

Introduction To Prayer

When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This is how you are to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,
And do not put us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:6-13

The evangelist Matthew describes Jesus imparting the *Our Father* during the Sermon on the Mount. In the gospel according to Saint Luke, the disciples of the Lord Jesus witness him at prayer. When he was done praying, one of the disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." It is at this point in Saint Luke's account that the Lord teaches them the *Our Father* (Luke 11:1-4). When he was on earth, the Lord taught us to pray by his example of frequent prayer. He reveals to us the way the Son of God communicates with the Father through the words of the Lord's Prayer. As adopted sons and daughters of God, the heavenly Father, we have the privilege to utter this prayer. It is a prayer simple enough for a child to memorize, yet profound enough for a person to meditate upon for an entire lifetime. The Twelve and the other disciples learned from the example and the teaching of the Lord "about the necessity for them to pray always and without growing weary" (Luke 18:1). Likewise, the apostle Paul, repeating the Lord's command, enjoins Christians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:16).

The Lord's command and the apostolic counsel were obeyed by praying at set times during each day, thereby allowing prayer to direct one's life. Later, the hesychast movement in the Byzantine Church would attempt to follow Saint Paul's dictum by the use of the Jesus Prayer, literally praying every moment of night and day.

The first Christians followed the Jewish practice of praying at set hours. The primary hours of prayer were the natural divisions of the day: the morning and evening. In addition, Jews and Christians prayed at other times of the day, chiefly noon and in the afternoon.

These Christians prayed for practically every reason. They offered praise and thanksgiving to God. They prayed for the coming of the kingdom of God in power, for the forgiveness of their sins, and for their persecutors. In their prayers they professed their faith and asked God to assist them to announce the Gospel. The Acts of the Apostles describes the life of the first believers:

They directed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

(Acts of the Apostles 2:42)

The result of this style of life was:

And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

(Acts of the Apostles 2:47)

Thirty to sixty years after the Lord's ascension, a writing was compiled entitled *The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles, through the Twelve*, known simply as *the Didache* (i.e., *The Teaching*). In referring to prayer, the *Didache* says: "Pray as the Lord enjoined in His Gospel, thus: Our Father..." The entire Lord's Prayer is given, but with a doxology at the end: "For Thine is the power and the glory forever and ever. Say this prayer three times every day" (Maxwell Staniforth, *Early Christian Writings*).

Although this work appeared at the same time as the epistles and the gospels, it was not included in

the Bible, but it reveals the prayer life of the very first generations of Christians.

The heart of the corporate prayer of the Byzantine Church Morning Praise (Matins) and Evening Praise (Vespers) as well as the prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours is the Lord's Prayer. From that foundation, psalms, canticles from the Bible, and prayers based on Biblical themes and quotations, comprise the remainder of each prayer service.

The eighth century witnessed the beginnings of a period of tremendous composition of liturgical poetry, as troparia, stichera, and canons were introduced into the liturgical services. This was a way to express and interpret the Gospel, to speak of God and his saving economy.

Two centers of ecclesiastical poetry, the monastery of Saint Sabbas in Palestine and the Studion monastery in Constantinople, produced a vast quantity of poetic texts which found their way into the daily prayers. These were arranged in an eight week cycle the Octoechos, or the Lenten period (Lenten Triodion) and the Paschal observance (Pentecostarian); later, the collection of the observance of feasts and the commemoration of saints the Menaion. The introduction of the stichera, troparia, and canons into daily prayer added to their length.

In the early Christian world, monks in monasteries were able to follow these expanded prayer services on a daily basis because they were supported by imperial or royal patronage to accomplish this prayer. It was, indeed, their chief work. The laity and the parish clergy, too, were able to pray a portion of the main hours of prayer in this culture, supported by a Christian world view and with an agrarian based society and its cycles.

The Industrial Revolution inaugurated the current age and brought great changes in daily life to the people of industrialized nations. **AB** new technologies developed in the second half of the twentieth century, marking the arrival of the information age, lives of people have been altered in revolutionary ways. The life of a believer is very different today in the industrial and communications-driven West, compared to the agrarian and faith-centered culture of early Christendom. In fact, the faithful in the current secular world find a situation akin to the first three centuries of the Church when, alternately persecuted or ignored, it found Roman society openly hostile to the Gospel.

AB a result, the practice of corporate daily prayer in the Western and Eastern Churches has become difficult to accomplish. The Roman Church responded by a reform of its daily prayer and the issuance of a whole series of prayer books based on that official prayer geared for the various states of its clergy, religious and laity.

Morning and Evening Praise

With the Holy Eucharist (Divine Liturgy), morning praise (Matins) and evening praise (Vespers) have been the principle ways the Church of Jesus Christ has expressed the liturgy or work of thanksgiving for salvation and celebration of one's life in Christ. We frame the beginning and end of each day of the new creation in thanks, celebrating the way God has saved his people through the renewal of creation in Christ. As the start and conclusion of each day it is logical to select these points to express the quality the whole day possesses as part of the new, redeemed creation that is life in Christ. We begin the day, offering our life to God, and we end the day with thanks for his gift of life and another day.

A. Morning Praise

The morning is a natural expression of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the new life which flows from his rising to the baptized. As we rise from sleep we experience a symbol of the resurrection from the dead. **AS** we have been saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the rising sun suggests to us the Sun of Justice who grants us enlightenment (salvation). As the sun warms and lightens the earth and is the source of life, we recall that God is the true Source of Life. We pray for the forgiveness of our sins, celebrate God's saving work in the past and present and express ardent hope in the future fulfillment, and consecrate the day to God. We exercise the priestly ministry of Jesus in which we have been given a share by offering intercessory prayer for the whole world, the Church, and for our intentions.

The Vigil: Research indicates that the first half of Matins as it is presently served is really the remnant of the old Midnight Service which, at a certain point, became joined to Morning Praise. **AS** such, it is not truly a morning prayer, and has been omitted from daily orthros. Sunday and feast-day

orthros as is presently served is composed of Morning Praise preceded by two night vigils: a monastic vigil, and the vigil of Jerusalem called the vigil of the Myrrh-bearing Women.

Since these Sunday vigils are eschatological signs sign of the fulfillment of the end times as well as our profession of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and thereby of our own resurrection (the vigil forms part of the funeral service for this reason), a small selection is appended to Sunday Matins.

Psalm 50 Our Expression of Repentance: Saint Basil the Great attests that Psalm 50 is prayed at the beginning of morning prayer in Cappadocia in the fourth century. He enjoins all to pray "with one voice and one heart, each one making his own the words of repentance." Psalm 50 functions as the prayer of penance in the morning just as Psalm 140 serves that purpose at vespers. We begin the day by asking God to forgive our sins and make us worthy to stand in his presence.

The Old and New Testament Canticles and the Psalms of Praise: The Byzantine psalter or Book of Psalms consists of the one hundred fifty psalms and the nine biblical canticles which were sung daily by monks so as to last through the whole night. Like the last three psalms, 148, 149, 150, the canticles were originally part of the vigil of the night and were moved to Morning Praise, although early witnesses state that at this point there were songs, canticles, and psalms which were displaced by the poetic canons. In this prayer book the canticles are restored although just one Old Testament canticle with the New Testament canticle is assigned per day.

God reveals himself not only in his creation but in his actions in history. God has intervened in the history of the Chosen People which was then seen as a pre-figurement and prophecy of the way he intervened through the Son, and which awaits completion at the eschaton. These canticles celebrate God's work and thank him for it.

The Hymn of Light Eucharist for the Light of the World: The present eight hymns of light were expanded from a few ancient hymns in order to serve the needs of the eight tone system of Palestine. As Christ is the Light of the world who enlightens (i.e., saves) us, we observe the rising of the sun and recall the saving work of the Sun of Justice. Our response to God's work is to offer a prayer of eucharist, thanksgiving, to God and to join in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ.

The Great Doxology-A Hymn of Praise: Saint John Chrysostom says that the Great Doxology is sung at morning praise in the city of Antioch during the fourth century. This hymn, a composite of scripture verses, is a mighty hymn of worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God. Chrysostom states that worshippers would rise from sleep and with one voice sing hymns of praise to God. "What is the difference," he queries, "between the angels and this company of them who on earth sing and say, 'Glory to God in the highest...?'"

Prayers of Petition: Traditionally, at the end of morning and evening prayer as well as at the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word (the first half of the Divine Liturgy), the priestly People of God offer prayers and intercessions for the needs of the whole world, for the Church God's servant of the world, their community, and for their loved ones and for their needs. At present, the typical editions have the litanies scattered throughout the services; it was not so originally. The litanies are grouped at the end of the services to serve as a guide to formulate our intercessions when praying privately. Another possibility is a traditional method. In place of the litanies we recite the prayer "Lord, have mercy" twelve times, once for each litany.

The Lord's Prayer The Heart of Daily Prayer: The *Didache*, written thirty to sixty years after the Lord's ascension, commands the followers of the Lord Jesus to pray the Lord's Prayer three times per day, morning, noon, and evening. It is the wonderful privilege of the baptized, those who have been adopted as brothers and sisters by Jesus Christ, to be able to call God our Father. The core of morning and evening praise, then, from the beginning of Christianity, is the Lord's Prayer, prayed at the conclusion of the service.

B. Evening Praise

At the end of the day, as night falls, we offer thanks and praise to God for the gift of the day which has passed. We recall, also, our failings committed this day and ask God to pardon our sins. This provides us with the opportunity to forgive those who have offended us so God will forgive us: "forgive us our trespasses," we pray, "as we forgive those who trespass against us."

As daylight fades and the darkness of night deepens we are reminded of the darkness of the passion of Christ as He conquers sin and death, the power of the Evil One. We consider the temporary,

passing nature of this world and our time upon it. Recalling all this to mind, we light a lamp, offering a prayer of thanksgiving, and, as it dispels the darkness, it is a sign that Christ is the Light who "shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it" (John 1:5)

The purpose of evening praise is to offer thanks to God the Father for Christ, the Light of the world, to petition for the forgiveness of our sins, and to request protection at the hour of our judgment.

Psalm 103 –A Psalm of Praise and Thanks for Creation: When we place ourselves before God in prayer, our first act is to praise Him for being God, and to thank Him for the wonder of our being and the wonderful universe. It is in creation that God first reveals Himself. Creation is the first Theophany or encounter with the living God.

Psalm 140 Our Expression of Repentance: Saint John Chrysostom testifies that Psalm 140 is prayed daily during evening praise. He mentions that not only is this psalm appropriate for this time of day, that is, it is an evening hymn ("the lifting up of my hands like an evening sacrifice"), but also he calls it a saving and healing medicine. Those who pray it with sincerity while recalling their faults and sins of the day gone by are forgiven their sins and healed by this medicinal psalm.

Hymn of the Evening Eucharist for the Light of the World: Christ is the Light of the world, the true God who "enlightens (i.e., saves) everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:9). The light of Christ is salvation, and it is received in baptism. Therefore, our Christian ancestors would light a lamp as daylight declined and offer eucharist, that is, thanksgiving, to the risen Christ, present, working, and illumining the world. The response of the believer to the work of Christ is to offer ceaseless thanksgiving to God and to join in the sacrifice of Christ, our God. The hymn of thanksgiving, *O Joyful Light*, which Saint Basil the Great, writing in the fourth century, says is very old even at that time, is one of the earliest Christian hymns.

Prayers of Petition Evening praise has petitions offered to God for the world, the Church, the community and its needs, and for our loved ones, as does morning praise and the Liturgy of the Word.

The Lord's Prayer The Heart of Daily Prayer As already mentioned in the section for morning praise, the Lord's Prayer forms the core of the cursus of daily prayer from the earliest days of the Church. On this prayer as on a foundation, the other prayers of morning and evening praise were added, so this prayer, taught us by the Lord Jesus Himself, is truly the heart of these services of prayer.

The Third, Sixth, and Ninth Hours of Prayer

The Acts of the Apostles indicates that the apostles prayed at the third (2:1, 15), sixth (10:9), and ninth hours (3:1, 10:3, 30), 9:00 AM., 12 Noon, and 3:00 P.M., respectively. Christians probably prayed at these hours because they were the principle parts of the ancient Roman day, rather than in any imitation of the Jewish course of prayer. They functioned, then, as points of reference, as reminders to "pray without ceasing." The idea was that whether at home or at work one paused for a prayer-break. Of course, the *Didache* mentions that noon is one of the times to pray the Lord's Prayer. Most probably, the Lord's Prayer was prayed at the third and ninth hours, too, as it is today.

Later writers would devise meaning systems for these hours, assigning various reasons why these hours should be marked with prayer. While each writer devised a different set of meanings, one set gained acceptance and were worked into the prayer and the troparia. The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost was observed at the third hour of prayer. At the sixth hour the nailing of Jesus to the cross was marked, while prayer of the ninth hour was understood as

solemnizing the time when Jesus died on the cross. Although this system of commemorations of the events of salvation has merit for our prayer life, still, as mentioned before, the original purpose is to pray at mid-morning, noon, and mid-afternoon as a way to permeate our daily work with God's presence and so to pray without ceasing.

Cassian witnesses to the practice of praying the hours in Bethlehem at the end of the fourth century. He writes that the hours were services composed of three psalms and three prayers. In this prayer book, then, the three psalms and three prayers along with the Our Father are retained. The other prayers and the troparia are not included.

Private Prayers

The first Christians made no distinction between personal or private prayer and public, corporate prayer. If they were alone at morning or evening, or at the hours of prayer, they prayed alone; if they were with other believers, they prayed with them. Nevertheless, the normal practice was to assemble together to pray since those who live in Christ are members of his body and members of each other. The principle parts of the public, communal prayer of the Church, and therefore of Christ himself, is morning and evening praise and the prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours.

The Church also provides a collection of prayers for morning and evening, for the reception of holy communion, and prayers for other times and needs. They are provided in this edition for one's personal use.

The personal prayers for morning and evening have been arranged in imitation of Matins and Vespers according to the received text as found in the typical editions of the *Casoslov*, the Book of Hours. In that order of the service, the priest prays privately a series of prayers eleven at Matins and eight at Vespers all grouped together. In the personal prayers for morning and evening, groups of prayers composed by spiritual masters are collected together in a similar way.

Likewise, a collection of prayers to assist us in preparing for the reception of holy communion and to help us offer thanksgiving after receiving communion are taken from the *Casoslov*. These prayers are meditations upon holy communion by the great saints of the Church.

It is natural for each person to be drawn to certain prayers which are favorites, and to pass over others which do not seem to express our thoughts. We must remember that one function of the Church's official prayer is that it serves as a school of prayer, teaching us to engage in an ever more perfect practice of this intimate meeting with God. Bearing this in mind, we should try to use even the less favored prayers since they too have something to teach us about dimensions of ourselves and others and our relationship with God and about prayer.

Let it be remembered that if we do not have all the time we desire to pray the prayers given here, pray the Lord's Prayer morning, noon, and evening, as the *Didache* instructed almost two thousand years ago.

For Further Reading:

Robert Taft, S.J. *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa. *The Lord's Prayer. The Beatitudes*. Ancient Christian Writers, #18. New York: Newman Press, 1954.