos.

The Church has designated particular prayers for important events in our lives such as birth, sickness, engagement, marriage and death, as well as for various other occasions, such the opening of a home, the beginning of a business, or the start of a professional career. The Church has also designated prayers for prescribed hours of the day.

St. John Chrysostom, commenting on prayer before and after meals, notes that among the reason for these prayers are the following: that we also remember the nourishment of the soul; that we avoid intoxication and over-indulgence; that we develop the discernment of moderation; and that we express our gratitude to God for his gifts.

At prescribed times the Church gathers in common prayer and worship. The prayers of many faithful who have gathered are more readily received and heard by God he is particularly attentive to such petitions. To help us receive the full benefit of ecclesiastical gatherings let us pay close attention to these words of St. Symeon the New Theologian:

"Stand in church as if you are in heaven together with the angels, and consider yourself unworthy to be praying together with your brothers. And be vigilant not to be looking

back and forth to observe the brothers and sisters, how they are standing or chanting, but observe only yourself, your chanting and your sins."

St. Paul noted that he who is happy should sing. Psalmody - spiritual song - is not only for church services, but for any circumstances that permit. We can chant aloud or silently, individually or as a group, before and after prayer, and even during intermissions.

According to Diadochos, bishop of Photiki, in addition to the familiar ecclesiastical psalmody, we also have another psalmody which comes from an overflow of joy, powerful and moving, with a prayerful disposition. This psalmody, when moved by the Holy Spirit, is accompanied by delight of the heart, spiritual tears and incredible joy.

Returning to the preparatory aspects of prayer, let us note the words of St. Athanasios in his treatise on virginity: "The believer who is dedicated to God must be found with the Book in his hands when the sun rises." He also provides instructions for the hours of the day and night, and how the faithful must stand before God.

It is well established that books are beneficial, but they do not always lead to prayer. And it is to be noted that a greater teacher than books is prayer itself. Innumerable ascetics have learned to pray without any books at all. Books and church gatherings cannot always be with us, but we can always learn by the inner work of prayer, which can be with us at all times. The soul of each one who truly prays becomes a temple of God and a sacred place of sacrifice. All prayers are good - audible prayers, book prayers, public prayers, silent prayers of the heart - when practiced carefully and attentively.

As there is no healthy plant without roots, there can be no life of prayer without the sacraments, especially Holy Eucharist. For, as Abba Apollos says, "He who withdraws from communing the Sacred Mysteries, causes God himself to withdraw from him." It is customary for monks to complete prayers begun in their cell when they have gathered in church. And common prayers started in church are completed in their cells. The sacrament of Holy Eucharist, in which they participated during Divine Liturgy is continued on the sacred altar of their hearts with ongoing prayer.

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

What, after all, is the nature of prayer? Is it worth the toil, concern and effort that goes into it? Let us examine the words of the holy Fathers for insight.

St. John Chrysostom says:

"Prayer is a harbor in the storms of life, an anchor for those who are storm-tossed, the treasure of the poor, the security of the rich, the healing of the sick, the preservation of health. Prayer banishes evil things, and preserves the good."

And the God-bearing ecumenical father continues:

"Prayer silences the passions of the soul, assuages the rebellion of anger, dismisses envy, dissipates evil desire, withers the love of worldly things, and brings great peace and serenity to the soul."

The essence of prayer becomes clear from what it offers. St. John of the Ladder says that prayer is the means which unites man with God. The most ascetic St. Gregory of Sinai, who wanted to traverse the universe to teach everyone the benefits of prayer, penetrates the matter more deeply proclaiming:

"Prayer is a pleasant fire for beginners, 'a light made fragrant when activated' for the advanced. Prayer informs the heart; it is the hope of salvation, the sign of purification, a symbol of holiness, the knowledge of God, the engagement of the Holy Spirit, the joy of Jesus, the gladness of the soul, the mercy of God, the sign of reconciliation, the seal of Christ, the ray of the intelligible sun, the confirmation of Christianity, proof of angelic life."

Serious obstacles to prayer are too much sleep, too much food, too much talk, and luxurious living. These contribute to forgetfulness of God and a sluggish body, while making vigilance and exaltation of the spirit difficult. They do not help in purification and they confuse mind, heart and judgment, which should be calm, peaceful and in quietude during prayer.

How should I pray? When should I pray? How extensive should my prayer be? Questions such as these reveal an absence of fervent and continuous prayer. For the one who loves prayer intensely there are no bounds. He will simply pray at every opportunity. Today's prayer is a continuation of yesterday's. And today's prayer will be continued tomorrow. It is said that a holy man never used the dismissal prayer "Through the prayers of our holy Fathers ..." because his prayer life had no end.

Difficulty in making prayer a daily experience is indicative of a serious weakness in our spiritual life. But, with recognition and acknowledgment of this weakness, we should not be disheartened. Rather, we should let it be a stimulus to intensified and more persistent efforts. We can learn to pray virtually anywhere we may be, whenever we think of it. But there should be special times, in addition to church services, when we conduct our individual prayers. And, as Abba Isaac suggests for each monk within his cell, we must seek the most quiet place available for our prayers.

Once Abba Makarios of Egypt was asked how we should pray and he answered in this way:

"It is not necessary to babble foolishly at great lengths, but to extend your arms and to say: 'Lord, have mercy on me as You desire and know best.' And if there is a war about to break out, say: 'Lord, help me,' for he knows what is best for us and provides his mercy."

We have prayer with words, and we can also make our entire life a prayer, a sacrifice of consecration to God, a prayer without words, which is perhaps the strongest and greatest prayer. Let us sit, patiently, tirelessly, as permanent disciples listening to God speak. Ignorant, innocent, humble, poor, dumb before the all-merciful Father, let us beseech his mercy, his salvation and his salutary help with "ineffable sighs." With a silent humble prayer, let us allow God to speak in our life. Let us allow him to do whatever he desires with us, that we may become similar to the saints, his ever obedient children, and be restored to our pristine and original beauty, making his life truly our own life.

Abba Isaac says that when you approach God to pray, "think of yourself as an insignificant ant, a creeping creature of the earth, a leech, a stammering infant."

Abba Serapion says that the stance of people in prayer must be like that of soldiers standing guard, constant, vigilant, in a state of emergency and courageous readiness.

That great teacher of prayer, St. John Chrysostom, whose entire life was a petition, has this to say:

"We must pray with ever vigilant attention. And this will be possible if we understand well with whom we are conversing, and that during such time we are his servants offering sacrifice to God. We must pray with contrition, with tears, with reverence, with serenity and great calmness. Our sins should not stop us from prayer. We should be ashamed of our sins, but they should not keep us from our prayers. Even though you are a sinner, approach God with prayer, that you may be reconciled with him; give him an opportunity to forgive your sins, which he will, in order to reveal his love for mankind."

And the holy Father continues:

"If you are afraid to approach God because of your sins, you are actually hindering him, to the extent, at least, that is dependent upon you, from expressing his goodness and the wealth of his providential care. Remove afar, therefore, every hesitation and doubt about prayer because of sin."

HOW TO PRAY

Compressing lengthy, beautiful and comprehensive homilies of St. John Chrysostom on prayer, we offer the following salient points to help the praying person. Prayer must be a systematic and regular practice in our life, with a pious and reverent stance, and with absolute attention. To pray as we should, with the reverence appropriate to conversation with God, we should be aware of the great benefit of prayer, independently of knowing whether there have been specific responses. The person whose prayer is truly a conversation with God is transformed into an earthly angel.

God does not ask that we converse with him using beautiful words, but that what we say emanates from a beautiful soul. Prayer does not need mediators, formalities, or appointments at prescribed hours. God's door is always open and he awaits us. If we are withdrawn from God that is something totally dependent upon us. He is always near. We need no particular eloquence. He hears us no matter how softly we speak. He understands us completely even if we say little. All hours are appropriate and all places good. And prolonged instruction in the art of prayer is unnecessary. It is sufficient that we want to pray; then learning becomes rapid and effortless.

It is the manner of prayer that is significant. We must pray with perspicacity and contrition seeking spiritual progress, forgiving others and asking their forgiveness, being truly humble. Our prayers will be received and heard if we are praying as God wants us, if we persist in our prayers, if we seek what is profitable to our souls and the souls of others, if our motives are pure, and if we avoid focusing exclusively on material things. And please note that all the prayers of the Prophet Moses and of St. Paul were not heard by God, simply because it was not expedient.

It cannot be overemphasized that when we pray, our efforts should not focus exclusively on the idea of receiving. The objective of making our soul better is necessary and this too is accomplished through prayer. The one who prays with this objective becomes stronger than the force of worldly things and is able to fly high above them all.

We mentioned earlier that prayer is obstructed by much sleeping, much eating, much talking and luxury. If these are obstacles to effective prayer, then certainly vigils, fasting, silence, quietude and asceticism are the wings which make our prayers fly higher.

Vigils are inseparable from the life of prayer. As there is no bird without wings, there cannot be a life of prayer without vigils. A night without the memory of God is like a garden without flowers, a tree without fruit, a house without a roof. The prayers best loved by God are those of the night: before we sleep, after we sleep a little and arise at midnight, and early in the morning, before dawn. In this way we dedicate the night not only to bodily rest, but also to the well-being of the soul. By sacrificing some of our sleep, we give something of our own to God who sacrificed his Son for our sins. Nocturnal prayer makes our sleep sweeter because the words of prayer continue to be active and stimulate beautiful dreams. It is said that St. Arsenios the Great would begin

his prayer each Saturday night just as the sun was setting in the west. He would conclude just as the sun arose to shine in his face on Sunday morning. That is how he measured his time of prayer!

A simple and frugal diet of fasting gives clarity to the mind and vigilance to the soul. A person who has eaten to satiety cannot pray, nor can one pray who is starved. One should eat just enough not to be hungry, perhaps a little less.

Silence is the adornment of the people of God who measure their words and do not use their tongue as a lethal weapon. The person who is easy-going with words may find it difficult to pray effectively. Loquacity confuses, tires and obscures. Silence concentrates the mind, gives rest to the spirit, and keeps it in constant readiness. Monks persistently search for the most quiet corner possible to set up their sanctuary. The objective is to have external quietude penetrate into the soul, for without inner silence and peace, external quiet is of no avail. When the serenity of the soul is accompanied by gratitude toward God, great results can be achieved.

According to St. Makarios of Egypt, guarding our thoughts and praying with much quietude and peace are fundamental to prayer. And, according to St. Ephraim the Syrian, the one who prays purely will burn and banish demons, while he who prays carelessly will become the demons' laughing stock.

OBSTACLES TO PRAYER

An elder of Mt. Athos used to tell young monks: "Do not strike up a conversation with your thoughts and imaginings!" Another elder said: "Above my cell many birds will fly. I cannot forbid them. But that which I can do is to disallow them to make their nest on my roof!" St. John of the Ladder says: "Even if your mind is constantly distracted from your prayer, you must struggle unceasingly to recall it. We shall not be condemned because our attention was distracted in prayer, but rather because we did not attempt to bring it back."

The "thoughts and imaginings" of which the first elder spoke trouble many of us a great deal and can be serious obstacles to prayer. A long and difficult struggle may be needed to cut them off completely. This is so because, in many cases, even though these thoughts and imaginings are foreign to our true nature, they have nonetheless become very familiar. They have established their lairs in us. We have become accustomed to them and, as a matter of course, consider them quite natural. When they come to disturb our prayer, concentration can be quickly lost. And these thoughts may not leave us when we want them to go away, especially if they correspond to our uncontrolled

desires, if they are indicative of a weakness in our will. As we said, the struggle can be long and difficult. Let us be honest and not try to hide or justify our weakness.

There are many other and varied obstacles to prayer. There is hesitation, anxiety and pain related to nonexistent illness. There is ill disposition, hunger, thirst, sleepiness, impatience, remembrances, weariness. We may recall details that we thought had been relegated to oblivion telephone numbers, sayings of elders, irritations and annoyances of the past. All these can be problems to beginners, but they should not dishearten us. In addition, there are imaginings and demonic fears that usually trouble those who are advanced in prayer, and sometimes beginners to a lesser degree.

More fundamentally, we can say that the devil uses our negligence and our inattention to leave the heart unenlightened by the life of prayer, bringing a myriad of vain thoughts and imaginations to draw us away from the essence of prayer. But we must keep in mind that which is exclaimed in the Divine Liturgy: "The doors, the doors; in wisdom, let us be attentive!" The doors of the mind and of the heart must be well guarded, so that the originator of evil will not control them and be able to enter freely.

It is most difficult to guard our thoughts and protect them from evil theories, demonic deceptions, false visions. Very particular attention is needed here. The purpose of prayer is not the vision of God, but the pouring out of his mercy. A strong desire to see God may be the beginning of error. Let us live as unworthy and incapable, as we certainly are, and if God should will to appear to us, then all well and good. But this should not be our agonizing purpose.

There was once an ascetic who was praying in the desert and a temptation came to disturb him. Humbling himself as usual, the ascetic was tempted with the presence of a false light. Deeming himself unworthy to look upon the divine light, and wanting to shun false lights, he buried his face in the sand. The temptation disappeared and an inexpressible peace filled the heart of the ascetic. This story illustrates how very much aware and sober we must be.

Let us therefore guard against obstructions. Let us stand courageously, like the ascetic mentioned by St. Neilos the Ascetic, who had been bitten by a snake while praying. He did not move until he had completed his prayer. "And he who loved God more than himself was not harmed at all."

A similar incident is mentioned by Palladios about a certain monk called Elpidios. He was bitten by a scorpion but did not move from his position of prayer either.

A characteristic of contemporary man, who is easy-going in some ways, is a strong sense of hurry, and great impatience. He expects a great deal quickly and without much toil. The impatience which possesses him makes him want to hurry in prayer; he wants

instant results, here and now. He wants to reap fruit before even sowing. Without a drop of sweat, he expects miracles, visions and revelations. Such pure but naïve desires of contemporary man, who in spite of his folly does not cease desiring God, are frightfully and dangerously exploited by the many wolves in sheep's clothing, who have infiltrated the spiritual fold of Christ.

THE ANSWER TO OUR PRAYER

The delay in seeing our prayer requests fulfilled, in having our questions answered, is yet another point on which our life of prayer is tested. It is neither a matter of God not hearing our prayers nor of his being indifferent to our suffering. God does not want us to be troubled and tormented, but to be in constant communion with him with our fervent prayers, which should increase if not immediately answered. We should thank God whether he gives us what we ask for or not, since in either case he is acting for our own good. We should not be discouraged and disillusioned when we do not receive what we ask for in prayer. God may be testing our persistence. Let us not tire easily.

If we do not receive what we seek we should thank God, nonetheless, as if our prayer has indeed been answered, since he knows our true needs of the present hour better than we do. It may be that our hope does not materialize because what we desire is not essential, even though it may seem indispensable to us at the time. If something is truly indispensable God will provide it instantly. Therefore, even in the case of apparent rejection, St. John Chrysostom reassures that in essence we have succeeded. Any failure that brings a benefit to our life is in fact not a failure but success.

"But Father, I am asking for spiritual things that are good for me, why is it that I do not receive them?" you may ask. Perhaps because your zeal for them is insufficient. Perhaps because the requests are not truly from your own heart, but contrived from other sources or motives. Perhaps you are not worthy to receive them at this time. It is not possible that God, who takes care of the birds, the irrational animals and the plants of the earth, and whose compassion for human beings far surpasses any paternal bond of kinship ignores us without reason.

Our drowsy yawning, our flight even from the very first disappointment when everything seems to bother us, our indifference, accompanied by much carelessness and doubt, indicate quite clearly that in the final analysis we do not really know what we want and what we seek. There are times when it is clear, as when we do not ask today what we were asking just yesterday, that we do not really need what we pray for. The illness of constant change in our desires, easily understood psychologically, can affect and torment our life of prayer. Essential changes in the way we pray come from mystical

experiences, divine breezes, subtle whispers of the Holy Spirit in humble, peaceful and understanding hearts. As our hearts improve, so does our attitude in prayer.

St. John Chrysostom asks rhetorical questions and provides answers which summarize the matter well:

"Are you in a state of calmness and serenity? Then, beseech the Lord to make more permanent this joy in your heart. Are you troubled by the onslaught of tribulations and temptations? Beseech the Lord to calm the storm in your life. Has your prayer been heard? Thank God. Have you not been heard? Persist in your prayer until you are heard."

To thank God for pleasant things that come our way is natural. But to be able to thank God even for the unpleasant events that happen in our life is remarkable. and when this really happens in our lives, we truly bring delight to God and shame to the devil. Sorrow changes to spiritual joy. No one is more holy than the person who can be grateful to God in his suffering.

St. John of the Ladder says that effective prayer is characterized by two main elements: sincere thanksgiving and contrite confession. He clearly tells us that our requests in prayer are sometimes not fulfilled for one of the following reasons. We may be asking before the appropriate time, we may not be worthy, or we may be seeking out of a sense of vainglory. Another possible reason is that, if we do receive what we pray for, we may fall into the sin of pride. Also, having received what we ask, we may fall into the other sin of negligence.

CONTRITION AND COMPUNCTION IN PRAYER

According to the same holy Father, St. John, who authored the famous spiritual book, The Ladder, true prayer is both mother and daughter of tears. Contrition and compunction are its regular companions. Compunctious prayer is based on an attentive life attentive to the ever-presence of God in our life, to the purity of our heart, to the genuine humility of our spirit, and to the mystery of death which we must ever remember and contemplate. As it is impossible for fire and water to live together, it is similarly impossible to mix compunction with a life of luxury. And if we could only direct our awareness to the many salutary interventions of God in our life, our eyes would fill with tears of joy for his abundant blessings. Orthodox hymnology is replete with such sweet tears tears of gratitude combined with tears of compunction, which in ascetic terminology refer to harmolypi (joyful sadness).

Should our prayers be favored with such tears, let us be careful not to lose this blessing because of pride. Mark the Ascetic informs us that with these tears Christ has visited us and has opened our eyes. The memory of our sins in general, and not necessarily specific sins, is sufficient for compunction. St. Barsanouphios says that compunction will come when we tame our will such that we are able to abandon our non-spiritual rights and our love for worldly popularity. It is important to distinguish true compunction from the tears of superficiality, vanity and sentimentality. And we must be careful. Compunction can be wiped out by a careless tongue.

Prayer without compunction is like a meal without taste, according to Elias the Elder. The saintly Theognostos tells us that compunction can be gained in prayer by temperance, vigilance and humility, says. And Niketas Stethatos observes that compunction begets humility and humility compunction.

UNCEASING PRAYER OF THE HEART

The present author is insufficiently prepared for an adequate discussion of the next stage in this topic the unceasing, spiritual prayer of the heart, marked by a single unwavering thought otherwise known as the Jesus Prayer. The topic of spiritual sobriety and vigilance, spiritual contemplation and action is very advanced and extremely difficult. I shall limit my efforts to the mentioning of a few applicable comments found in the inexhaustible treasury of the holy Fathers.

St. John of the Ladder instructs that if the mind wants to pray united with the heart and is unable to achieve this, then the prayer should be said with the mouth, while the mind holds and attends to the words of the prayer. In time the Lord will bless us with the prayer of the heart when we will be able to pray without constraints and distracting imaginations. This charisma is given, as are all charismata, to the simple and humble soul, in accordance with the austere and precise spiritual order. To the one who is simple, humble and temperate in all things, Christ himself will bestow the prayer of the heart.

The so-called Jesus Prayer is simply the repetition of the phrase: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me a sinner." There are some minor variations in the wording. The power of this prayer is unlimited. The very name of Jesus banishes the demons, as St. Anthony the Great tells us. This prayer and the name of Jesus is repeated by many saints. St. John Chrysostom says that the acquisition of the prayer of the heart is not a matter of one or two days, but involves much time and effort, until the enemy is banished and Christ comes to dwell in our heart. According to St. Neilos the Ascetic, the best defense against the enemies is the name of Jesus. And who are the enemies?

Burning desires, sinful delights, diabolical schemes and the like. As to how to say the Jesus Prayer properly we have instructions in the book called Philokalia.

The unceasing prayer comes from great love. It is lost of course when one becomes inattentive, idle and critical. Our love for God cannot be impeded by the work we do. The person of God, no matter what he or she is doing, can have a constant remembrance of God, a constant doxology, a constant thanksgiving. God loves us all, but he loves even more those who love him. Our prayer reveals the measure of our love for him. The infinite love of God for man has provided for prayer, so that, at any moment one so desires and all the days of his life, one can have conversation with God. All the saints kept their life of prayer unceasing.

Abba Poimen, the great father of discernment, says that there are three most useful principles: fear of God, unceasing prayer, and love for our neighbor. The disciple of Abba Bessarion, Abba Doulas, mentions in the Gerontikon that he found his elder praying continuously with his arms raised for fourteen days. Only after he lowered his arms did the disciple disturb his elder. St. Basil the Great says that unceasing prayer means to so unite yourself with God, through the manner of your whole life, that your very life becomes an unceasing prayer. Abba Isaac says that unless the grace of the Holy Spirit abides in our heart, perfection in this prayer cannot be attained. When the Holy Spirit dwells in our heart, prayer is not interrupted even when we sleep. And Niketas Stethatos calls this unceasing prayer a spiritual reflection, a remembrance of God with persistent contrition.

One of the elders on Mt. Athos related to us that he had received a letter from a simple woman in which, among other things, she wrote:

"Father, I am a widow with two children and am working to raise them, etc. Please pray for me because I do not have enough time and I pray only eight hours"

Yes, you read correctly, eight hours, and she did not consider it enough! Apparently she was practicing the spiritual prayer. The person who is dedicated to God does not measure, does not calculate, does not give in order to receive. He or she is offered completely to God and God gives himself completely in return.

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON PRAYER

Dear friends, let our prayer be regular, but not out of custom and duty; let it be with a program, but not for the sake of the program. In this way our prayer can be expected to have sweet warmth and inspirational variations and graces. In a mystical yet certain way, God will inform us if our prayer is true and pleasing to him through the joy and peace which will fill our soul. For many, temptations, difficulties, misfortunes, dangers,

deaths, losses have been stimuli which led them to the art of prayer. These difficulties have helped them to more fervent and stronger prayers which earlier had not been achieved, even with persistent effort, because they were not whole-hearted or lacked sincerity.

The true art of prayer is taught to the person who prays by God himself. Customary prayer, without a spirit of contrition, of compunction is not pleasing to God. A soul who loves God cannot live without prayer. God draws the soul to himself through prayer. Only to the humble person will God give the taste of the sheer sweetness of prayer. Only the prayer of the humble person can be pure.

In the final analysis, my dear brothers and sisters, whoever you are strong or weak, warm or cold, young or old, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, clergymen or laymen know that not even a single word of our prayers is in vain. They are all heard, all of them. For this reason do not forget, during those sacred hours, to mention my unworthy person, since God also loves prayers for others, particularly for those who have so much need

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