

PRAYER

WHAT IS IT? HOW DOES IT LEAD TO GOD?

Not each prayer is considered a spiritual means that would lead you to God... I remember here what was said about Elijah that, *"he prayed earnestly"* (Jas 5:17). His was a genuine prayer that was able to close heaven then again to open it. *"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (Jas 5:16).

What is prayer then ? How could it be defined?

Prayer is a bridge that links man to God. It has been compared to Jacob's ladder which was set up on the earth, and its top reached heaven (Gen 28:12). Prayer is not just words, but a relationship... It is your relationship with God, with your heart and with your thoughts...

Prayer is a feeling that you are in the Divine presence. Without this feeling, prayer would not be a prayer... It is the feeling of a heart that is directed to God, feeling that God is with him or that he is standing before God. As said by Elijah the Prophet, *"As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand"* (1 Kings 18:15) ... Before God, one forgets everything and nothing remains in his mind except God alone. Everything diminishes and God becomes everything, nothing else matters beside Him...

Prayer is the work of the heart, whether expressed in words or not.

It is lifting up the heart to God because the heart talks to God through feelings and emotions more than the mouth does with words. The heart may be lifted up to God without words. Therefore, the sigh of the heart is a prayer before God. The heart's longing to God is a prayer. Feelings of love towards God are a prayer. So prayer is a relationship between God and man. And if this hearty relationship does not exist, words would be of no use.

If you love God, you will pray. And if you pray, your love for God will increase. So prayer is a statement of love that we express in words.

We see this love and this sentiment clearly in the Psalms of David when he says: *"O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You"* (Ps 63:1), and *"As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God ?"* (Ps 42:1-2). It is longing for God, thirsting for Him as a dry land thirsts for water... Many pray and do not feel comfort because their prayer is void of love... It is just words! God has rejected the prayers of those people and said about them, *"...these people honour Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me"* (Is 29:13). And the Lord Jesus Christ repeated the same rebuke, concerning the Jews, in the Gospels of St Matthew (15:8) and St Mark (7:6).

So then mix your prayer with love. Talk in your prayer to God with sentiment. Prayer is the longing of the soul and being in the presence of God. It is the longing of the limited to the Unlimited, the longing of the created to his Creator and the longing of the soul to its source and to its satisfaction...

The acceptable prayer is the one that comes from a pure heart.

The Bible says, *"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, But the prayer of the upright is His delight"* (Prov 15:8) and (Prov 21:27). God has rejected the prayer of the evil men and said to them, *"When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from You; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood"* (Is 1:15). On the other hand, the Bible says, *"The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (Jas 5:16). So what would the sinner, who is burdened by his sins, do? Pray and say, *"Restore me, and I will return"* (Jer 31:18). So prayer is the gate of help through which the sinner enters to repentance. Mar Isaac said, *"Whoever said that there is another gate for repentance except prayer is being deceived by the devils"...* So then do not wait until you repent then pray!! Ask for repentance in your prayer, as the Lord said, *"Without Me You can do nothing"* (Jn 15:5).

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Prayer is opening the heart to God, so He would enter and purify it. It reminds us of the prayer of the tax collector who lifted up a contrite heart before God, asking for His mercy (Lk 18:13). And so he went back to his house justified. Therefore, you should pray to acquire purity of the heart, while you say to God in your prayer: *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow"* (Ps 50)... Is not He the one who said, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes"* (Ezek 36:26-27)... Ask Him in your prayers to fulfil this promise.

Prayer is consecrating the lips and the thoughts and it is the sanctifying of the soul. Furthermore, it is reconciliation with God...

It is natural for the one who has a dispute between him and God, not to talk to Him. He does not pray. He does not have the intimacy to talk with God. If he starts to pray, it means that he wants to reconcile with God... And if he prayed, he will be humbled by his talk with God and ashamed to defile his thoughts which were with God not so long ago. He will then reach modesty of the thoughts, which is a healthy, spiritual sign. And so by praying, bad thoughts are abolished, as one continues to pray and uses prayer to enter into a spiritual atmosphere, far from the forces of darkness.

Prayer is the horror of the devils and the strongest weapon against them.

The devil fears the person who prays, for he will escape his grasp. He fears that through his prayer, this person may gain strength by which he could fight and defeat him. The devil would also envy him for having such a relationship with God, which he has been deprived of... Therefore, the devil fights prayer by all means. He tries to stop it by insinuating to the person that he is too busy and has no time, or he would make him feel tired and his body becomes heavy. If the person insisted on praying, the devil would try to distract his thoughts so that his mind would stray...

As for you, man of God, be firm in your prayer, no matter what the combats. Concentrate on it with all your thoughts and all your feelings... And as the Apostle said, *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jas 4:7)*. Do not give way to his thoughts. Be aware that his effort to stop your prayer is an implied confession from him about the power of this prayer as a weapon against him. So do not throw away your weapon but fight with it. Continue praying no matter how much your thoughts may stray. The enemy is bound to give up when he sees your spiritual struggle and leave you. Besides, God’s grace will never leave you but will be with you.

In your prayer, open your inmost soul to be filled by God.

Ask for God Himself, and not only for His blessings. Say to Him, as David said before, *“Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide Your face from me” (Ps 27:8,9)*. Be sure that your soul which feels what it lacks, will continue being empty until God Himself perfects it. It needs love stronger than all the world desires. It is thirsty and the water of the world will never quench its thirst (Jn 4:13).

Tell Him: ‘O Lord, I cannot find anybody except You who understands me.’

For with whom I feel safe, I open my heart to Him, tell Him all my secrets and explain my weakness, which He will hear and not despise. I pour my tears before Him and reveal my longing. With Him I don’t feel alone but with a heart that holds me and power that supports me... Without You, O Lord, I feel empty and void of any real existence. You are Emmanuel, God with us... My soul longs for Your omnipotent soul, and longs for what is above the material; the world and all that is in it... Yes, inside me there is longing for the unlimited and nobody will satisfy it except You...

This is the prayer of love whose level is higher than that of request. In it you pray and might not ask for anything...

Your prayer could be thanksgiving for what God has given you. You thank Him for taking care of you, looking after you, for His protection, assistance and all His benevolence for you, your friends and all your dear ones... And your prayer could be praising God, like the prayer of the Seraphim *“Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; heaven and earth are full of Your glory” (Is 6:3)*.

Your prayer could be just contemplation on God’s beautiful attributes as in the prayers of the Liturgy according to St Gregory and as in many Psalms and Agpia prayers. And it was said by St Basil the Great: *“Do not start your prayer by a request, lest it is thought that if it was not for the request, you would not have prayed.”*

Consider your prayer as just a delight in God’s fellowship or as some fathers call it, “A taste of the Kingdom.”

Just being in the presence of God is an enjoyment, even if you do not open your mouth and utter one word, even if your mind does not hold any thought, like a child in the bosom of his father. He does not ask for anything except to remain as such... I wonder what could we ask for in the Kingdom of Heaven?! Nothing, of course, because there we will lack nothing. We just enjoy what the Psalmist expressed when he said, *“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8)*. Prayer is a taste of this kingdom. We taste here on earth what we will enjoy in Heaven...

Therefore it was said about prayer that it is the food of angels.

It is food for their souls and nourishment that satisfies them. It is also the same for the souls of the saints, and on earth it was food for the monastic fathers and the anchorites... They fed on it, with the love of God and His fellowship and the enjoyment of their spirits with it. As David the Prophet said to the Lord, *“But it is good for me to draw near to God” (Ps 73:28)*.

Blessed is He, our good Lord, who granted us to pray. It is humility from Him to allow us to talk to Him.

And it is humility from Him to listen to us... Who are we, but dust and ashes, to get close to God and stand before Him and talk to Him...? We add ourselves to the ranks of angels, standing before His throne, praising and blessing His name, and become blessed for being in His presence. Truly, it is humility of the Creator to allow us, His creation, with such intimacy, to talk to Him and for Him to hear us. Therefore, it is a great shame and a most serious sin to say: I have no time for prayer...!! How dare the slave say he has no time to talk to his master?! It is so amazing that the created has no time to talk to his Creator!! You find time for many trivial matters... and you find time for conversation of no value. Why then do you consider lack of time as an excuse not to talk with God?! David the Prophet was a king, a leader, and a judge for the people, with a big family, and in spite of all this he says to the Lord, *“Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgment” (Ps 119:164)*, *“Evening and morning and at noon” (Ps 55:17)* and *“At midnight I will rise to give thanks” (Ps 119:62)*.

The problem then is not in time but in the interest. If you have the interest to pray, you will no doubt find the time.

You must also know that prayer is a blessing for you. In it, you take and you do not give.

Do you think you are giving God time when you pray?! Does God need you or your prayers?! But by praying you gain strength, support and blessing. You also take spiritual enjoyment, delight in your fellowship with God and solution for your problems...! You must change your thoughts about prayer so that you realize you cannot survive without it, for it is the strength of prayer that you will depend on. If you realize this, you will rely on prayer as an essential spiritual means in your life. And so, would I be able, in this article, to talk to you about everything that relates to prayer?!

No, but after all that, I leave you to pray and also to remember me in your prayers...

CONDITIONS OF THE ACCEPTABLE PRAYER AND EXERCISES IN PRAYER

Not each prayer is acceptable because not each prayer is a PRAYER.

The prayer of the proud pharisee was not acceptable like the prayer of the contrite tax collector, who returned to his house forgiven (Lk 18:14). The same with the prayer of those whose hands are full of blood. The Lord said about them, *"When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear"* (Is 1:15). And also the prayer of the hypocrites (Mt 6), and those who for a pretence make long prayers (Mt 23:14). You might pray a prayer and one of the twenty four elders would proceed and take it in his golden censor and present it to God, a sweet aroma of incense... (Rev 5:8). While another person would pray all day long and the angels would wonder at him, as none of his prayers ascended!

What are then the conditions of the acceptable prayer ?!

There are many conditions: We mention here that it has to be in the spirit. In it, one's spirit talks to God's Spirit, and his heart becomes linked to God's heart. This is the prayer that is from the spirit and the heart. It is the one that opens the gates of heaven and enters into the presence of the Lord, talks to Him with intimacy, enjoys Him and takes from Him whatever the spirit wants... This is the prayer that satisfies the spirit, as the Psalmist said: *"I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness"* (Ps 63:4,5). This is the prayer that is from the heart, in it one feels that he met with God. In it we either ascend to Him or He descends to us. But the main thing is that we meet. Or it is the Holy Spirit that elevates our hearts and thoughts to God. The saints say about this prayer that it is the coming of heaven upon the soul, or that the soul becomes heaven. And here, the prayer is distinguished by spiritual warmth.

The prayer that is with love and passion is a warm prayer.

The prayer that is with the spirit is warm by its nature. It is inflamed by the fiery spirit. Therefore, it was said about the prayers of saints Maximos and Domadios that it proceeded from their mouths like flames of fire. And so were the fingers of St. Shenouda the Archimandrite, whenever he raised his hands in prayer...

The spiritual prayer is also one of understanding and concentration.

Concentration keeps the thoughts from straying. Understanding also is another factor that enables the mind to concentrate and so does passion. As for the one who prays with no heart, no understanding and no passion, his thoughts will definitely stray in various matters because his heart is not free yet from worldly concerns. He is still attached to them, even during prayer. His prayer would not be pure because it is yet in close contact to the things of the world. Therefore, when St. John of Assiot was asked, "What is the pure prayer?" He answered, "It is death to the world", because when the heart dies to worldly matters, it would not ponder on such things during prayer, so his prayer becomes pure without straying.

The spiritual prayer is also one of reverence before God.

We have spoken before about prayer with love, for love does not hinder reverence at all. Our love for God could not make us forget His solemnity, dignity and veneration. So our talk to Him is mingled with reverence and respect, and thereby we attain the manner of speaking with God. Our reverence is not the fear of slaves but the respect of children to their father and what a Father! He is not a Father on earth but He is our Father who is in Heaven. The One before whom stand the angels in reverence, *"...each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet..."* (Is 6:2). Therefore Mar Isaac said: "When you stand up to pray, be like one standing before flames of fire." Abraham, the father of fathers and prophets, also said, *"Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord"* (Gen 18:27). Therefore if you stand before God say to Him: Who am I Lord, to stand before You... You, before whom stand the angels, the archangels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim and all the countless gathering of the heavenly powers. How could I place myself among these luminous hosts?!

Your reverence before God is the reverence of the spirit and also the reverence of the body.

As for the reverence of the body, it includes standing, kneeling and prostration; it would not surrender to standing in a lazy way, or to the devil who tries, during prayer time, to make your body feel tired, sick, exhausted or in need of

sleep...! There are those who, if they stand to pray, they feel tired, while they stand with friends for hours without feeling tired! Therefore, beware of this illusionary tiredness which is of the combats of the devil. Saint Basilios the Great said:

“Do not use sickness as an excuse for not praying because prayer is a means of recovery from sickness.”

And as it was said by Mar Isaac, “If you start the pure prayer, be prepared for what will come on you”, which means be prepared for the wars of the devil as he tries to hinder you from prayer. Reverence of the body is essential because the body shares in the feelings of the spirit and expresses them. So reverence of the spirit is expressed by reverence of the body. Slackness and carelessness of the spirit show also in the movements of the body such as having the senses busy with something else during prayer either the sight, the hearing... etc.!

As for the reverence of the spirit, one must pray with a contrite heart.

Remember that God is near those who have a contrite heart... Do not forget that you are from dust and you are talking to your Creator who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev 19:16). Do not also forget your sins by which you grieved God’s Holy Spirit, betrayed His love and met His loving kindness with ingratitude. Therefore stand in contrition before Him as the prophet Daniel prayed and said, *“O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face,... because we have sinned against You... we have rebelled against You”* (Dan 9:7-9). Say to Him: I don’t deserve anything. But in spite of my many sins and ingratitude, Your long- suffering encourages me and Your big heart comforts me. You are the kind God who does not wish for the death of the wicked but that he should turn from his ways and live (Ezek 18:23,32). The greatness of Your mercies are revealed in me who has fallen.

Let your prayer be with faith...

Believe that God hears you and loves you and will answer you in whatever He finds good for you. The Lord said, *“And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive”* (Mt 21:22). And if you don’t have this faith, ask for it in your prayer, as it was said to the Lord by the father of the boy who had a mute spirit, *“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”* (Mk 9:24), or as the Apostle said to the Lord, *“Increase our faith”* (Lk 17:5). Remember this beautiful promise, *“All things are possible to him who believes”* (Mk 9:23). Be confident that faith gives strength to prayer. Prayer also strengthens faith... But if you ask for something, do not be in a hurry to get it. Wait for the Lord. Believe that He will answer your request, no matter how it seems to you that He is slow in responding. Listen to David the Prophet, when he says, *“Wait on the Lord; Be of good courage, And He shall strengthen your heart; Wait I say on the Lord!”* (Ps 27:14).

Let your prayer be also with depth and understanding.

The more your prayer is with understanding, where you mean each word you say, the deeper the prayer. The Psalmist cries out in the psalm: *“Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!”* (Ps 130:1), and *“With my whole heart I have sought You”* (Ps 119:10). Pray then from the depth of your heart, the depth of your faith and the depth of your needs... The depth of prayer gives it warmth...

EXERCISES IN PRAYER:

1. Train yourself to extend the time you spend in the presence of God.

How beautiful is the saying of David the Psalmist in Psalm 119:97, *“Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.”* Ask yourself then, how much time do you spend with God? There is no doubt that you spend much time in conversation and entertainment that you benefit nothing from... It is a wasted time. Would that you dedicate more time to talking with God. Do not make this time at the end of your busy schedule but on the top of it.

2. Train yourself to get up early and start the day with prayer.

This is when the heart is clear, not crowded by thoughts about work and other responsibilities. The house would be still quiet as the rest of the family is still asleep and no noise is heard. You will be alone with God, with no obstacles and God will be the first one you will talk to in your day and you will take a blessing for the whole day...

3. Give more care to the “Hours Prayers” from the Agpia:

If you can’t pray each hour completely during the day, at least pray the parts and the absolution of each. You can be sure that it would not take more than a few minutes from you, during which you lift up your heart to God during the day’s struggles and anxieties. What would help you here is memorizing, so the more you memorize parts and psalms from the Agpia, the more you will be able to pray without a book and without anyone noticing...

4. Try to practise praying in all places.

Follow what the Bible says, *“...Men always ought to pray”* (Lk 18:1), and *“Pray without ceasing”* (1 Thess 5:17)... Practise praying while on the road so you would not be occupied by its scenery. Practise praying while with other people, especially if their talk is a stumbling block or it does not concern you. Practise praying when you enter your house and when you leave it, and also when you get to work and when you leave it... Pray also in each meeting, so God will give you grace and success.

5. Train yourself to pray the repetitive short prayers:

For example, the prayer: “My Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”, or “Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me,” or “I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I bless His name”, or “I thank you Lord on every occasion”... or any short verse that you make up for yourself as a prayer and that suits your condition and expresses your feelings... By repeating a prayer, it makes it register in your subconscious so it will be in your thoughts automatically and may stay with you, even in your sleep. The saying of the Psalmist, “...*I remember You on my bed*” (Ps 63:6), refers to this.

6. Train yourself to pray for others.

Practise praying for all those who are in need. For your relatives, friends and colleagues... for the church in general and for your local parish, and especially for the service... Another prayer could be for the sick and for those who have departed and for those who are in need of repentance. A prayer for the world and the nations... And by this way you will progress gradually in praying for others, until you even pray for your enemies and those who resist you.

7. Train yourself to bring God into each topic and each problem.

Do not face problems on your own, or depend only on your intelligence, or on your friends to solve your problems. But have the feeling that you can not do without God in whatever faces you. Be sure that prayer will give you a feeling of security, comfort and inner peace. Be confident that your problems are in honest, strong hands, capable of guiding all your affairs. When you pray for a problem, either God will solve it and so it comes to an end, or if it remains, God will give your heart peace concerning it. This is another way of solving the problem. Although the problem is still there, you are not upset about it or disturbed; it is almost as if it does not exist. You don't consider it a problem any more... This is the effectiveness of prayer.

8. Train yourself on personal prayers, beside the ritual ones.

The prayer in which you talk openly to God and reveal all that is in your heart. There is nothing wrong in saying to Him, ‘Lord, I love You but I feel that I love other matters in the world which hinder me from You. Whenever I try to remove them from my heart, I find myself weak before You. I know that, “*Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*” (Jas 4:4). Therefore, grant me Lord to love You with the perfect love and with Your strength, save me from any love that is against Your love.’ Don't let your prayer be just mere chosen and well selected phrases. Let it be in plain words that spring from your heart, without artificiality... Let your prayer express your condition and feelings with an open heart... Beware that you do not make your prayer just a routine.

9. Pray with understanding. Train yourself to contemplate on the psalms, the Agpia prayers and all the memorized prayers.

The deeper you go in the meaning of these prayers, the more you will find this depth accompanying you at the time of prayer. You will also learn the manner of talking to God; as the Disciples said to the Lord, “*Teach us to pray*” (Lk 11:2).

10. If you haven't reached yet the pure prayer, do not stop praying for this reason.

Prayer, like any virtue, is one in which progress is made gradually in order to reach its perfection. And as it was said by Mar Isaac, “If you are going to wait until you reach the level of perfect prayer before you even start praying, you will never pray, because it is through constant prayer that we reach the perfected and pure prayer...”

11. Train yourself to continue praying, whenever you want to end it...

It is a sign of success in praying that you feel you cannot live without it or leave it; it is as if you are communicating direct with God, saying, “Stay with me, my Lord.” And you say with the Shulamite in the Book of Songs, “*I held Him and would not let Him go*” (Song 3:4) ... You will even feel the sweetness of each petition or word and you would not like to leave it. Or, as one of the fathers said about the prayers of the saints, “Because of the sweetness of the word in their mouth, they were unable to leave it for another word...”

DEPTH

DEPTH IN PRAYER:

I was really touched by the Psalm 130 in which David the Prophet pleaded, and with which we begin the prayer of the Twelfth Hour, “Compline”:

“ Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!”

Out of the depths I have cried: Out of the depth of the heart and passion, out of the depth of the call for help, as it says in Psalm 119 : “*With my whole heart I have sought You.*” Out of the depth of faith and confidence that You will

respond. Indeed, out of the depths I have cried: Out of the depth of my weariness and neediness... Out of the depth of my weakness, frailty and inability... Out of the depth of the bottomless pit where I am..

It is a deep prayer similar to Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly.

Indeed, out of the depths I have cried to You, because there is no one else but You who is sincere and is a saviour... Entirely like the prayer of the people before the moving of Al Mokattam Mountain... A prayer on which the whole future of the church relied. Or perhaps like the prayer in the heart of Daniel when they threw him in the lions' den.. Or the prayer of the three young men when they were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace... Out of the depth of the heart, out of necessity... Like the voice of a drowning person calling the rescue boat to hasten to reach him before he drowns... Like the prayer of Elijah, asking for the water to fall over his burnt offering (1 Kings 18), or the prayer of the people marching around the walls of Jericho (Josh 6).

It is not important the length of the prayer or the selection of its words, but the depth of feelings in it...

The prayer of the Pharisee was longer than the prayer of the tax collector (Lk 8:14). Why? Because it was a prayer out of the depth: the depth of humility, contrition, feeling of remorse and shame... He stood afar off without daring to raise his eyes to heaven.. His few words were enough because God looked at his depth...

And like the prayer of the tax collector, so was the prayer of the thief on the right hand.

A short prayer but deep. A prayer of a person in his last hours, on the verge of death. Out of his depth he yearned for his eternity, and asked God to remember him. He said to the other criminal before: *"And we indeed justly for we receive the due reward of our deeds"* (Lk 23:41). Truly, it was a crucial prayer, it was said in depth.. It was heard. One sentence a man says in depth, like "Lord have mercy", so one of the twenty four elders comes forward and takes this prayer in his golden censor and ascends with it to the throne of God as a smell of incense which are the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8). Another man says the same prayer tens of times and not one is received, as if he did not pray!

Then how can we distinguish the deep prayer?

It is a prayer which has a feeling of relation with God, a prayer with passion, understanding, contemplation, concentration, warmth, love, humility, contrition... with faith, confidence and hope... A prayer with a spirit and not mere words... Its length is not important but its depth, as the scribes and Pharisees and the like, were - for a reason- making long prayers (Mt 23:14). St Paul said: *"I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue"* (1 Cor 14:19)... And so our prayers ought to come out of our depth; and if we had length with the depth, it would be much better.