

**TOWARD PRAYER:  
REFLECTIONS OF A COPTIC MONK**

*by Abouna Seraphim el Baramosy*

We cannot speak adequately about prayer because words cannot convey intangible facts. For the word is the implement of this world, that interprets its facts; but prayer is a way of living life and an experience tasted by the heart – the instrument of Eternity – that can express, in silence, matters unseen.

In this way, we are endeavoring here to draw near prayer while in the formidable and awesome Presence of God, clothed with silence, appropriate for approaching His Presence.

We walk in its horizon, and feel the rays of light emanating forth from it, while a halo of light surrounds it.

When we approach prayer, its flame warms us and nourishes in us a desire toward God, Who is the subject of our prayer.

Prayer is not an aimless scream in a heart of a valley, neither is it a crying out in a desert; nor does its echo fade into the horizon as the sun sets, vanishing with the disappearance of word and voice.

Prayer is not an obligation fabricated by religion or created by humankind speaking to emptiness, imagining in it the god of rescue and help. It is not a necessity of a sick imagination, escaping to talk with himself, visualizing in this other self, a listening god!!

It is not an alter-ego or a shadow chattering words to itself, nor a wine on which the soul becomes intoxicated and blindly turns away the facts of reality, departing from the rationality of earth, body and time.

But prayer is a necessity of life. It is a deep action that touches the divine immortal part of the human being, his spirit, which is the gift from God to us and in us.

Prayer is not about consuming time and wasting that which will not produce tangibly; but it is transforming time into eternal value and intensifying time to embrace its purpose and its end, which is Eternity and timelessness.

Prayer is the water that nourishes the tender plant of Eternity deeply rooted in our hearts, implanted by God Himself when He brought us from emptiness and meaninglessness to make us masters over Creation and sons of Himself; and without this pure and flowing water – prayer – this tender shoot will wither, shrivel, and die while its young shoot was eager for life and light.

“Prayer in my opinion  
is being twenty-four hours in communion  
with the commandment of Jesus  
by living for Him, with Him, and in Him.”

*Mother Theresa*

Prayer is putting the Bible into action and transforming it from written papers into life, engraved on the tablets of the heart; as the commandment lives only when it becomes a prayer and an application, it will not be transformed into effective action until it passes through a heart, poured out in prayer. For prayer is a fount of life, that Jesus brought to us, rather than the concrete letter of the Law, and the stony heart used to performing repetitive religious practices.

Prayer is the main entrance into the essence of Christianity, because without prayer, Christianity is just a remarkable mental theory or a unique collective social behavior with amazing communal status!!

Prayer is a laboratory where the soul interacts with the Holy Spirit to produce a mystical meeting with God, wherein the human soul witnesses the truth of the Incarnation and the Mystery of Life poured out as a Sacrifice of Love. Through prayer, the soul can also witness the pain of death, the joy of resurrection and the departure of Christ from the Mount of Ascension, to inherit what He had of glory, where the whole redeemed humanity will join Him.

So, all Christ’s movements on earth and in time which occurred historically, develop into actions, transcending time and touching the reality of humanity, each day. Christ’s deeds become the power of life from which the soul derives its sustenance while facing the world, with its deep passion and true desire for Eternity. And prayer becomes our companion through the journey toward Eternity,

holding us through the stresses of life, pressures of daily living, and the pain of the moment, to deliver us to this One who is limitless in His existence and pure in His presence, who feeds the soul with the actual Bread of Life which is Love. Then, the soul descends with a renewed vision and a fresh power as an invigorated being, allowing those living in the desert of life to discern who the God of Love truly is.

Prayer is an abundant desire to meet Jesus, a desire that takes the soul, and inflames the longing heart every moment; and this longing intensifies, as the soul prays, as the yearning to meet Jesus does not stop or cease or extinguish, for prayer kindles and ignites the fire of longing, and the spirit becomes vibrantly alive and joyfully ablaze in each moment of prayer. The Holy Spirit pours into the soul this feeling that it needs Jesus, as if prayer serves not to quench the thirst of this encounter, but to deeply intensify it, so that the soul can be in communion with Jesus while its tongue utters without ceasing:

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” John 12:21

Moments of prayer become marks in time for the destined meeting during which the soul waits in eager longing and anticipation; for prayer in these moments moves as the inner leaps within the depth of the individual toward this Infinite Being, whom we behold as Jesus of Nazareth. And these leaps are not hindered by place or time, for they are “leaps of the spirit” toward God, just as a child who springs towards his mother, freely stretching his hands to reach her, tugging at her and ignoring the distance that might be separating them, is unmindful that he might fall, for he desires the embrace of his mother where he feels safe and comforted.

Those are the souls who experience the presence of the Savior. They cannot be patient while separated from Him, even for one moment; and they ask with boldness and humility of prayer, that His Image be imprinted on their hearts and in their lives as well. They desire to be His light flooding to others from His loving heart; to be His salt melting within the world and creation, saturating it, and returning to it the taste of Life in the Spirit and the beauty of the unique relationship with God.

The warm comforting bosom, on which the soul rests while praying, becomes its longing that draws it back from the midst of the world into its chamber of prayer. It desires to be sent out to the world, yet not to be separated from the precious holy intimacy of the prayer chamber.

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” Mark 16:15

The soul feels as if it is pushed by another force, after experiencing and tasting the Presence of the Savior, for it cannot enjoy the glory of life with God, alone, amidst a world that is dying, for the experience of prayer is indelibly imprinted on its heart. It can do nothing but proclaim what it has glimpsed; and the transfigured God on Mount Tabor becomes its subject of preaching and crying out to the world.

It experiences Him every day, renewing... mortifying the old man, and dressing the soul with the new man. For this new man, born in the shadows of Light, is the one who is fitted for the Eternity of Light and sonship of Light.

“Believe in the Light, that you may become sons of Light.” John 12:36

In this moment, prayer is no longer a mystical action, but becomes a blend of deep need and longing. Thus the soul inhabits this sphere between deep hunger and yearning, swaying between them, and when it recognizes its own counterfeit image, it turns toward the scream of need... It screams for deliverance from the cruelty of the world, the lies of the devil and the pressure of its own fleshly carnality.

“Your prayer will not be, mostly,  
anything but a deep scream...  
it will be like a modest  
and silent expectation,  
but it is an expectation of longing!!”

*Renee Voyaom*

‘Where were You, O Lord,  
when I was screaming to You?’  
“In your heart,”

says the Lord,  
or you wouldn't be able to scream  
to Me.'  
*St. Catherine of Sinai*

This Prayer develops into an aching desire in those moments when the soul leaves its ego and its self-centered existence by melting into the Infinite Divinity. It melts as if it is a flying spirit without body, without needs, without lusts, tasting a little of the Glory which is hidden and predestined for those who climb hills of Life along with the Lord, stepping over the mountains of this world, waiting for the Chariot of Fire to take them into Eternity, the true indwelling of humanity.

"...whether in the body I do not know,  
or whether out of the body I do not know,  
God knows!!"  
*II Corinthians 12:2*

The habitation of the longing, the meeting, the screaming and the tears is the heart, the wide place, in which God loves to dwell more than His own heaven. It is that sacred place wherein soft and gentle knocking is always heard; it is the place where Almighty God refuses to enter by force, because on its steps the freedom of Love is experienced. On its steps there is another departure (kenosis), not from the glory of Divinity, as in the Incarnation, but from using the power to impose His presence; for He will not allow Himself to break into the heart of man, unless this man genuinely and willfully opens his heart, earnestly desiring His Presence.

Those knocks of love, heard on the human heart become a risk that God would go through, in His love... a risk carrying the possibility of freely choosing even to refuse God Himself!

"Open to Me, my sister, my love,  
my dove, my spotless one,  
for I am wet with the heavy night dew,  
and my hair is covered with it."  
*Song of Songs 5:2*

Christ is the only truth in life that enlightens all matters, illuminating its essence. He is the only One in this universe Who is Omniscience; and He is the only One who opens the eyes of the soul to comprehend the meaning of the Invisible Eternity, for which all intellectual and academic knowledge is inadequate to move yet one step forward in this journey toward enlightenment and illumination. But when the soul stretches forth its hands and bends its knees, it will receive the actual truth from its Original Source, Lord Jesus Himself.

So prayer is a conscious savoring of the truth declared in the awesome Divine Presence. This truth would not be revealed apart from the prayer chamber inside the heart.

“... and when I became convinced that all the humanitarian efforts,  
which we try in order to understand  
this eternal truth,  
are insufficient  
and they will not lead me to a unity  
with the truth  
and owning it as if its mine,  
I turned into prayer”

*Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov*

The importance of ‘insight’ in the spiritual life as spoken of by St. Antony, is simply about, “owning Jesus,” the Precious Jewel, in our depth, to enlighten our inner man (the invisible essence of the human being), as expressed by St. Antony (in his sixth epistle), to be able to discern the truth from falsehood. And this can only be discovered in those times when we are veiled from the world, wherever we might be, in the world or in a desert.

In prayer we taste the eternal truth in accordance with our own limitation to receive, as finite human beings.

And when we touch the depth of this truth, the real prayer will be unveiled in us; the prayer which grows and nourishes, not by expanding superficially, but through deepening inside.

At this point prayer will not be a matter of time, but a profound and conscious awareness of the Presence of God’s love outpoured from the depths of His heart. And if we allow time to participate in

such a deep and inner activity, it will be measured in the time spent away from prayer... as Love requests a continuous and permanent meeting.

“What makes the Presence of God continuous in our lives,  
is not our instant feeling,  
but the Consciousness of love”

*Renee Voyaom*

Prayer is the perfect response of the one who feels within, the sonship he has received from Jesus as a gift, this sonship which is the delectable fruit humanity picked from the Tree of Incarnation. And the one who fully understands kenosis, incarnation, and the dwelling of God amidst a created humanity, imitating their lives without sin!...will find in this realization no other response for this Indescribable Love, than prayer, praise, thanksgiving, confession and kneeling, as the Divine Incarnation has brought us adoption and we become sons through grace.

So those who were sons of darkness and under the wings of death have become, by grace, members of the household of God, heirs with Christ, our First Fruit, our Priest and our Sacrifice.

“The Son of God became the Son of Man  
to make sons of men, sons of God.”

*St. John Chrysostom*

Therefore, our relationship with God develops so intimately, as that of a son and his father in natural and spontaneous relationship, deeply rooted through continuous communication. This relationship raises us above the emotionality of prayer without abandoning emotions in prayer! We can say that we are born in the New Covenant, once again, from the Water and the Word, and become carriers of the Divine genome which leads us as a compass toward God as our Father, and sweeps off the dirt of transgression from the image, fulfilling in us the likeness which was the aim of our creation when the hands of the Creator fashioned us.

“Man has taken the honor of the image in his first creation,  
but the fulfillment of the likeness of God will be given to him,  
only at the end of ages.” *Origen*

God gave us the gift to unite with Him spiritually through the Eucharistic table, and He gave us also the ability to touch Him in the poor, the sick and the hungry... so our prayer cannot be completed unless we serve His body that is in pain.

So, how can I declare that I am praying to the Lord with longing and honesty, while not hearing the crying, mourning and groaning of those who are in need!!

“Poor people are our prayer...”

*Mother Theresa*

It does not mean, of course, that serving the poor replaces prayer, but when the prayer of the lips ceases and the mind is engaged in other activities, then God is transfigured in the poor, the needy and the those who are in pain; so every activity in this sphere, of freely given love to them, is a complete prayer in its fullest meaning.

“You can find this altar (suffering people) every day  
standing in the streets  
and you can always offer on him,  
your sacrifice.”

*St. John Chrysostom*

So, we cannot taste the freely given Grace through prayer apart from serious listening and participation in the needs of the Body of Christ which is suffering. For our hearts will not be able to receive the Heavenly Light until we are free from our selfish ways, moving toward the other, with abundant and sincere love, not cloaked with the garments of superficial practices called worship and attending services, while ignoring the needs of those who are in pain...

“They filled the air  
with praises and hymns  
so they are not able to hear  
the calling of the orphans  
and the sighing of the widows!”

*Kahlil Gibran*

The Desert Fathers worked with their hands and gave the poor of their own necessities and from their daily food, that was “their prayer during their labor,” as one of the Desert Fathers responded,



countering those who adopted the idea of the Messalians ‘ευχίται’.<sup>3</sup> Prayers of the Desert Fathers were kindled by the joyful Spirit dwelling in their hearts, as a pushing force lifting them up to the heavens, while loving every single person on this earth with practical and sacrificial love. Without such love, prayer loses its power and is transformed from sweet incense rising up to the Holy of Holies in Heaven, to sheer black smoke, separating humanity from God.

“By this we know love,  
because He laid down His life for us.  
And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.  
But whoever has this world’s goods,  
and sees his brother in need,  
and shuts up his heart from him,  
how does the love of God abide in him?  
My little children  
let us not love in word or in tongue,  
but in deed and in truth”

*1 John 3:16-18*

The ‘Paradise of the Fathers’ tells us about St. Serapion who was perfect in worshipping God, as the book records; he sold everything, even his robe which provided him warmth in winter and...

“...Sat naked with the Bible in his hand...”

And when one of his disciples asked him the reason for that, he responded with those famous words and pointed to the Bible, and said:

“That is what unclothed me”

And even that was not enough for him, he sold his Bible, the source of his comfort, and when he was asked about the reason, he replied:

“The Bible was telling me every day;  
sell all that you have  
and distribute to the poor,  
so I sold it.”

This relationship between the Bible and prayer is essential, for prayer inspires the ability to fulfill the calling of the Bible. It unleashes the words of the Scripture from limitations of paper and ink by intangibly etching and inscribing them deeply into the real life of man's existence; for it is this calling in prayer which enables the Holy Spirit to provide day by day from the Priceless Treasure which Christ left us.

So we can say that we feel burdened by the commandments of Scripture in our daily lives only when attended by poverty of prayer and lack of the daily gift of the Holy Spirit, when we close the door of communication with Heaven by ceasing to pray.

Prayer becomes a channel through which our needs are heard in Heaven, and in turn Divine gifts are given, only with surrendered pure prayer, hoping but still submissive, requesting and yet not imposing.

Surrender here is a positive action, which means asking without childish nagging, receiving the Divine gift with mature and thankful acceptance. And this requires trained senses to understand the depth and the full meaning of the gift. These senses grow in discernment through Biblical praying and prayerful reading of the Word of God. As the reading of the Bible must be in the spirit of prayer, the prayer itself should originate from the thought of Christ inscribed in the Word of God.

As the full understanding of the will of God in our lives, the secrets in His dealings with us and the value of the gift given to us, do not come from Heaven as a fleeting instantaneous inspiration upon us; nor by devoting some moments for prayer, dwelling in darkness prior to, and living in darkness after they end!! But the will of God is declared in our natural day when it is full of the incense of prayer and the fragrance of obedience to His commandments - every moment and in each situation.

The will of God is not only concerned with big decisions before which we stand in a quandary, fainting, but it encompasses the entire life in all its small details, for experiencing God every day in prayer is the only way to own such knowledge.

The will of God for some is a mystery that involves searching everywhere and anywhere, asking for an answer; yet the answer is

within us if we live by the Spirit and for the Spirit.

The real crisis is that we want a “computer-like” God to whom we give some information in what we call a “prayer,” and then wait for the answer, after which we “shut down” until there is another need!!! But prayer is more than a temporary tool used to impose our will over God and then imagining an answer through signs and tests put to Him.

By such means we are only found dampened through the dew of prayer and not found immersed in it. So our conscience is anesthetized while waiting for those imaginary “signs” imposed over God; then we thank Him for what we have imagined as an answer!!

When we wake up from our sedation, we find ourselves in a tragedy after which we scream, “Where were You God in all this?”

Wasn’t this Your will? Wasn’t it Your answer?” And God stands in front of us and He is broken over man’s rephrasing of His commandment, when he distorted the channel of communication and love between the heart of God and the heart of man, into a device for begging and persisting to get what he wants, when he wants and the way he wants.

And thus, by doing this we reject the concept of a life surrendered to the Lord by asking only for an approval to accomplish our desires.

It is as if we are the ones who control the helm of a craft. Yet we ask God to put His hands on the helm, without giving Him any authority to change the course of the vessel of our lives which sails throughout the world.

So some may wonder, isn’t it God who says seek and you will find? (Matthew 7: 7) Wasn’t He the One who gave Gideon signs on the fleece, once to be damp with the ground dry and once to be dry with the ground damp? (Judges 6: 36- 39) In order to comprehend those verses, we have to understand some facts of the spiritual life:

- We should differentiate between asking for what is personal and appealing on behalf of the others, for most of the records of the Old Testament were about the nation of Israel as a whole, the revealing of God’s presence to His people and victories achieved by His hand.

- There is a marked difference between the one who comes to prayer only in the time of need, and abandons it after the fulfillment of his needs, and another who lives in a continuous attitude of prayer, and his demands are a part of his steady relationship with God. When the books in the Old Testament focused on answers for material needs, this took place because the Jewish people required what was tangible to believe in Him who is Invisible, and to comprehend that all their needs are met in God, not in the gods of the nations.
- So there is always a background for every Biblical situation, and the circumstances behind these situations also require a life filled with prayer and surrender.
- There is a distinction between the ways of God in dealing with the people of the Old Testament and the ways of God dealing with the people of the New Testament. For we in the New Testament receive the Holy Spirit with complete indwelling. This Spirit guides us when facing any situation. In the same way, the signs and symbols were the manner in which God dealt with the people who had not yet received the complete indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But one who has the Holy Spirit and requests outward signs, insults and misunderstands the role of the Holy Spirit and His effect in our hearts.

We must realize that the “asking” Christ demanded from us in Matthew 7: 7 is:

Asking for what is for God,  
asking for the virtues  
of the Holy Spirit,  
asking for the Kingdom of Heaven,  
asking for the kindling  
of the Holy Spirit in our hearts,  
asking to be rid of the darkness,  
asking for one last exodus from sin...

Yet the Lord speaks quite obviously about earthly material things, that they shall be “added” to us (Matthew 6: 33).

Although we cannot stop asking for the material things because of our continual needs, our demands must be sealed with true and honest surrender for such things, because paramount in our lives is the need to discern the will God with an open heart and enlightened insight.

Finally, if we cannot reach the Prayer of Life, we will not be able to realize the will of God in our lives...

we will not see His Light that penetrates our selfish fog...

And we will walk round and round in empty circles to the unknown...

“...Running in vain...”