

Using a Prayer Book

Many Protestants would argue that using a prayer book results in formal, ritualistic prayer and stifles a truly personal relationship with God. By contrast, some Orthodox are of the opinion that it is wrong to pray without a prayer book, that this can lead to spiritual presumption and deception. What, in fact, is the purpose and proper place of the prayer book in Orthodox practice?

In the Holy Gospel, Christ gave an example and many instructions in how to pray. When the disciples asked our Savior to teach them to pray He taught them-and us through them-the Lord's Prayer. Prior to the Incarnation of the Lord the holy prophets and righteous had offered many beautiful prayers which are recorded in the Old Testament, especially the Psalms. But even before the saints were inspired to compose and offer these prayers we read how when Enos, the grandson of Adam and son of Seth, was born that they then began to call upon the name of the Lord God (Gen. 4:26). Prior even to that, newly-created man conversed with God in Paradise.

With the fulfillment of the expectations and promises of the Old Testament in Christ we now call upon the name of the Lord in the words of the Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me! But in addition we also have a rich treasure of psalms, hymns and prayers with which we can offer our thanksgiving and praises, our petitions and repentance to our God and His saints.

Prayer has been called the science of sciences and art of arts, and rightly so. We should be aware of the need to pray just as the disciples did, and we should beg the Lord to teach us just as they did. In our own persistent and sincere efforts at prayer, as well as through reading the Scriptures and writings of the saints we can obtain this instruction.

The Prayer Book consists of prayers composed by saints of God that have been collected in a convenient form for our daily use. The words of these prayers give direction and expression to our desire and need to pray. They teach us what kind of things we should pray for and how to express ourselves reverently and humbly before God and His saints. Because of our ignorance about spiritual matters we need these prayers to open our eyes to our true spiritual needs.

In using the Prayer Book we must first set aside other worries and tasks, gather our thoughts and concentrate on offering our prayers to God. Before opening the book we may want to stand quietly before the icons, making the sign of the Cross and asking the Lord, the Mother of God, our Guardian Angel and the Saints to help us to pray. Some people light a lamp or candle or burn incense so that these offerings accompany their sacrifice of prayer.

We might think of our prayer as the flame that burns the wax, gathered by the bees from many flowers like the spiritual nectar of the prayers gathered in the Prayer Book from many saints. The inspired words of these prayers can be like pearls of fragrant incense placed on the hot coals of a fervent heart whence there rises up a sweet-smelling sacrifice pleasing to the Lord.

Reading unfamiliar prayers offers our minds and hearts fresh images and thoughts and insights. But when we use prayers that are very familiar, even prayers that we know by heart, various expressions and words have special force or touch our heart in different ways at different times, on different occasions. When we offer these words in prayer with attention and sincere feeling they become living words, as it were. This is also true of proper reading of the Holy Scriptures and Fathers. We may repeat a particularly moving or meaningful phrase several times.

Some people never learn many prayers by heart and always rely on reading them from a book. Others learn them by memory and find it easier to concentrate on prayer without the book. Whichever case applies, the goal is to pray sincerely, to commune with God and His saints.

Hannah, the mother of Samuel, set an example for all generations of heart-felt prayer, "Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard (I Kings 1:13).

A great man of wonder-working prayer, St. John of Kronstadt, discusses this in his own spiritual diary: "Outward prayer is often performed at the expense of inward prayer, and inward at the expense of outward; that is, when I pray with my lips or read, then many words do not penetrate into the heart, I become double-minded and hypocritical; with my lips I say one thing, whilst in my heart I feel another. The lips speak truth, whilst the disposition of the heart does not agree with the words of the prayer. But if I pray inwardly, heartily, then, without paying attention to the pronunciation of the words, I concentrate it upon their content, their power, gradually accustoming my heart to the truth, and thus entering into the same disposition of spirit in which the words of the prayer were written. In this way I accustom myself, little by little, to pray in spirit and truth in accordance with the words of the Eternal Truth: They that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

"When a man prays outwardly aloud, then he cannot always follow all the movements of his heart, which are so rapid that he is necessarily obliged to pay attention to the pronunciation of the words, to their outward form. Thus the prayers of many...who read rapidly become quite untrue; with their lips they seem to pray; in appearance they are pious, but their hearts are asleep, and do not know what their lips say. This proceeds from the fact that they hurry, and do not meditate in their hearts upon what they are saying. We must pray for them, as they pray for us; we must pray that their words may penetrate into their hearts and breathe warmth into them. They pray for us in the words of holy persons, and we must pray for them also." "When praying, we must pronounce each word from the heart with the same power that is contained in each one of them, just as medicines are usually taken with a curative power corresponding to each of them, and bestowed upon them by the creator. If we leave out the power or the essence of the medicine, then it will not take effect, but will only set our teeth on edge; likewise, if during prayer we pronounce the words, disregarding their power, without feeling in our heart their truth, we shall not derive any benefit from the prayer, because true, fruitful prayer must be in spirit and in truth."

In striving to fulfill the commandment of the Apostle to pray without ceasing (I Thes. 5:17), it is helpful to cultivate the habit of praying. This means that at certain times of the day we by habit, as a rule, devote ourselves to prayer. It also means cultivating this habit in our thought patterns so that as often as possible our mind and thoughts turn to God in prayer.

When a person has become accustomed to praying with the Prayer Book, he finds these prayers express very eloquently various needs and feelings, but there are also occasions when in private we may need to express some particular offering or petition to God in our own words. But even here, the divinely-inspired prayers of the saints can teach us the language of prayer.

In his advice to people cultivating a rule of prayer in their lives, the saintly bishop Theophan the Recluse recommended the daily morning and evening prayers in the Prayer Book. But after a person learns these prayers and develops a habit of praying each day he also advises to take note of the amount of time they usually devote to prayer and to use this time saying the Jesus Prayer on some occasions. Since the state of our mind and soul are constantly changing, at various times and under various conditions, it is profitable

to pray in different ways, sometimes with prayers from the Prayer Book or Psalms, sometimes in our own words, sometimes with the Jesus Prayer or other short prayers, sometimes aloud, sometimes silently.

Becoming familiar with the prayers in the Prayer Book adorns our minds and memories with sanctifying offerings to God. Habitually making the effort to pray sincerely and attentively releases us from the tensions and anxieties of our worldly life so that the peace and grace of God can cleanse and heal, so that our soul can find freedom from its frustrations to find its rest and fulfillment in God. Prayer is not just reading or thinking; it is an offering from our entire being: mind, heart, body and soul.

In addition to the morning and evening and other daily prayers, most prayer books also contain prayers of intercession for others, both the living and the dead, as well as intercessory canons to the saints and in particular to the all-holy Mother of God. We can make use of these when fulfilling our obligation to pray for others.

Let us conclude with some further words of instruction from St. John of Kronstadt: "When you ask for life, faith, and spiritual understanding for others, do you ask sincerely, not hypocritically, only with your tongue? Do you desire from all your soul that they should progress in these? Are you yourself progressing in the same? Do not you yourself remain in the bondage of the passions? Beware, the Master sees everything with His clearest eyes; it is necessary to pray to Him with understanding, in the simplicity of your heart, with a fervent spirit."

"Why has our sincere prayer for each other such great power over others? Because of the fact that by cleaving to God during prayer I become one spirit with Him, and unite with myself, by faith and love, those for whom I pray, for the Holy Spirit acting in me also acts at the same time in them, for He accomplishes all things."

"Endeavor to attain to a child-like simplicity in your relations to men and in your prayer to God. Simplicity is man's highest good and dignity. God Himself is perfectly simple, for He is perfectly spiritual and perfectly good. And do not let your soul be divided between good and evil."