

Theophan the Recluse, On Prayer, Homily 2

Written by Theophan the Recluse
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Yesterday I showed you one method of establishing a prayerful spirit in yourselves [see homily 1], namely, how to pray in a way which corresponds to the meaning of the prayers. But this is only the beginning of the art (science) of prayer and it is necessary to go further. Consider the study of language, for example. First one studies words and phrases from books. But this is not sufficient, one must go further, and truly reach the point where he can correctly form phrases in the given language without the aid of the textbook. It is the same in the work of prayer. We get used to praying with prayer books, praying using prepared prayers given to us by the Lord and the Holy Fathers who were successful in prayer. But we should not stop at that, we need to continue on, and having accustomed ourselves to making petition to God for help with our minds and hearts, we must attempt to ascend to Him. We must strive to reach the point where our soul by itself begins speaking, so to speak, in a prayerful conversation with God and by itself ascends to Him and opens itself to Him and confesses what is in it and what it desires.

The soul must be taught how to ascend to God and open itself to Him. I will briefly instruct you how one should proceed in order to succeed in this art.

The skill of praying with piety, attention, and feeling according to a prayer book itself leads to this higher level. In the same way that water flows out of a bowl that is overfilled, so the soul which is filled with holy feelings by prayer begins by itself to spill out its prayer to God. But when pursuing this goal, there are particular steps which each person on this path must take.

Why is it, you ask, that one can pray for so many years with a prayer book, and still not have prayer in his heart? I think the reason is that people only spend a little time lifting themselves up to God when they complete their prayer rule, and in other times, they do not remember God. For example, they finish their morning prayers, and think that their relation to God is fulfilled by them; then the whole day passes in work, and such a person does not attend to God. Then in the evening, the thought returns to him that he must quickly stand at prayer and complete his evening rule. In this case, it happens that even if the Lord grants a person spiritual feelings at the time of the morning prayer, the bustle and business of the day drowns them out. As a result, it happens that one does not often feel like praying, and cannot get control of himself even to soften his heart a little bit. In such an atmosphere, prayer develops and ripens poorly. This problem (is it not ubiquitous?) needs to be corrected, that is, one must ensure that the soul does not only make petition to God when standing in prayer, but during the whole day, as much as possible, one must unceasingly ascend to Him and remain with Him.

In order to begin this task, one must first, during the course of the day, cry out to God more often, even if only with a few words, according to need and the work of the day. Beginning anything, for example, say "Bless, O Lord!" When you finish something, say, "Glory to Thee, O Lord", and not only with your lips, but with feeling in your heart. If passions arise, say, "Save me, O Lord, I am perishing." If the darkness of disturbing

thoughts comes up, cry out: "Lead my soul out of prison." If dishonest deeds present themselves and sin leads you to them, pray, "Set me, O Lord, in the way", or "do not give up my feet to stumbling." If sin takes hold of you and leads you to despair, cry out with the voice of the publican, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Do this in every circumstance, or simply say often, "Lord, have mercy", "Most Holy Theotokos save us", "Holy Angel, my guardian, protect me", or other such words. Say such prayers as often as possible, always making the effort for them come from your heart, as if squeezed out of it. When we do this, we will frequently ascend to God in our hearts, making frequent petitions and prayers. Such increased frequency will bring about the habit of mental conversation with God.

But in order for the soul to begin crying out in this way, one must first teach the soul to ascribe everything to the glory of God, all of its works, whether great and small. This is the second way of teaching the soul to turn to God more often during the day, for if we apply ourselves to fulfill the apostolic commandment, that is, do all things for the glory of God, even "if we eat or drink" ([1 Cor 10.31](#)), then we will ceaselessly remember God in all that we do. Our remembrance of God will be accomplished not simply, but with care, so that in no case we would act wrongly and offend God by any deed. This will help us to turn to God with fear, prayerfully asking for help and understanding. Since we are almost always doing something, we will always be turning to God in prayer. Consequently, the art of raising up the heart in unceasing prayer to God will develop within our souls.

In order for the soul to do all things as they should be done, that is to the glory of God, one must prepare from the early morning, from the very beginning of the day, before "a man goes forth unto his work, and unto his labors until evening" ([Ps. 103](#)). This inclination leads to the contemplation of God, and this the third way of teaching the soul to turn frequently to God. Contemplation of God is the pious reflection on divine properties and actions, and about our necessary response to them. It means to reflect on God's goodness, righteous judgment, wisdom, omnipotence, omnipresence, knowledge of all things, about creation and industry, about the working of Salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ, about grace and the word of God, about the holy mysteries and about the Kingdom of Heaven. If you start to reflect on any one of these things, your soul will immediately be filled with pious feeling toward God. Consider, for example, the goodness of God, and you will see that you are surrounded by God's mercies, both physical and spiritual, and that you would have to be a stone not to fall down before God pouring out feelings of thanksgiving. Consider the omnipresence of God, and you will understand that you are always before God, and God is before you, and thus you cannot avoid being filled with pious fear. Consider the knowledge God has of all things, and you will realize, that nothing inside of you is hidden from the eye of God, and will set yourself to be strictly attentive to the movements of your heart and mind, in order not to offend the all-seeing God in any way. Consider the righteousness of God, and you will believe that not one evil deed remains unpunished. As a result you will firmly set yourself to cleansing all of your sins in a heartfelt way before God with brokenness and repentance. Thus, whatever property or action of God on which you reflect, that reflection will fill your soul with pious feelings and inclinations towards God. It will align all of your human substance towards God, and it is therefore the most direct means of

teaching the soul to ascend to God. The most useful and comfortable time for this is morning, when the soul is not yet burdened with many worries and work issues. Specifically, the best time is after morning prayers. Finish your prayers, sit down, and with thoughts cleansed by prayer, begin to think now about one divine aspect, and tomorrow about another, and incline your soul to this aspect. "Come", says St. Dimitri of Rostov, "come, holy contemplation of God, and let us immerse ourselves in contemplation of the great works of God", and he passed mentally through the works of providence and creation, or the miracles of our Lord and Savior, or His sufferings, or something else, and warmed up his heart, and began to pour out his soul in prayer. Everyone can do the same. The work is small; one only needs desire and resolve, but the fruits are many.

Here are three means, other than the prayer rule, by which one can teach the soul to ascend prayerfully to God: first, dedicate some time in the morning to the contemplation of God; second, turn every action to the glory of God, and third, often turn to God with short prayers. When contemplation of God goes well in the morning, it leaves a deep inclination toward thinking about God. Thinking about God makes the soul carefully order all of its actions, interior and exterior, and turn them to the glory of God. At the same time, this sets up a state in the soul that it often will be moved by prayerful cries to God. These three: contemplation of God, doing all to the glory of God, and frequent short prayers are the most active weapons of mental prayer and prayer of the heart. Each of them raises the soul to God. He who decides to practice these quickly attains the habit of ascending to God in his heart. The labor put into these leads to the heights. The higher one ascends on a mountain, the freer and easier he breathes. Thus it is also here: the more one does these exercises, the higher his soul ascends, and the higher the soul ascends, the more freely prayer can act in it. Our soul by nature is the abode of the higher divine world. Our soul should always be in this world by thoughts and feelings of the heart. But the baggage of worldly thoughts and passions leads and pulls the soul down. These methods separate the soul little by little from the earth, and then completely pull it away. When they have completely pulled the soul from the earth, then the soul lives in its own region, and will happily live on high. Here in heart and mind, and later in actual substance it will be vouchsafed to be before the face of God in the choirs of the angels and the saints. May God grant this to all of you through his grace. Amen.

Translated from the Russian by Rev. Fr. Michael van Opstall – January 2007

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