

POINT OF FAITH NUMBER 15

**ON**  
**ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN**  
**SYSTEMATIC PRAYER**  
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*An extemporaneous talk given at the St Gregory Palamas Conference,  
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# THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY

Before I speak about prayer, there are a few observations I would like to add to the previous paper.<sup>1</sup> When we talk about the appearance of the "holy man" as an historical phenomenon, we are speaking also of certain major changes in society, and in the life of the Church. There are certain movements and changes in the structure of society, and in the way life in the Church is being shaped, which appear to necessitate a passage from the need for the ministry of kerygma to the ministry of prophecy. There is a time when we need prophets instead of preachers. Prophets do not teach in the same way that preachers do, even if the preachers are truly Orthodox. In North American society we have crises of corruption among those outside the Church who claim to be preaching the Gospel. The crux of the crises is with televangelists, if only because they reach so many people, but their style permeates most of the Evangelical and Fundamentalist preachers. Televangelists and "crusade" preachers are in the religion business and it is a lucrative business, which has made many of them very rich. They occupy substantial niches on television and present the Gospel in such a way that they have encouraged the younger generation to reject Christ and Christianity altogether. Such preaching may be highly theatrical, often worthy of vaudeville, but at the same time it is highly formalistic and choreographed. Almost all of these populist preachers follow the same choreography and use the same studied and ritualized artificial vocal inflections, what someone once called a "Moody Institute dialect." They demand of people a moral life which requires great struggles of fasting and prayer, and yet either denounce, completely reject or at least ignore that kind of struggle. This kind of preaching is similar to the techniques used by Adolf Hitler to entrance and seduce the people of Germany. While it is conducive to the mass-hypnosis of a crowd, it has substantially undermined the credibility of the Christian faith in North America and elsewhere. Hitler once said that the mass rally is valuable, because it is there that people abandon reason in favour of the desired oversimplification. In this era when we see these preachers tap dancing around the podium, shrieking hysterically and staging fake healings, a change has also taken place in the general attitude toward prayer. In Evangelical Protestant and Fundamentalist ideology (it can hardly be called theology), the Christian faith is very much concerned with material well-being, with wealth, romanticized emotionalism and moral scapegoating. Because this ideology has had such a powerful impact in America, far more than in Canada, the concept of prayer has also been changed. We cannot avoid the reality that this has impacted upon many elements in the Orthodox Church also. We find many of our own priests preaching the oppressively moralistic and fundamentalist ideology of Calvinism, and many priests who have lost the patristic perspective and have fallen into the darkness of Augustinianism. In these cases, we are not faced so much with the wealth and prosperity version of the Gospel, as with an oppressive and repressive moralistic message which ultimately has little to do with any genuine morality. This also has a negative impact on the understanding of prayer and its purpose.

Ironically, while pretending to be charismatic, these preachers have adopted a radical formalism which is stagey and theatrical. At the same time, within the Orthodox Church, the crisis of Ecumenism is substantially undermining the Orthodox Christian Gospel and leading Orthodox Christians into the spirit of reductionism and minimalism common to Liberal Protestantism.

The hesychasts or holy men and women of any particular historical era are people with a prophetic ministry, a prophetic gift, who have seen the generation of corruption within the Church, a stepping away from an effective prayer life, and an abandonment of the Orthodox Christian system of prayer which we have by revelation. To say that they see some *unique* corruption in society would be rather utopian. There is always a corruption in society at large, as there was in Israel, in the Christian Roman Empire, including the Byzantine period of that empire. The prophetic ministry in Israel did not concern the world at large, but was concerned with the life of that nation which constituted, at that time, the Church of the living God. The prophetic ministry manifested by the appearance of the "holy men" in the life of the Orthodox Church has not concerned the life of the world at large, but rather has concerned that which impacts directly on the lives of the faithful within the

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1. **The Appearance of the Holy Man**, by Anastasios Papademetriou.

Church. St Symeon the New Theologian was not overly concerned about the civil society around him, but focused his prophetic ministry on the life of the Church, the monastic communities and hierarchs in particular. There is little use in criticizing civil society while the leaders in the Church are incapacitating the Church's ability to minister to the world. Ultimately, the witness of St Gregory Palamas was just as effective after the Turkish conquest as it had been before it. The leaders of civil society, the Paleologoi, Kantecuzene and the Serbian Tsar Stevan Dusan, in their overweening greed and lust for power, incapacitated what was left of the state and rendered it incapable of surviving the Turkish invasion, but the witness of St Gregory Palamas and the hesychasts strengthened the inner life of the Church, the inner life of prayer of the faithful, and remained a force after the secular state, that pitiful remnant of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire had ceased to exist. The rise of the holy man, usually from among the monastics, with a prophetic ministry, is a gift of grace to the Church. If it impacts at all on civil or secular society it is because this ministry has been heeded and re-enabled the Church to minister to the world in truth, not just the truth of words, but the truth of deeds and of the lives lived by the hierarchs and the people. This ministry is not manifested in histrionic sermons or angry moralistic preaching, but in the transformation of the lives of the faithful and the manifestation of such transformed, even transfigured, lives in the world. The core of this prophetic ministry, this prophetic teaching of these holy men and women, is prayer.

### **THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY AND PRAYER**

There is a difference between having a system of prayer, prayer with a meaningful form, and a formalism in prayer just as there is a difference between formalism in worship and having a meaningful liturgical form of worship service, a form established by the Holy Spirit. The form of worship conveys the inner Gospel message of that worship and formal liturgical worship was established directly by God from the beginning of the human race. Televangelism represents formalism of preaching and worship, but is devoid of meaningful form and established only by the imagination and traditions of men. Formal liturgical worship is based in revelation and is filled with meaning and understanding. It has purpose, direction and destination, and is an antidote to spiritual chaos and confusion. The systematic prayer which has always been an instrument of the prophetic ministry within the Orthodox Church is likewise an antidote to chaos and confusion. Such prayer has not only a clear meaning, but it has a clearly defined purpose and destination.

When a person is called upon to say a prayer impromptu in front of an audience, or told to have a prayer ready next week for some event, they are concerned with what the people of the audience are going to think of them while they are saying this prayer that they have made up. Such prayer is genuinely formalistic and often egoistic. One is not just trying to address God; one is also trying to impress the audience even if only subconsciously. This is what formalism actually consists in. A form or system of prayer can become formalistic to an individual, no matter that it is revealed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the prophetic ministry actually tries to restore the perspective of such people.

Civil society in Byzantium had developed such a deadly formalism that the whole structure of government was crippled by the most inane, useless and mindless rituals and formality which even the Emperor himself was obliged to go through, instead of tending to the business of the Empire. This naturally spilled over into every class of society especially the upper classes. The leaders of the Church had become corrupted by this degenerate spirit also, and this in turn crippled the preaching of the Gospel and darkened the path of salvation. At such a critical time in history the prophetic ministry was again manifested in the form of the hesychastic renewal: the prophetic ministry was directly tied to the *meaning and purpose* of prayer. It is recorded that on one occasion, the father of Saint Gregory Palamas was sitting in his place in the senate in Constantinople, at a time of crisis and emergency for the state. Senator Palamas was very deep in hesychastic prayer. One of the other senators turned to the Emperor and suggested that they "call him back" out of his state of prayer so they could ask his advice. The Emperor replied, "Leave him alone. He is doing much more good for us there where he is than we are here where we are." Ultimately, any solution to the problems of the State would depend on solutions to the

fundamental problems of the fallen human nature. Those solutions certainly cannot be found in the almost brutish and hypocritical hypermoralism<sup>2</sup> of televangelists and the twisted, deformed ideology of the Falwells and Dobsons of this world.

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**2.** Moralism and morality are not synonyms. Moralism is a form of external conformity, used as an excuse to persecute or degrade people whom the moralist feels are not living up to his or her standards of external proper behaviour. Morality is an inner struggle to purify the heart so that our external behaviour is motivated by a sincere inner love, with no external show, boasting or berating of others.

They do not look for the actual causes of problems, rather, like Hitler, they oversimplify in order to gain support, primarily financial support, and instead of trying to help heal the problems, they seek to persecute them, to stir up hatred against them and advocate their own version of the "ultimate solution." The prophetic ministry seeks the solution to problems in the nature of the fallen human condition. The solution remains to be found in the struggle for transformation and the assimilation of the renewed nature in Jesus Christ. We attain this, only with great effort, by the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, and this requires a unique life of prayer and fasting. The preacher seeks to expound the elementary things of the Gospel, the sincere preacher, honourably, the hate monger and "for profit" preacher, dishonourably. The true prophet is not a soothsayer nor an entertaining predictor of the future. The prophet seeks to open the human nature to the light of grace, first to expose and then to heal. This is why I would identify the prophetic ministry with the holy man who preaches true prayer, a life of prayer and hesychastic prayer in particular. True prophets who have received some warning about the future which God commands them to proclaim, do so in order to arm people with spiritual struggle, prayer and repentance so that they will not be found wanting when those things do come to pass.

That is all I wanted to say about the holy man: he is a transference to the prophetic ministry. If we look at the Old Testament prophets, the prophets were always on the periphery of society, they were not at the heart of society. No prophet can be an integral part of the society around him and fulfil his prophetic ministry. The prophetic ministry automatically places a person on the periphery of society, as it did in the case of St Symeon the New Theologian. First of all, he has to stand back and look at society from its outer boundaries, and he cannot be in the midst of it and still do that. Secondly, a prophet can never be accepted by society, because he is peeling away the scab over the sores of the society, and because he is offering a critique of society in the light of divine grace, with the grace of the Holy Spirit that has been imparted to him by God. We have a certain form of prophet in literature, the arts and even cartoonists. If you look carefully at the cartoons in the newspapers, you will see that there is a certain amount of social critique going on in them. There are different kinds of prophecy; there is a form of prophecy given by the careful and concerned social observer with no gifts other than his or her natural astuteness, and there are those prophets who are clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit. The latter has to somehow stand on the periphery of society and look in lovingly, with sorrow rather than with self-righteous condemnation. This is precisely what the holy man who arises at particular times in our history does. This is what the holy men at the end of the Byzantine Empire did. Foremost among them was Saint Gregory Palamas, the preacher of prayer, having received divine grace from the Holy Spirit. They had the gift of prophecy and they were making a critique of society in the light of that grace, not in order to condemn it, but in order to offer it healing, at least to those who had ears to hear the will of God. The primary vehicle for this healing was prayer, hesychastic prayer.

Now, I want to invite your attention to the first question which I have written on the board and let you think about it, for a little while and think about what it means: "Morality is a heresy." I will explain why a little later.

## **PRAYER WITH FOCUS AND PURPOSE**

First, I want to discuss prayer with you, in particular, why we have both a system of prayer as well as the spontaneous prayer that we practise within the context of our own private lives, and formal prayers that are unified with the worshipping community within the liturgical context. When prayer is spoken about in our day, we often hear about it in an emotional way, most often with a theosophical and New Age spin. One hears the most astonishing assertions: if your television set is broken, put your hand on it and pray, and you might be able to heal it so you will not miss any of your favourite soap operas. People will tune in to a certain preacher on radio and they will place their hands on the radios in the theosophical seance type of holding hands which is popular among sectarians, and all pray to lose weight together. This is how inane and degenerate the concept of prayer has become. If there is no economic or material benefit to it, why bother to pray? We pray for material things, we pray that we will not have to suffer and endure anything in this life, even though Christ directly promised us that His true followers would have to endure much. For many, prayer life has turned into a form of

egotism, a self-satisfaction, a self-endorsement, a plea for instant gratification. Ironically, even while religion hawkers are selling their own snake-oil systems of prayer, they are preaching against the systematic prayer of the Orthodox Christian Church.

Televangelist prayer systems are designed with the promise that they will attract material well-being, health and happiness, the acquisition of some worldly state without the process of purification, while the systematic prayer of the Orthodox Church has a definite and clear-cut spiritual goal and destination. The reason people do not understand Orthodox Christian prayer is that their own prayer life seldom has any destination or concept of precisely what it is they are trying to accomplish in prayer. The necessity to struggle for the purification of the conscience (heart) does not even occur to them. Most people, when they pray, are not trying to accomplish anything except to satisfy some emotional need or perceived material need. Often, people pray because it is a cultural exercise. In fact, even religion itself has become little more than a cultural affectation in our society. In America, many consider it a patriotic duty to be religious so they practise the cultural religion and pray because it is the proper thing to do. It is like singing "O Canada," "God Save the Queen," or "The Star-Spangled Banner." Even though religion and prayer may be a cultural affectation, they do not become an integral part of the soul of society. Religion and prayer fulfil a superficial emotional need in our lives, but we do not give it any depth, we do not give it any genuine meaning. Above all, we do not think of prayer in terms of the process of the purification of the conscience, the path toward illumination, and as an absolutely necessary part of the struggle for our salvation.

When our holy fathers and mothers examined the matter of prayer, they never even considered the idea that it was an "obligation" to God or that it was somehow done "for God's sake." We do not have to pray in order to inform God, to let Him know something He does not know. We pray in order to draw ourselves closer to God, because we really cannot know someone that we do not talk to; we cannot know someone that we refuse to have discourse with. So, we pray in order to bring ourselves closer to God and learn more about what He reveals to us about Himself. Many of the written prayers in the Church are designed to lead us into this kind of prayer. They instruct us and give us a ladder that we can climb in an ascent toward this knowledge and understanding of God, bringing us closer to Him. They also offer us a proper perspective on ourselves.

### **THE LORD'S PRAYER AS REVELATION**

The most formal of prayers is the "Lord's Prayer" itself. When we look at the Lord's Prayer, on the surface it appears very simple, but it is not simple at all. What is most astonishing about the Lord's Prayer is that in its profoundly simple beauty, such riches of theological knowledge are given.

The Lord's Prayer is actually quite complex. If we begin to think about the unknowable, unseen, incomprehensible, uncircumscribable God as our Father, it is an astonishing assertion. He is not like us at all. We have no genetic relationship to Him. He is absolutely unlike us in any way and yet we have to conceive of Him as our Father. Moreover, this has to deeply shape our emotional view of ourselves and our relationship with the universe. Yet we humans manage to trivialize that. In many modern Protestant hymnals and prayer books, we see such perversions as "our Father/ Mother Who is in heaven," "our Parents who are in Heaven," and perhaps even, "to whom it may concern," whatever fantasy people fall into these days. We trivialize our concept of God as Father and make it an empty, meaningless, emotional statement. By trivializing the words and content of the Lord's Prayer, we trivialize both the meaning of God as our Father, the message of redemption and, indeed, Jesus Christ Himself. Do you see how easily we trivialize the words of Jesus Christ by rewriting the Lord's Prayer according to our own whims and fancies? Jesus Christ taught us to pray, "Our Father Who art in the Heavens, *o en tis ouranis*." "In the Heavens," not "in Heaven," because God is everywhere present and fills all things. If we would take the time to contemplate the meaning of the words Jesus Christ has given us, perhaps it would be more difficult for us to trivialize them. The idea of God as our Father is astonishing. We must realize that God is our Father because he cared enough about us to adopt us as His children, to seek us and search us out to find those who were willing to become His children, in spite of our constant rebelliousness and self-will, and bring us into His own household and try to train us and bring us up in His way. It is an astonishing thing; "Our Father Who art in the Heavens." The word "heavens" refers to the material creation which we see when we look skyward, the moon, stars, planets, galaxies, and all that moves through the universe. The "heavens" has no

mystical meaning, no metaphysical significance, it is just a bunch of material and energy that formed in the process of creation, but it does fill the universe and God does order and direct it. Our God is everywhere present and fills all things, and this is what Jesus Christ taught us when He instructed us to pray, "Our Father Who art in the Heavens."<sup>3</sup> Hallowed be Thy name, Thy rule and reign come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The word that is used in the original Lord's Prayer does not signify simply "kingdom" in our earthly sense, rather it indicates the "rule and reign" of God. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." This time, Our Lord Jesus Christ narrows the scope down. He taught us to pray "Heaven," in the singular. He is no longer talking about the universe at large, but is using the word "heaven" in its abstract sense, the "kingdom of Heaven," that unique place of God. The "kingdom of heaven" is not a geographical location, or a political or physical entity such as an earthly kingdom. The kingdom of heaven, God's Kingdom, is present and manifested wherever the rule and reign of God has been accepted. Great mysteries are being revealed to us in this prayer, and yet some jurisdictions of the Orthodox Church literally trivialize the words and teaching of Jesus Christ by self-willed rewording of this prayer, done primarily for the sake of Ecumenism.<sup>4</sup> The mystery of the fall of Satan from "heaven" is revealed in this prayer, for when we say, "on earth as it is in heaven," we acknowledge that the will of God has been *freely accepted* in that "place," if we may metaphorically call it a place. The rebellion of Satan against God was something permitted because God desires that each of his creatures takes a decision of their own free will, without compulsion, to be with Him or separate from Him. Love does not compel love, but desires that love be freely accepted and freely returned. Angels could not have been sentient, intelligent beings without freedom of will. Satan departed from heaven under the same circumstances that Adam and Eve departed from Paradise. A free will choice was made, and those angelic beings who chose to love God and remain united with Him, freely accepted His rule and reign, and were sealed in that choice forever. Thus, our Lord taught us to signify that unique "heaven" where the will of God is truly fulfilled, where the will of God rules and reigns in the minds and will of the angelic hosts. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." The will of God is that all people should turn from their separation and live. The will of God is that all should freely accept His love and share in an everlasting life of blessedness. The will of God will be done on earth wherever the rule and reign of God has been freely accepted, which is why Jesus Christ told us that the kingdom of heaven is within us, even in our very hearts, that is, to those who, like the faithful angels, freely accept His rule and reign in their hearts. Thus, the way to bring about the rule and reign of God on earth, is to freely accept the rule and reign of God in our hearts. But the fulness of this message is also usually trivialized because so many people do not consider a correct translation of this prayer to be important, and they can think up a host of trivial excuses for not correcting their translations of it. It is also trivialized when one claims to "accept Jesus into his heart," but in fact, only so long as He doesn't bother us any, or make any noise down there or disturb us. We are not speaking here in terms of the novel concept of "accepting Christ as your own personal Saviour" which was invented around the end of the 1800's by the Revivalists Movement. This concept is understood in a legalistic way. You accept Christ as your own personal Saviour and then He is obligated to save you, because now you have a legal agreement with Him. Such people forget that the old covenant was not a *legal agreement* between God and Israel; it was a *spousal relationship*. All the Holy Prophets, without exception, try to remind Israel that they did not have a legal agreement with God but a spousal relationship with Him. A spousal relationship does not include non-involvement. Spouses do interject with each other and interject into each other's lives. Spouses have a relationship where they are quite free to be intimately involved in every aspect of each other's lives. The Church has a spousal relationship with God, and the will of God is done not where somebody just says, "Yes, I accept Jesus." The rule and reign is not simply a presence, it is a governance, it actually governs our lives and the structure of our being. Though we speak of the heart, of accepting Jesus into our hearts, we are talking about the conscience, which is the spiritual heart of man. The physical heart is an electro-mechanical pump. Our physical heart responds and reacts to emotional stimuli, but only because of hormones released by the brain. It

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3. The New Age Movement trivializes this by turning it into a pantheistic concept.

4. Ecumenism is a form of reductionism and minimalism. Many Orthodox leaders have been more than willing to compromise the faith for it and to trivialize even the concept of "truth," not to mention the sufferings of the holy martyrs.

is neither the seat nor source of our emotions, disposition or faith. The spiritual heart of man is his conscience and the conscience is the ultimate judge of man. So the purification of the "heart," "accepting Jesus Christ into our hearts," involves allowing God to rule and reign in our *conscience*. We will talk about this in the context of prayer in a moment.

*Our Father Who art in the Heavens, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily superessential bread, "epiousion arton," "khleb nash nasushni."* It doesn't say simply "daily bread," it says "*ton epiousion arton*", the meaning is deeper than simply "daily", our superessential bread, the bread of life. Give us today the bread of life, that superessential bread that comes down from the Father. Give us today participation in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who said, "I am the bread of life." The manna was not given by Moses. The manna, that life-saving bread in the desert, was given by God, and Jesus Christ is the *Bread of Life* that came down from the Father. Give us today participation in the "epiousion arton," the superessential bread of life, our Lord Jesus Christ.

"And forgive us our debts;" the word "trespasses" does not occur in the original. Forgive us this day our debts, "*ta ofelimata*," as we forgive our debtors. There are two unforgivable sins mentioned in Scripture: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and refusal to forgive. If you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven. If you do not forgive, your Father Who is in Heaven will not forgive you. You close yourself off from forgiveness, by refusing to forgive if only because by refusing to forgive you deny or trivialize the meaning of Christ's ministry and refuse Him a place in your heart. When you refuse to forgive you reject the rule and reign of God in your life and your heart, and when the rule and reign of God is no longer there, the will of God is no longer done. The will of God is that we should forgive as He forgives.

"Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors and lead us not into trials and tribulations, into temptation." Tempting or tempering is what a blacksmith does when he wants to strengthen a steel object he has made. If you forge an axe blade, while it is red hot, you dip it under cold water to temper it. You tempt or temper the blade to make it harder and more durable. When we pray not to be delivered into temptation, we are not suggesting that God would deliver us into temptation in the way we usually think about it, the temptation to fall into separation from Him, but we are nevertheless, willing to accept it when God determines that we need to be exercised or tempered in order that we be strengthened.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Jesus Christ never said "deliver us from evil" and we trivialize both His word and Him when we allow the mis-translation to be used. Evil has no ontological existence, evil is not a thing, is not a being so we cannot be delivered from it as if it was our captor. Evil is a condition of separation from the good. Deliver us from the evil-one, [Sl. *ot lukavago*: Gr. *paniroui*]. Jesus Christ did not come down to earth to redeem us from God. He did not come down to satisfy God's need for justice, for God is not subject to immutable laws of the universe over which He has no power. Christ ransomed us from the power of the evil-one, Satan and our struggle, like that of the Hebrews in the Sinai Desert, is to keep from falling back into bondage. The phrase, "deliver us from the evil-one" is a concise exposition of the meaning of redemption and a refutation of the Western doctrine of "the Atonement." Let us not trivialize Jesus Christ and His teaching, but rather let us accept His word and insist on praying the Lord's prayer as He taught it to us.

The idea that Christ came to take on our "just punishment" vicariously and deliver us from God's juridical justice and satisfy His offended majesty, is simply pagan. That is the concept which motivated pagans to sacrifice babies to Moloch and Baal. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to *redeem* us. You can only be redeemed from one to whom you are in bondage. We are not in bondage to God, we are in bondage to Satan through sin because sin separates us from God. We fall into bondage, we are "sold under sin" (Rm.7:14) by our own acts and deeds, by our own choice of actions, which cause us to fall short of the glory which God intended for us (Rm.3:23) and become separated from God and thus from life itself. We are redeemed from the power of Satan and death, we are redeemed back to the household of God. This is revealed to us throughout the Old Testament in the laws of redemption. We see that revelation in the person who had the title of "first born," whether he was literally the "first born" of many children or an only child, or simply the one who held the position. In the concept of redemption and the Old Testament laws of redemption, the title "first born" is equivalent to "redeemer." The "first born" son of any household was obligated to redeem back to the father's house every seven years, any property, land, or real estate that had been alienated from the father's house. Every seven years he would redeem the alienated property for money if possible, but in any Jubilee year, he could redeem it without money, by demanding its return. Thus, the one who bore the position of "first born" bore the responsibility of redeemer.

Our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed that which had been alienated from the Father's house, sold under sin, held in bondage to the fear of death by Satan. He redeemed us back to the Father's household. He did not redeem us *from* the Father, rather He "delivered us from the evil-one."

The mystery of redemption is the mystery of the cosuffering love of God for mankind.

## PRAYER AS PART OF THE HEALING PROCESS

We have discussed all this because a deeper understanding of the prayer which Jesus Christ taught us, the "Lord's Prayer," will help us to form our perspective about what prayer actually means. Prayer is not a social affectation nor an emotional fulfilment, nor something that props up our ego, as it often happens. When we pray, we want to feel the presence of God in our lives and sense more deeply the presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is a basic purpose of prayer. This, however, can be expressed at a shallow, emotional level where emotions can be mistaken for a real, prayerful relationship with Christ. Prayer has a great deal more to say to us and to give to us. Prayer is a part of the healing process. The ministry of Christ on earth was a healing ministry, not a juridical expedition. Christ came to heal the fallen human nature and restore it to unity with God, thus unity with life. All of us participate in one and the same human nature for there are not many human natures, but one and it is a fallen nature. Jesus Christ came to redeem our nature and restore the perfect human nature in Himself. By becoming participants in Jesus Christ, we become participants in the perfect human nature, which is fully united with God; we become partakers of the redeemed humanity, freed from the bondage of the fallen human nature. Despite the vain and, in some cases, blasphemous attempts in the West to forge a rationalistic, juridical explanation based on the concepts of Roman and Germanic law, there would have been no other reason for God to become man. There would have been no need for God to become incarnate in the flesh. It would be useless had He not come to restore mankind to unity with Himself, or rather to facilitate and offer man the possibility of such unity. The whole life of Christ on earth is a revelation to us about the struggle for the reunion of man with God. It is made possible by Jesus Christ, but not made inevitable by Jesus Christ. It is up to us to accept and pursue this redemption, this healing and restoration.

The life of prayer has a great deal more to do with the healing process than we often consider. That is why we have a *system* of prayer. We are being systematically healed and prayer is a major part of that process. In addition to the systematic prayer which St Gregory Palamas and other holy fathers defended against the Augustinian West, we have those prayers that we pour out from our hearts in the fulness of our grief and joy "in our own closet" (Mt.6:6). When hesychastic prayer was being taught from the very earliest times, Apostle Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1Thes.5:17) was taken quite seriously. Systematic hesychastic prayer is the method revealed in the Church by which we may attain to ceaseless prayer and at the same time be protected from delusion in our prayer lives. It is a part of the healing process in much the same way that a prescription given by a physician is part of the healing process for infections and physical illnesses. That is why it includes something called guarding of the mind, both to prevent our falling into delusion and to help prevent a "reinfection" by whatever passions we are being healed of.

But prayer is very practical. It is not just an emotional or spiritual practice that leads us into some kind of mysticism or creates some form of "spirituality" for us. *Mysticism* and *mystical* do not equal the same thing. When we talk about mystical we are not talking about mysticism and when we talk about a spiritual life we are not talking about "spirituality," but I will explain why a little bit later.

We will understand the concept of prayer as part of the healing process if we look at the process by which sin daily enters our lives, and examine how prayer responds to that process. Let us look at how the holy fathers defined the entrance of sin into our lives, and the process by which it takes possession of our minds and often becomes an addiction that consumes our being. We will see how we use prayer to repel or heal ourselves from that invasion of the spiritual virus that is sin. Sin does not mean breaking the law; sin means to fall short of the

mark or goal which God has set for us. The mark and goal of having good health is intervened by microbes, viruses, bacteria, and that sort of thing. The same is true of spiritual health. Sin is a spiritual microbe that invades the body and dwells parasitically within the body. It lurks parasitically in the flesh. We are concerned, therefore, with spiritual antibiotics. We are concerned with spiritually struggling against these microbes, these viruses of sin, deceit and delusion that take root in our being and become parasitically imbedded in us. They consume us not only as individual human beings but as societies, cultures and nations. The holy fathers and mothers of the desert knew very well exactly what they were talking about when they defined the process by which sin takes possession of us. They did not simply say "The devil made me do it." The devil may delude us or take advantage of what we have become willing to do or in bondage to, but if we know the process by which this take place, we are able to use prayer as a powerful weapon against it.

We are astonished at how clearly the fathers actually understood the physiological steps by which we become victims to these destructive viruses, these microbes of sin. How clearly the holy fathers understood that the soul and body are one unit and they operate together as a team; and how serious a Gnostic error it is to attempt to make a dichotomy between soul and body. Man does not *possess* a soul, but man *is* a living soul. Body and soul operate together and both are sanctified and both become deified and glorified together at one and the same time.

So, let us take a look at systematic prayer in relation to the physiological path by which sin enters into our mind and takes control, even becoming an addiction in us. We will see that, although the holy fathers did not know the physiological structure and pathways of the brain, they nevertheless understood very well how it operated, the steps by which temptation enters our mind and the stages by which it becomes manifested, develops and becomes habitual and then addictive. They told us that when sin first enters into our mind we have to be constantly on guard, guarding our mind like a watch-dog at the door. We have to always examine the things that enter into our mind so that the negative things not enter in and take root. We must even guard ourselves so that virtuous things not become sin in us. This is a part of a systematic prayer life, part of the healing process. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" as the old English saying has it.

Here is the order by which, according to the holy fathers and mothers, sin enters into and takes possession of us.<sup>5</sup> When a **suggestion** enters into our mind, it is obviously not sin, because we have not acted upon it, we have not reacted in its favour. But, then, we begin to **contemplate** it. As we **contemplate** it, we find that we begin to **savour** and **take pleasure** in the suggestion. When we begin to take pleasure in the suggestion, even though we know just from our own human experience and reasoning, let alone the warnings of our conscience, that it can be destructive, we come to a point where we actually **accept** it in our mind. At what point does it become actual sin? At the point where we take pleasure in contemplating it or at the point where we accept it in our mind? At the point where we accept it, we come into a **conscious agreement**. At this point, we have decided not to struggle against it even though we know the consequences of not doing so. At this point, it becomes sin. Why does it become sin at that point? Because we have made a conscious decision to separate ourselves from God's will, we have rejected the rule and reign of God in our spiritual heart, our conscience, and this has separated us from God. This occurs not because it breaks a law, but because we have chosen to accept this over what we know to be God's will, and this separates us from God, causing us to "miss the mark" or "fall short of the goal" to which He has called us, for which He created us. Worse, we have rejected the terrible sacrifice which Christ made for us in order to liberate us from bondage to Satan, for we have made a conscious choice to enter back into that bondage. We have now set up a "golden calf" in our mind and returned again to the "hot pots of Egypt" (Ex.16:3). Still, even at this point our conscience calls out and rallies to our defence. We are faced with the choice of whether to reject the divine voice of our conscience or whether to heed it and struggle against our decision, our fall into sin. We are called upon at this point to *metanoia*, to repent, to rethink, to turn around and go in the opposite direction. The word repentance means to rethink, to have a different perspective on the matter.

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5. Vladika Lazar gave this talk extemporaneously, without prepared notes. I have added emphases to the steps he describes from the system of the holy fathers in describing the steps by which sin develops in us, and also to the steps by which a stimulus enters the mind and develops, from the clinical description Vladika gives for comparison. The emphases make the comparison clearer. I have also added Scripture verse locations to most of his quotations from the Bible. (Editor).

With regard to the guarding of our mind, when a suggestion enters our brain, we may not perceive it right away, but when it enters the part of our brain where we contemplate and think about it, then we are able to take action to drive it back out of our mind and to begin to resist it, or if it happens to be a virtuous thing then to accept it and try to set it into proper context, so that we are not led into sin through something that, on the surface, is virtuous. Ironically, we can lose our soul through our virtues also. So, we can think about it and we choose whether to accept or reject this thought or temptation. When we accept a negative impulse, it then becomes sin. That is why our Lord Jesus Christ said if one commits adultery in the mind, one is as guilty of it as if he committed it in the flesh. He did not mean that we are guilty for a passing thought, but you become guilty if you savour the thought of adultery, contemplating it in your mind and accept the idea. When you reconcile yourself to the idea, then you are guilty, because you have become reconciled to the act and accepted the desire and even carry out the deed in your imagination. You have resisted the voice of the conscience and failed to take steps to repulse the temptation. After that, as our mind takes this whole situation in, we act on it in one of two ways: either physically or mentally by contemplating and savouring it. Our conscience will still call us to turn back, to repent and will try to intervene in how we set the matter into context. When we set it in context, we adjust the context according to whether we heed our conscience or fight against it. If we have contextualized the matter contrary to our conscience, then it is on the way to becoming **habitual** and it is a small step from habitual to **addiction**. Our conscience continues to strive with us and at any stage we can turn back, but the further along the process we have gone, the more difficult the struggle becomes. When we set this whole matter into context, we either fall into a deep repentance about it and determine to purify our conscience through repentance and through prayer; seeking God's forgiveness, and actually we are seeking the forgiveness of our own conscience. The forgiveness of God is always there, if we just turn around and take hold of it. When we repent, we seek to reconcile our soul with our conscience. On the other hand, we might choose to push our conscience to the side. We think, "This is really very pleasurable. It does something for me; it might destroy somebody else and it might separate me from God, but it gives me pleasure, if only temporarily. I'm going to store it in this context in my memory so that I can draw it out again and savour it more."

Now we have contextualized it and stored it in our memory in a certain way so that, even without committing the deed physically, we can draw it from our memory and savour it and take pleasure in it, and so renew the sin. Instead of repenting and purifying our conscience and our mind, we corrupt both. Now we no longer need an external stimulus to lead us into the sin; we have a stored up internal stimulus and we lead ourselves into temptation. We do not need the devil to tempt us all the time. In fact, I think the devil sometimes stands in awe and envy at the effective way we can tempt ourselves. This is how we make the sin habitual, by drawing it out of our memory and not trying to cleanse our mind and our memory. The next stage is addiction and then hopeless bondage. And then we wonder what bondage it was that Jesus Christ wanted to redeem us from! Partly, the bondage of our own mind, as well as the bondage of Satan and the power of the fear of death. *"Inasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also took part in the same; that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is Satan, and deliver those who through fear of death were all their lives held in bondage."* (Hb.2:14-15)

Man was all his lifetime held in bondage *by him, who had the power of death*. Not by God, but by the devil, and Satan has the power of death because we ourselves empower him. Satan has the power of spiritual death because we yield the power to him by accepting the delusions and deceit with which he entraps us. He has the power of physical death because physical death is the result of sin and we empower Satan by not struggling against sin. Mortality and death are not necessarily the same things. We have mortality and we do not necessarily have death. Man is not immortal by nature, but by the grace of God. Awareness of our mortality may help in the healing process of our nature so we can appreciate our mortality as something that reveals to us our need of God. Fear of death, however, bonds us to the spirit of this fallen world and the fallen nature. We die because we sin, we fall into sin because we fear death, and Satan is the great manipulator that makes us run on this treadmill to nowhere.

We have examined the concepts which the holy fathers used to describe the entry and progression of tempta-

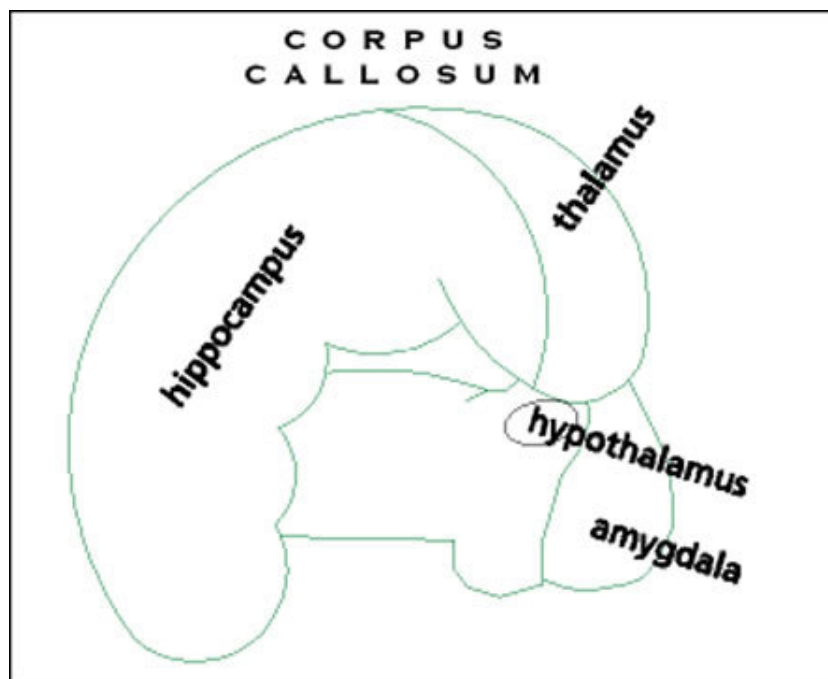
tions into our mind. What is amazing is how closely this system equates the actual physiological process by which this takes place. I want to take a look at the brain and show you why, from a purely physiological point of view, systematized prayer is a part of the healing process, and why people who have a prejudice against systematized prayer, because they think it is dry formalism, are dead wrong.

When we talk in terms of human psychology and physiology, we discover the same process which the holy fathers described, only we use different terminology to describe it. Let us limit our discussion to negative impulses so that we will not become too technical. First of all, let us dispense with the idea that the physical heart is the seat, origin or generator of our emotions, temptations or emotional stimuli. All this takes place in the brain and the heart is only involved when increased bloodflow is mandated by the emotional reaction and called forth by the release of hormones.

Our reactions are the result of some impetus which, technically, is called a stimulus. We will speak about a visual stimulus; there could also be an auditory stimulus. Suppose we are walking along a path and suddenly we see that we are on the very edge of a cliff. We jump back suddenly and micro-seconds later we become aware of why we jumped back. This occurs so quickly that we are not conscious of the fact that fear preceded the awareness of fear and the reaction preceded the awareness of why we reacted. Here is what has happened, and this will be the circumstance in every case. It sounds very technical, but it all will make sense in a moment.

A stimulus enters the brain. What happens when a stimulus enters, through the eye in this case, is that, in our brain, the stimulus goes into a region called the "*thalamus*."

*[The Archbishop made the following drawing on the chalk board as he was speaking:]*



That is the little round thing sitting on top of the almond in the little drawing I have made here. Actually, it looks like a walnut, but it is called an "amygdala" which means "almond." The little golf ball sitting up there, like the sort of thing that keeps so many people out of church on Sunday morning, is the **thalamus**. The stimulus enters that part of the brain and then takes two directions: it goes up toward the top of the brain, toward the visual cortex and it also sends its signal down into the almond, the **amygdala**. It hits the almond first, and then we react automatically without thinking. We do not think about what it is we are doing, we just react, and that is very valuable, because if you are walking along a path and you start to teeter on the edge of a cliff, if you stop to think the whole thing out and reason what might happen if you fall over the cliff and hit the bottom, you will be

down there before you react. Instead, you step back immediately, without thinking about it. Afterwards you go through the whole process of thinking it out, "Wow! That was a close call. I would have been smashed to bits if I fell over the cliff."

You start to reason about it instantly after the event, but you reacted emotionally before you thought out the matter. Then you go through the whole reasoning process, beginning from the visual cortex, and the whole picture forms. The reasoning or thinking process moves through the neo-cortex, and the signal, which began as an undefined stimulus, moves down to this lower part of the brain, down to the amygdala by a different route than the original signal from the thalamus. Now we are back down to the almond. Here, the two streams of the original stimulus meet in an area of the brain called the **hippocampus**, or hippocampi since there are two of them. Here, our brain sets the whole incident into context or **contextualizes** it, and prepares it to be sent into our memory. This is called **memory potentiation**, but we do not want to enter into a complex discussion of this. Since we have placed it in bold letters, however, you understand that it has a correlation in the system taught by the holy fathers, and we will place these two sets of vocabulary side by side in a moment so that you can see the true meaning and power of the patristic system of prayer defended by St Gregory Palamas. Forgetting about the cliff, let us look at a like sequence of events with a stimulus that might lead us into a sinful action. In that case, the conscience would have come into the action as soon as the stimulus moved from the thalamus to the cortex. As soon as we began to think about the meaning of the stimulus, our conscience would have entered into the deliberations in our brain.

Now, at the point where we contextualize the matter, the conscience enters into the process in a very powerful way. If we struggle to purify our relationship with our conscience,<sup>6</sup> to develop our conscience according to the faith and the principles of true morality, the conscience helps us to guard the mind from the very beginning of the appearance of this stimulus, which we might call a "temptation." It will help us to struggle against it at every stage, and now it helps us to set the whole thing into context. It brings us either to repentance or to going deeper into the abyss. Now the matter is set in context, we have two kinds of memory potentiation, long term and short term. If we have resisted our conscience and set this matter in the context of something that gives us pleasure (even if we only accepted it in our minds and did not fulfil it physically), and we really want to hang on to and savour the contemplation of the deed, it is going to go into our long-term **memory** in much this set **context**. It is going into our long-term memory in such a way that we can draw it out and savour it in future at the merest internal or external suggestion. So what happens now? We have a real potential for habitualization and addiction even if we do not fulfil the deed physically. We can become addicted to the contemplation of it. If you will compare this admittedly sketchy order of the steps by which a stimulus becomes action, context and memory, with the stages of temptation given in the system of the holy fathers, you will see that they are the same. The holy fathers gave us something concrete and practical, not something merely theoretical or ethereal. They had an astonishing insight into the manner in which the mind works and the steps by which we fall into active sin. Having such understanding, they also, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, provided us with systematic prayer to help prevent this fall or heal us after we had fallen. It is possible for humans to train themselves to take some control over the way they contextualize things for memory, and even to respond to many of their emotions in a reasoned way because human beings have a bi-directional neurosystem which allows the cortex to communicate with the limbic area of the brain. There are a number of approaches to psychotherapy in which this is demonstrated, and prayer is a part of our Orthodox Christian contribution to the psychotherapy process.<sup>7</sup>

Let us look at a more concrete example of the type of emotional response that might ultimately be contextualized and enter into active memory in a most destructive way. Our instant, emotional reaction to a stimulus can be useful, even life saving, as we have seen. The way we contextualize the matter can be quite destructive in some cases.

Anger arises from fear; there is no other source of anger except fear, even when anger is inculcated into us

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6. See *The Purification of the Conscience*, by Archbishop Lazar Puhalo in the Synaxis Press Point of Faith series.

7. I hasten to add that it is not a replacement for treatment by a competent psychiatrist. Priests should never delude themselves that they can guide a persons psychotherapy by themselves, without the primary treatment by a psychiatrist.

through propaganda. Fear is the mother of anger, and anger is the mother of hatred, and hatred is the mother of malice. Fear may be just an emotion that takes place without initial thought, as when we see a snake on the path just in front of us. Fear can elicit a fight or flight response from us and, in the case of a fight response, fear produces anger, which in turn helps us to fight more effectively. When we contextualize our fear, however, we can contextualize it as hate or submission or in a number of other ways. That is quite useful in case of a war. If you are afraid of the enemy and you have to fight against him it is much more effective if you hate him, because that way you can fight with more intensity and without reservations. That is why the propaganda machine of any nation in the war tries to build up a fear of the enemy and then turn that fear into hatred. That is why they demonize the enemy, so that we will hate him and have less qualms about shooting him. It is also useful if the head of the government or the head of state wants to control you, because they can manipulate you far easier through fear than through any other emotion. Hitler spent a long time building up fear of the Jews so he could turn it into a hatred so that the nation would support him, no matter what he did. Hitler became the one who was going to "save us from this great enemy who was destroying our society and our culture," namely the Jews. Any time a demagogue wants to manipulate us or control us, he first has to make us afraid of someone in society, some group. It does not matter which group, but anybody who is a scapegoat. And then you change that fear into a hatred. The demagogue then presents himself as the one who has the solution, who can lead us against this enemy who might otherwise destroy our society and our culture and all that we hold dear. History has shown us how such a demagogue can take control of people and lead them into hatred and terrible deeds. It does not matter whether it is Hitler or a televangelist; the method and the end result might be the same.

Satan is the master demagogue. He can lead us to fear someone, and then to hate them, and then into the bondage of malice. In such a state, we can become most destructive. Our conscience will try to intervene in this process at many stages and turn it back, even after it has entered into our memory to hate such and such a person or group of people. Our conscience will call upon us to repent of our hatred or malice and be healed of it. Alas, we can be a demagogue to ourselves, and in such a case, healing is even more difficult because we have to pray for help in overcoming ourselves. Our systematized prayer, the patristic hesychastic prayer defended by Saint Gregory Palamas in particular, serves to deliver and heal us at every stage of the process. Why is this prayer so potent in this healing process? Because it is focused,<sup>8</sup> it has a known "destination," and it is aimed at a specific, practical purpose. We know the process and the steps by which temptation and sin enter and are manifested in our minds, and Orthodox Christian prayer is designed by experience and grace to precisely respond to this process.

Orthodox Christian prayer is a "prescription" given by the Holy Spirit, designed to help in healing us of the spiritual viruses and microbes that want to parasitically inhabit our flesh and bring it into bondage and cause that spiritual illness which leads to spiritual death.

Our brain, created by God to house our mind, is an integral part of our being, the seat of our reasoning faculties, the locus of our emotions and the dwelling place of our conscience, our spiritual heart. It is the place where we must begin the healing process. Hesychastic prayer is a spiritual medication. It is a process by which we gain control of the stimuli that enter our mind; it helps us to assess them and limit them and ultimately, such prayer helps greatly in the healing of our mind, the purification of the conscience and the strengthening of the will. It involves both the body and the mind, and so helps to collect us and unify our spirit. Prayer is psychotherapy, the treatment of the soul. Such systematized prayer is an extremely important part of Christian life, because Christian life is a struggle to find healing for the whole being, the whole person.

## SYSTEMATIC PRAYER

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8. Focus is so critical for our spiritual life. Orthodox Christian systematic prayer, both hesychastic (the "Jesus Prayer") and the prayers of the Liturgical cycle and the Prayer Book, serve to focus our lives and our spiritual struggle. When our Lord Jesus Christ said "*strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.* (Mt.7:14), He was speaking about focus. The narrow gate and path are visible to those who have focus in their spiritual lives, who have set a clear destination for themselves and focussed their lives on it.

## AND THEOSIS

Prayer also helps to bring us into accord with the will of God so that we no longer fall short of the "mark" or "goal," which is to be united with God and share in His immortality, in everlasting life and eternal joy. Everyone who has sinned has fallen short of the glory of God. We fall short of that glory of God which He desires that we participate in through *theosi*, the glory of God, not the "glorious ideal that God has for us," as some sectarian versions of the Bible say, but literally the glory of God (2Pet.1:4;<sup>9</sup> 2Cor.3:18). We attain this state of participation in the glory of God by ascending through purification to illumination and then to glorification. Prayer is the primary instrument for this ascent because prayer is an act of seeking to draw near to God just as it is a tool for overcoming our sinful separation from God.

Everybody in the Church is called "saint" by Apostle Paul because the Hebrew and Greek equivalents of the word indicate "dedicated to," "set apart," "sanctified to the use of." Yet we have those people whom we uniquely call "saints" and place on icons in a transfigured form.

To understand this, and to understand the essence of Christian struggle, let us first set aside the un-Orthodox idea of "canonizing" saints. We do not canonize saints in the Orthodox Church. This idea of "canonization" is not an Orthodox Christian concept, but a term borrowed from the Latins. The expression in the Orthodox Church is *glorification*.

The goal and destination of our prayer life and struggle is this ascent through purification of the conscience to illumination in the grace of the Holy Spirit, to glorification so that we no longer "fall short of the glory of God." How do we know that a person has attained to glorification, except that it be revealed to us by the Holy Spirit? And why is that revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, except that it shows that it is possible for man to attain? Why do we venerate those glorified saints in the Church, except that they have proved to us that though we have fallen short or missed the mark of the glory of God, we can return to that glory and ascend to that "*prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" being "*changed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord*" (Phil.3:14; 2 Cor.3:18), and can participate in the glory of God; that we can become truly dwelling places and temples of the Holy Spirit; and that the Holy Spirit can abide in us and work through us, as He does in the saints. In such a way, people can see the glory of God and desire it. Only by this witness can mankind comprehend that our Lord Jesus Christ became man in order to unify man with God in Himself, and understand that our redemption consists in making it possible for us to truly participate in, and attain to, the glory of God once more, through the process of *theosis*.

### PRAYER AND THE HEALING OF OUR NATURE; THE WHOLENESS OF MAN; ORDER IN PLACE OF CHAOS

The most concrete life of prayer, and systematic prayer in particular, is hesychastic prayer, the prayer defended by Saint Gregory Palamas and the prophetic ministry. It is a healing process by which our fallen human nature can become collected and focused, delivered from chaos and redirected toward the goal for which God created us. By means of such focused prayer, we can once more assimilate to our hearts the principles of life revealed to us by our Creator and Redeemer. With the help of divine grace, such prayer can help us conquer those things that separate us from God and from one another. By means of such an active and focused prayer life we can, with the grace of the Holy Spirit, become healed of those spiritual microbes, viruses and build-ups of spiritual cholesterol in our system. Consequently, when one denigrates or denies that systematic or hesychastic prayer which is fundamental to Orthodoxy, one denigrates the Gospel itself. Only the spiritually blind or ignorant could consider as formalistic ritualism that system of prayer which leads us toward such a definite goal, a definite destination, toward our high calling in Jesus Christ, toward restoration to participation in the glory of

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9. Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature.

God. This is precisely what systematic prayer is doing for us. It is not a magical process; it is a free-will act of setting our desire toward purity, true morality and unity with God. The action of such a free struggle in man, and the process of such ordered prayer, helps to collect and bring the whole person together, dispelling the chaos and confusion from our lives. It solidifies our "person" and draws it into true communion with Christ. God is not a demagogue or a dictator; He does not force us into anything. The idea of predestination is a Gnostic heresy. There is no predestination for man just as there is no determinism in the created universe. We are free moral beings and, as such, obliged to make our own free-will decisions concerning our relationship with God and our expectations for everlasting life. Nowhere in creation do we find predestination or determinism. The Heisenberg Principle of Uncertainty and the Hamiltonian Principle, which is the vector operator of the universe itself, testify to this. God created the universe as well as us. The universe is not something that came to be accidentally, and the structure of the universe is not accidental and we, as part of that created universe, are intimately connected to it. Thus, there is no predestination or determinism anywhere in the universe and least of all in the matter of mankind's salvation. So, we have to make free choices. God does not hold us like puppets on a string. We have the capacity to love and to reject love, so we can have a spousal relationship or opt for sheer ego. In this, we can understand the relationship between humanity and God. Both the Old and the New Testament covenants between God and man are spousal relationships, not legal agreements. That is why the Church is called the Bride of Christ. That is why God would refer to the old Israel, when it fell away into idolatry and Ecumenism with other nations as an adulteress or a harlot, because it was a violation of a spousal relationship, of the sacred covenant.

### **THE POWER OF COMMON OR UNIFIED SYSTEMATIC PRAYER**

The life of prayer, hesychastic prayer in particular, is the healing process which the Holy Spirit has revealed to man. By means of it, we cooperate with God's grace and gradually attain the healing of our fallen nature. We begin the process first by guarding the mind with prayer and vigilance, and then by entering into ourselves and looking after the soul itself as a garden, something like the garden of Eden. We enter into the garden of our soul to tend it, to pull out the weeds and tares which pollute it and choke off the fruitful crops of love and virtue. By means of this loving and prayerful cultivation, we make the soul a fit dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. When we seek to acquire the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we seek the help of that same Spirit to prepare ourselves for its indwelling. By continually tending the temple of our bodies and the garden of our souls, we attain purity of conscience so that we are able to bear the illumination of the Holy Spirit. We have to remember the promise, "blessed are those who love the beauty of God's house," and consider our soul and body together to be, as the Apostle says, His temple. If God's house is going to be our heart, our soul, our person, we have to constantly be tending that temple, and our life of prayer is precisely about such a cleansing and beautifying of this "temple" of God.

Systematic prayer is dealing with this whole aspect of our life. We can pour out our prayers in moments of grief and lamentation, like the prophet Jeremiah, or in times of personal joy from the depths of own hearts. Systematic prayer is not only a personal, hesychastic experience, however. More powerful still is that unified prayer of the worshipping community when we all come together in the Divine Liturgy to pour out our common prayer. Such common prayer is like an army marching in unison. When soldiers are marching together, in step, such unified marching has great force. If the soldiers come to a bridge, they have to break step so that they are no longer marching in unison and rhythm, otherwise the strength of the unified step will cause the bridge to collapse. Our common, unified, systematic prayer has such power because it unites our hearts, draws us into a love and oneness with our neighbours and focuses us as a family, a worshipping community, on our ultimate destination, our common hope. It is true that God knows what we need before we ask and that God is always present to us. Our struggle is to become present to God. The Apostle never said, "Find some way to make God

become reconciled to you," but, "Be ye reconciled to God."<sup>10</sup> God is always reconciled to us, He does not change His attitude toward us, but we need to be reconciled to Him. Our common prayer which brings us together in a common act of love and worship, opens to us the experience of love of neighbour and unity with them in the grace of the Holy Spirit. You cannot obey the word of Scripture to *have love among yourselves* if you are alone. If it is only you alone, there is no one to have love among. You can only have such love in a community, and never more than when we worship as a community. God calls us together as family, as community. The whole structure of the universe is based on the principle of a hierarchical family and community. Even galaxies do not exist in isolation, but they exist in clusters of galaxies. So, everything in the universe is set to rhythms and harmonies and structures that indicate community, that indicate family. Consequently, we pray together in the Divine Liturgy in a way that informs and illumines the heart as part of a worshipping community, and a family of believers.

The Divine Liturgy is revelation and prophecy given to us in the context of community. Just as in the Old Testament, the structure of the Temple was a revelation and prophecy, so every aspect of our common, systematic, communal prayer is a revelation to us. After all, the Holy of Holies was a type of Paradise. And it was in both Paradise and in the Holy of Holies that God the Word came personally to be present with man. It is the New Testament temple, where the altar is equally a type of Paradise, that God constantly calls us back to Paradise.

The curtain of the Temple was torn in two at the crucifixion of Christ, because the Cross was the key that unlocked the gates of Paradise. The curtain was a type of that gate of Paradise which was no longer closed against us, but was reopened now, through Christ. That is why, when we begin the Divine Liturgy, we open the royal gates, because the gates of Paradise are opened to us. How are they opened and by what means are we called to enter in? As soon as the royal gates are opened, the priest elevates the Gospel and makes the sign of the Cross with it saying, "Blessed is the Kingdom of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The Cross is the key that unlocked the gates of Paradise and the Gospel is the voice that calls us to enter into that kingdom that is now revealed before us.

The Gospel is only useful, however, if people understand it, and decide to actually live it and not just pay lip service to it. It enters into our hearts and transforms us, but it actually changes us only when we make a conscious effort to assimilate it and be changed by it. The way we bring the Gospel into our hearts to transform us and to change us is *through prayer*. However, it must be prayer that is informed by the Gospel, prayer that is filled with the living *spirit* of the Gospel and not the letter only. This is a systematic prayer, not just the emotional prayer that we sometimes pour out in times of need, though these do indeed, bring us into a relationship with God.

The systematic prayer which the Holy Spirit has revealed to us in the Church, and which was so diligently defended by Saint Gregory Palamas, makes the Gospel deeply alive within us. This is so because we do it intentionally, we do it consciously, we do it knowing why we are doing it; we do it knowing what destination we are aiming for, what goal we are aspiring to, what healing and restoration we are seeking. It is a prayer planned, planted, and tended, because we know where we want to go and we lay down the road map before us. Sin enters into us and develops in us systematically, as we have seen, and so we turn it back and drive it out systematically. And that is how we actually get to our destination. Even when we practise the systematic prayer of the Church alone, we are still practising the common prayer of the community, though there is no substitute for the Liturgical prayer of the "synaxis", the coming together of the community. "One Christian is no Christian," the desert fathers often said. You cannot have love for one another if you are egoistic and alone. You can only have love for one another in community. It is because of both this profound sense of community and this awareness of a personal place in the community that we give a child of forty days Holy Communion *by name* immediately after baptism. They receive Communion by name as do all members of the community because, having entered into a spousal relationship with God in the Church, they have a name in the community, a name before God.

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10. 2Cor.5:18-20.

When children receive Communion by name, they learn from their youngest infancy and begin to understand that they have a name before God, and therefore a personal relationship with Him, and a value in the community. They grow up realizing that they are a living, vital part of the worshipping community, they are a royal priesthood. They participate in the system of communal worship and prayer even when they are crying or appear inattentive in Church. They receive Communion by name, because they have a name before the throne of God, a name that is written in the Lamb's Book of Life. They are able to understand the connection with the community and with God through the community. Our life of prayer, our life of systematic prayer establishes that community of believers and brings us together as one through Liturgy and gives us a common face before God, and a real sense that God is our common Father.

This brings us back full circle to the Lord's prayer, and we understand why God is our Father. Because we are a community, a family, God reveals Himself as our Father, so that we can understand ourselves as family. "Our Father Who art in the Heavens;" our Father, because we are a community, a family, brought together by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ established us as a family by accepting us as His brethren.<sup>11</sup> Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters and, therefore, we are not afraid to call God our Father. We are a community and a family, otherwise God is not our Father. A family is not made up of isolated individuals. If we are isolated individuals we have no common mother and no common father. God will not be our Father by different spouses, for we are not stepchildren, stepbrothers, stepsisters. We have a common mother, even the Church, and the spouse of the Church is our common Father. God has revealed Himself to us through that family and community, and His covenant through the mystery of marriage. The mystery of redemption is revealed through the mystery of marriage. The covenant with God is a spousal relationship, not a legal agreement, and the mystery of redemption is the mystery of cosuffering love, the cosuffering of the Father with His children. The cosuffering love of God with His creation is what makes our restoration and redemption possible. It offers a bond of the most perfect and powerful love, a love that is willing to lay down its life even for those who despise it. The systematic prayer of Orthodox Christianity, a prayer life that is meaningful and understood, prayer that has a reason, prayer that has a destination, prayer that has a purpose; this is a healing process that has been given to us by God so that we might come into accord with His love and assimilate it to ourselves by defeating those sinful barriers to it which develop within us. This is the very meaning of systematic prayer, and of hesychastic prayer in particular.

This is the whole root of the "hesychastic controversy." The whole controversy between Orthodox Christianity and Western Augustinianism concerned our relationship with God, our ability to know God through His uncreated energy, our ability to have a personal relationship with God, not through types and symbols, but directly through Jesus Christ. It was about our ability to be restored to the glory of God, our ability through prayer, through systematic prayer, to find that healing and restoration which Jesus Christ has made possible for us, the healing of the fallen human nature. That is why we know that the monks and nuns who went away into the desert were not simply seeking isolation away from the rest of humanity, forgetting about the plight of the world and mankind. We all have a common human nature. When one person, through prayer, struggles to purify their human nature and bring it into accord with the life of Jesus Christ, they become filled with light. When they become more light and less darkness in themselves, they drive the darkness out of their own life, they invite the light into their own life. When they accomplish this, then because there is less darkness in them, there is less darkness in the whole human nature and there is more light in the human nature. Their victory is a victory for all of humanity, especially those who believe. So, the monastics in the farthest part of the desert, Saint Sarah sitting on top of her house, Saint Pelagia in her little kellia, Saint Anthony the Great, Abba Sisoës or Abba Justin Popovich at Chelia, all these holy fathers and mothers were struggling for the healing and redemption of the whole human nature. In physics this is called the principle of non-locality. Everything that occurs in one field of the universe effects all the universe, every other field of the universe. Just so, every saint who has achieved glorification has an impact on all the rest of the fallen human nature. All the rest of the fallen human nature is

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11. Hb.2:11.

more filled with light, and less filled with darkness, because one person has attained glorification. This is why we venerate the saints and this is why it is such a catastrophe that some people thought that there was something wrong with venerating them. They never understood the principles at work and they never understood the true meaning of redemption.

I want to close by going back to this first statement which is written on the board. Is morality a heresy? Morality is a heresy when it becomes a substitute for our life in Christ. Morality becomes a substitute for our life in Christ when we reduce religion to a moral code, when we reduce the faith to a system of correct behaviour instead of a struggle to purify the conscience and acquire the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We cannot acquire the Holy Spirit by means of correct behaviour, which is just a matter of human works and legalistic works at that. Such an approach fills us with so much judgment and condemnation and arrogance and self-righteousness that the Holy Spirit remains alien to us. We begin to think ourselves to be moral and everyone who is not like us somehow immoral. We set ourselves as the criterion of morality, but there can be no true morality without the inner transformation of our person. Perfect holiness consists only in perfect love, not in correct behaviour. Righteousness does not consist in correct behaviour, but in genuine cosuffering love and pure faith. No deed has any moral value unless it proceeds from the heart motivated by love. Otherwise it is simply ethical or correct behaviour according to one or another system of law, a human work which anyone in any culture, with or without faith in God can attain to. The Old Testament law could help to preserve society but it could not save anyone, no matter how diligently they fulfilled it to the letter. Moreover, since it could not transform the heart, it could not even preserve the nation from falling constantly away from God. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the only One who fulfilled perfect righteousness was motivated solely by love, cosuffering love. And that is why our Lord Jesus Christ became our righteousness on the Cross, and imputed that righteousness to us through faith. Only righteousness is the fulfilment of the law and righteousness consists only in perfect love. The self-righteousness, the arrogance that we have which makes us judge and condemn others, by which we put our foot on the heads of the weak and push them deeper into darkness by our arrogance, this is the apex of unrighteousness and it is a great sin. That is ultimately what our struggle of prayer is all about, trying to acquire perfect, cosuffering love in ourselves, becoming truly conformed to the image of Christ, so that we may actually share in His glory, the glory of the Living God, receiving by grace through faith, *"the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." being "changed into the same image from glory to glory by the Spirit of the Lord"* (Phil.3:14; 2 Cor.3:18).