



HOW I PRAY

PEOPLE OF
DIFFERENT RELIGIONS
SHARE WITH US
THAT MOST SACRED
AND INTIMATE ACT OF
FAITH...

EDITED BY
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Defining prayer is easy for me. Prayer is talking to God, during which you take almost the point of view of a child.

When I pray, I pray both silently and out loud—more silently than out loud. That might have to do with the fact that I'm a single person and live alone. If I were in a familial environment where there were more people around, there would be more communal prayer. As it stands now, I'm involved in communal prayer only at Saint Vladimir's. We have Matins every morning at seven-thirty and Vespers every night at five-thirty. We have this daily routine of services, and then we have feast-day services and Sunday liturgies. There's a complete liturgical cycle for the community.

In addition to that there's personal prayer. I don't get up in the morning and say my prayer in an orderly fashion, but there's a certain sense in which the whole day is offered up in prayer, there are just periods of time when it comes out as a prayer. The prayer just bubbles up

out of me. I can be walking home at lunchtime and it's a beautiful day outside, and I'll say, "Lord, thank you so much for this beautiful day and the fact that I'm able to appreciate it." It just comes bubbling up to the surface. Sometimes I'll say it out loud, as I'm walking, and people sometimes will look at me strangely.

But sometimes I feel that I don't need to have words in between God and myself; it's knowing that God is and I am, and that we are together. That's enough, and words aren't needed. Other times they are very much needed. An element of prayer develops because you memorize all the prayers. For example, I'm able to recite prayers like the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. If there's a time in my life when I need prayer, a specific prayer just comes out. When you go through the liturgical cycle in the Eastern Orthodox church, it's rich in terms of poetry in the prayer, in terms of the music associated with the prayer. So sometimes my prayer is in music. When I'm praying, I'm singing; it's not just saying words or something that comes from rote. There's a melody of music that brings joy to the prayer as well.

We just went through Holy Week in preparation for Pascha a month ago, and it was really brought to my attention that I know a lot of the words to the Holy Week services. We're talking about services that are two and three hours long and that have been internalized in me as prayer. I don't know how it happened, but it did. I always wondered about that when I was a child: older people did the reading in church, and many times they read without a book; they didn't need to look at the words. I couldn't understand how they could learn all of that. It was beyond me. But now as I'm getting older, I feel that all of these words are inside of me, and they do come out at the right time.

Growing up in the church wasn't easy, because most of

the prayers were in Church Slavonic, and I didn't understand the language. But there was a message there that was above the words, and it somehow got communicated to me very early in my life. I couldn't explain the relationship that somehow developed between God and myself, but I knew that He was there, that He loved me, that I loved Him, and that I wanted that relationship not only now but eternally. This was an awareness on my part that I had when I was about eight or nine years old, and I recognized that I couldn't break the connection even if I wanted to, because God would always love me no matter what I did.

As a child I remember learning that there are prayers of asking or intercession, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers of glorification. I think that the prayer of intercession is the one that children use most. Children think, "God, give me this, I want this thing" or "Help me to do this." The "me" is much more the center of a child's prayer. As I've gotten older, the "me" is not so important because I know that the relationship with God is there and my prayers of intercession are more along the lines of "Allow me to see what you want me to do in life, help to guide me in what it is that you want me to do." I also don't pray so much for things or for certain events to happen, but rather for larger-scope things, like that the Holy Spirit might work, that we might work as a community together, that we might offer a good witness to the world, that our church may be strengthened, that the clergy and the people will work together. Prayer for me has become much more the prayer of the will of God and the prayer of thanksgiving that He's allowed me so many years in this life to work for His glory and that He hopefully will allow me many more years to work for His glory.

I wouldn't say I have a "favorite" prayer. There's a

prayer that I pray a lot—the Jesus Prayer—that’s traditional in the Orthodox church: “O Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” I used to say that even before I came to seminary, but my seminary training brought it home. I was having some difficulties as a student and I talked to my spiritual father, my father-confessor. He suggested that I add a phrase on to the end that would make the Jesus Prayer not only the Jesus Prayer, but something personal for me that would pull it down from the ethereal, heavenly realm to the earthly realm and make it concrete. So what I said was, “O Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner, and help my thoughts to be in Thee.” That way, my thoughts and therefore my activities and actions and the relationships that I have with people are in the presence of God all the time. It doesn’t always work, but that’s the ideal.

Just this last Sunday was Pentecost, and the *prokime-non*—a short verse that appears before a reading—that we pray at Pentecost is, “Who is so great a God as our God.” It epitomizes what it means to be in awe of the great glorification God has given us in this world and what we anticipate in the kingdom to come. The prayer is in anticipation of and hoping that God’s mercy will abound and that the things that we have accomplished in this life will stand us in good stead at the Second Coming and at the Judgment, so that we really will inherit the Kingdom of God and have life eternal.

While there’s a calming sense to prayer, that’s not always the case. Prayer can be energizing and motivating. For me there’s a real sense of awe of God about it, and that makes me feel thankful that I’m allowed to participate in creation and be a part of God’s plan and His plan for the kingdom. There’s this element of joy that all of this has taken place. My favorite Scripture line comes from John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son.” He cared enough about us

not to leave us hanging, but to take care of us. There’s a sense of motherly comfort in that; it’s like a shawl being put around your shoulders to keep you warm.

You always get an answer to prayer, but you don’t always want to hear the answer. Your ears aren’t always open to hearing what He wants to say, and when He does respond, it’s not always what you anticipate. As I get older, I’ve learned to anticipate that that’s going to be what happens, and my joy in the answer to my prayer is greater than it was earlier in my life because of the variety of His responses.

The prayer that the Orthodox use most often that encompasses everything liturgically is called the Great Litany. It’s at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, but it also occurs in the other services of the church. It’s a series of petitions that are offered up. It begins, “In peace let us pray to the Lord,” and the choir sings “Lord, have mercy” after each one of these petitions:

For the peace that is from above and for the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord.

For the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of God’s holy churches, and for the union of all, let us pray to the Lord.

For this holy temple, for those who with faith and devoutness and the fear of God have entered therein, let us pray to the Lord.

For our most holy synod of bishops, for our metropolitan, for the diaconate in Christ, for all the clergy and laity, let us pray to the Lord.

These kinds of general prayers that pray for everything have become more of my prayer life in terms of petition. A friend of a friend was getting married and they were

writing their own wedding service. They wanted to have some prayers in it. My friend said, "Well, there's nothing better than this Great Litany. We literally pray for everyone: for all the people, for all the churches, for this city, for the holy temple, for every city and land and for those who in faith dwell therein. There's really nothing you can add to this Great Litany." This particular series of petitions say it all in terms of asking for what we need for our life. The last petition is, "Have mercy upon us and keep us, O God, by Thy Grace." All that we're asking for here is to have His mercy given to us and to have Him keep us with Him. It's all by His grace—it's not by our asking—and He gives us this because He is God.

Praying for other people like that has an impact on my relationships with them. If you know that God loves you and that you love God—however broken that relationship can be sometimes on our part—and then you offer up His love in prayer and thanksgiving, then you can't help but love your enemy. But it doesn't always work quite that way. After all, it is a fallen world, and we're not perfect and we will fall and not love our enemy; we will have difficulty with relationships. But when I've had these difficulties, I just place them before God: "I've tried everything I can to work it out, but there's still a difficulty, a disagreement, a dislike; we can't talk to each other." You offer it up to God and you leave it there in His presence and let Him work in your life so that you can change and so that the other person can change. Eventually things will work out. Life changes, people's hearts change, and relationships that were broken before can be fixed.

Prayer life, if it's intense and regular, helps you to deal with those people that you come in contact with who are very angry. When you go to the grocery store and the

clerk is really nasty, if you're grounded in a good prayer life, that person will disturb you, but not to the point of making you angry as well. So a good prayer life is a defense against the difficulties that other people are having. Someone can come in the office and yell and scream at you, but you know that they've had a bad day and you look at it from a different point of view because you realize that not everyone is going to offer up everything every day to God.

There are going to be times when we're going to fall and we're going to be angry and we're going to offend and say things that we don't mean. But prayer gives you a greater respect for the person, for the identity of the person in front of you. Rather than treating everyone like numbers or bodies that pass in the day, you want to stop—even if you're very busy—and look on the face of the other person and pay attention. If that person is angry, prayer makes you try to understand why they're angry, to say a word to calm their anger. In the Eastern church we use the word *synergy* to signify the cooperation between God and man that makes the relationship work. There's synergy in the relationship between human beings as well.

Prayer also affects my relationship to the broader community. You realize that the only thing you can do for people sometimes is to pray. It's one of my pet peeves that people say to someone who's lost a relative or has an illness in the family, "I can't help you or do anything, so I'll pray for you," as if prayer were the last resort. Prayer should be the *first* resort. The first thing you do is pray, and then you take action, if at all possible. This element of prayer helps to unite people in the world. I may never meet a person from Bosnia, but I'll have a tie in my heart to them because I've prayed for them and I've prayed with them. I know they're praying to God for His

intercession in their situation. There's no question but that prayer is a common element, and it's not just among Christians.