



On Prayer

(From Metropolitan Vitaly Oustinow's letters)

As regards prayer, I will begin with reminding you of the words of the holy apostle Paul in his epistle to the Thessalonians: "Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, in every thing give thanks" (5: 16-18). From ancient times the Holy Fathers of Christ's Church have persistently knocked at the door of this mystery of constant prayer, because expressions of such importance in the Holy Scriptures do not represent some kind of symbols or abstract ideas, but have always been accepted as commandments, i.e. in a literal sense. "Without ceasing" means just that, neither less nor more. But how can we accomplish that, when we are always working in this busy life of ours: we must constantly think things through, make plans, think of the future, analyze our past, not to mention simply sleeping, eating, watching over everything, observing everything around us. And in the meantime we feel these words over us, and not just words, but the power of God, the commandment to "pray without ceasing," from which we cannot escape, cannot hide, because it is a strong and unyielding command, though not forced. Yet when we look at the boiling pot which is our head, in which thoughts are constantly seething which we cannot even stop, so much so that even Descartes came to the following incredible conclusion: "I think, therefore – I am," (i.e. the fact that a person is engaged in constant thinking made Descartes conclude that that is the mightiest proof of our existence), – then where can we insert prayer into all of this, not to mention constant prayer?! However, the Holy Fathers made the amazing discovery that our spiritual force, or simply our heart, possesses a certain independence within us. From such a discovery there is but a single step to having the full attention of the inner eye concentrated upon this spiritual force and making an all-out effort to attract the heart to prayer. There are varying degrees of prayer; however, it is already worthwhile to just drag one's body to church, and with it one's soul. Inside the church everything is out-of-the-ordinary: the icons look down upon you, while you look at the icons from which there are people gazing at you, but people unlike those whom you see every day; and the singing is not like anything you know, and the incense has a fragrance which you will not smell anywhere else. In general, everything is quite unusual, but it all invites you somewhere else, to something better, more tranquil, more restful, and the soul unconsciously responds to all of this. Such is one form of prayer. It is but the soul which sees, hears, and smells through the eyes, the ears, and the nose. This is the reason we must go to church, and especially take our children there, since their souls are purer and imbibe everything more deeply. Afterwards you begin to ponder, you listen not to the prayers, but to their meaning, and the meaning almost always constitutes penitential prayer, and so you unconsciously join in. You pass the stages of your life superficially and do not see anything sinful in it, and in such a state you return home. However, the human soul mysteriously imprints within itself various images and thoughts that are deeper than superficial impressions and thus slowly exert influence over both the mind and the heart. Such is another form of prayer.

Nevertheless, all these above-mentioned forms of prayer are only the threshold, the preface to prayer. This preface is necessary. No one begins to write a composition without first studying the alphabet. Similarly in spiritual life everything is orderly and rational. The Lord says to us: "My son, give Me thine heart" (Proverbs 23:26), not the mind, but specifically the heart, because the heart comprises the entirety of the human personality. And so now we face this task of how to pray with the heart. Here we stumble across the

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first great barrier: we make some kind of effort, and we achieve nothing. We soon realize that we can think of anything, that our thoughts are capable of moving instantaneously wherever we wish, wherever we spent even a single moment of our lives, that our thoughts are subservient to our will. But to feel whatever we want – that is not within our will. Moreover, the Holy Scriptures picturesquely describe to us how “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19). These vices prevent our heart from praying; it becomes taken over as though by an alien force, it becomes occupied and it is not within our power to drive out the enemy, i.e. the devil. We must, therefore, appeal to God with the prayer: “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10), and only then can the Lord cleanse our heart. For this reason St. John of Kronstadt says in his opus My Life in Christ : “When we pray with our hearts, we witness the miracle of the expulsion of demons.”

The holy Church Fathers teach us a very short prayer that is called the Jesus prayer: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” Here are only several words, and there is no place in the mind for too many thoughts. This short prayer should be repeated as often as possible, trying to use our heart, which had been cleansed by God, to enter into the words of this prayer. Thus we gradually teach this prayer to our heart, and it becomes so accustomed to the prayer that it engages in it of its own accord, without the pressure of our will. No matter whether we are sleeping or doing something, the heart engages in this prayer at all times of the day and night. Having thus learned to pray ceaselessly with the heart, we become capable of repeating any prayer with the heart. And when a person prays with his heart, this means the entire person prays to God, and the Lord hears such a person and heeds him. Each one of us has naturally experienced moments when we cry out to the heavens for help, and we receive it, because our entire being turns into this cry of the soul, but the saints do not wish to wait for unexpected vicissitudes to make them turn to God, but instead wish their prayer to always come from the heart, just as the holy apostle Paul teaches us. Such is a brief instruction to you on prayer. When one of the saints was asked – how can one learn to pray, he responded – “Pray, and the prayer itself will teach you everything.”