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Prayer - eternal dialogue with God in secularization, pandemic, and war conditions

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Abstract. In a world marked more and more by secularization, where man loses the character of a person in favor of that of an individual, in the difficult conditions brought to the fore by the pandemic and war, man tends to lose himself in the vicious circle of his own ego. In such conditions, in which man, although with many virtual friends, realizes that he is more alone than ever, prayer is the one that can provide him with the emotional and spiritual stability necessary nowadays, through the correct relationship with God, relationship through which man realizes that he is never alone.

Keywords. prayer, God, dialogue, pandemic, war conditions

Introduction

The contemporary world is at a crossroads, we could even say at an existential turning point. Pandemic, war, famine, calamity, financial crisis and moral decay repeat themselves repeatedly in the history of mankind, which, blinded by sin, seems not to learn its lesson. We are lonelier than ever even though we have thousands of friends in the virtual environment. Our happiness has gone down the drain on Saturday as we spin in the vicious circle of our own ego psychosis. Humanity is collapsing miserably in the nets of lies and diabolical deception. All seems lost when hopelessness knocks insistently on the door. We are experiencing a spiritual drought more intense than ever, beyond the late attempts to hide behind our fingers, ignoring reality. The Christian himself tends to abandon the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14, 6), chained by the lusty charm of temptation under the light of the moon, in the tango of PR. Even those who serve with typical tenacity end up confusing the yoke of the Cross, as the joy and reality of the Resurrection, with the yoke of the letter of the law, exacerbating the human component in an aggressive way, to the detriment of the "spiritual and theological meaning"¹. Thus, the Christological horizon of the apostolic exhortation of that "royal priesthood, holy nation, people agonized by God" (I Peter 2, 9) as an expression of the nature of the Church is lost².

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to liturgical theology*, translated by Vasile Bârzu, Sophia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 93.

² Nikolas Lossky, *Theology of liturgical music*, Renaștea Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, p. 34.

I. Prayer as a cure for humanity's spiritual turmoil

It is here, at the point of convergence of humanity's spiritual turmoil, that what we call prayer intervenes. What is prayer, what is the time for prayer, how is it practiced, what are the requests we can make in prayer, these are questions answered by the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Fathers. Prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. And more than that. Prayer, above words and sacramental liturgical singing, is the breath of the Church, our daily bread (Matthew 4, 4), the spiritual guide, the measure and pavement of faith of good works, the earnest of the Kingdom of Heaven, the girdle of the Mother of God (as boldly suggested Saint Gregory Palama - because it unites us under the girdle of the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ), the precious gift of the Holy Spirit, the sacrifice of humility, the conversation of the mind with God³, time and the dialogue of eternity⁴. The church is certainly the ideal place of prayer, especially in the liturgical/eucharistic plan, as it is the House of God and "My house will be called a house of prayer" (Matthew 21, 13). According to the Holy Fathers, the time for prayer is the whole life of man, because that is what the Savior Christ Himself asks: "Watch, but pray all the time" (Luke 21, 36). And in order for the prayer to become a pleasant offering to God, it must be brought with a chosen preparation, in complete peace: "if you bring your gift to the altar and remember there that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, before the altar, and go first and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and bring your gift" (Matthew 5, 23-24).

About the practice, requests and meaning of true prayer, which becomes a sacrifice when it is uttered from a broken and humble heart (Psalm 50, v. 18), St. John the Ladder testifies to us: "Prayer is, according to its appropriation, the accompaniment and union of man with God; and after the work, the sustainer of the world. It is reconciliation of God; the mother of tears and their daughter; atonement for sins, bridge over temptations, middle wall in front of troubles; the crushing of wars, the work of angels, the nourishment of all incorporeal beings, the joy to come, the boundless work, the source of virtues, the cause of charismas, the unseen increase, the nourishment of the soul, the enlightenment of the mind, the ax of despair, the proof of hope, the dispelling of sorrow, the wealth of monks, the treasury of hermits, the diminution of anger, the mirror of progress, the showing of measures, the revelation of the inner state, the discovery of what is to come, the sign of glory"⁵.

It is no coincidence that the scriptural exhortation is to pray without ceasing (I Thessalonians 5, 17), a statement that seems to be confusing. How can a man sit unceasingly with his head bowed, his eyes closed, and his hands folded in prayer? Well, here it is not about a specific position, as we see in Eastern practices (fashionable, moreover, in postmodern society), but about an attitude of continuous obedience and surrender to God, which we carry with us all the time the time. Every conscious moment of our life must be lived to the fullest, aware of the fact that God is with us and that He is actively involved in our thoughts and actions, that is, He is constantly exercising the divine providence on us, provided and with respect to free will.

³ **Evagrie the Monk**, *Word about prayer*, in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 1, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Electronic edition, Apologeticum, 2003, p. 75

⁴ **Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi**, *Regulae Sancti Pachomii*, Operum Tomus II, translatio Latina, in "Patrologiae Latinae", Jacques-Paul Migne, tomus XXIII, Paris, 1845, col. 78.

⁵ **St. John the Ladder**, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in "Philocaly or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 9, word 28, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Publisher of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1980, p. 403.

That is why the Fathers of the Church called the fervent prayer of the heart⁶ as the union of man with God. Because human reason cannot encompass divinity, it must humble itself and descend into the heart of man, which becomes the church and throne of God, under a Eucharistic aspect: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him and he with Me" (Revelation 3, 20)⁷. The natural question arises: is the contemporary man still, caught in the web of spiritually sterile daily life, able to pray and truly understand the meaning of prayer? The answer will be given by each person within himself. Theologically speaking, we can firmly affirm that this way, of uniting man with God through prayer and, implicitly, of his deification, is possible especially in the liturgy (community) and, exceptionally, in the heart of each one of us (personal, private). The Church, as a pillar and foundation of truth, is the one through which and in which contemporary man can get rid of sin to embrace divine grace and full freedom, towards the de-formation of the human being, in its full aspect, according to the Mariological model⁸ "let it be unto me according to your word!" (Luke 1, 38). For God has many places in which to dwell, but the heart of man is dearest to him, as St. Nicolae Velimirovici teaches us.

Why should the human heart be desolate of pride, hatred, envy, lies and all sin when it can be filled with the grace of God? For through the grace of prayer, through his likeness to God as a work of virtues⁹, through the soul cleansed of passions and a pure heart, man meets the Creator personally, knows Him mystically and loves Him above nature¹⁰. "This knowledge requires the engagement of the whole person in prayer and service, through love for God and neighbor. It becomes not only an intellectual perception of the Creator at the level of the mind, but turns into much more than that, into a "spiritual feeling", transiting a perception that is no longer purely material, nor purely spiritual. In prayer, according to the method, man is called to the communion of God's life, and this true knowledge of God. God remains inaccessible in His Being, man being able to become God only through grace or energy"¹¹.

In Romanian theology, father Dumitru Stăniloae calls prayer the secret of man's union with God, a permanent, immutable secret, through which man knows, through direct discovery, a part of the endless depths of God. But this humble descent of man becomes for him a source of purifying ascension, of permanent communion with the Living One, in prayer which is the light of the soul¹², on the path of the forgiveness of sins, towards the acquisition of salvation and eternal life. Prayer as a dialogue towards eternity with God is eminently based on humility, since humility is the very garment in which God Himself dresses, followed by repentance and

⁶ **Theoclitus the Dionysian**, *Dialogues from Athos*, vol. 2: "Theology of the prayer of the mind", translated by Rev. Prof. Ioan I. Ică, Deisis Publishing House, Alba-Iulia, 1994, pp. 41-42.

⁷ **Petrov, G. D.** (2021). *The hypostatic union – the foundation of the theandry of the Church*. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 22(1), 804–811. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v22i1.4364>

⁸ **Saint Gregory Palamas**, *the Virgin Mary and Peter the Athonite* - prototypes of the Hesychastic life and other spiritual writings, Writings II, translated by Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2005, p. 289-322.

⁹ **Marcu Ascetul**, *About those who believe that they are guided by deeds*, in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 1, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr Dumitru Staniloae, Electronic edition, Apologeticum Publishing House, 2003, p. 252.

¹⁰ **Vladimir Lossky**, *Mystical Theology of the Church of the East*, Bonifaciu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 186.

¹¹ **John Meyendorff**, *Byzantine Theology, Historical trends and doctrinal themes*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, p. 115.

¹² **Isaiah the Hermit**, *Twenty-nine words*, "Word IV. About the conscience of those who sit in cells", in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 12, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Harisma Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 50-51.

effort, that is, by asceticism, through which man becomes a friend of prayer¹³, as Saint Paisie from Neamț, one of our great hesychists.

II. The lordly prayer - the basis of all prayers

The most beautiful prayer and the basis of any prayer is certainly the "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6, 9-13), which can also be called the "Jesus Prayer", rather than what we call today with this title or as "the prayer heart" (hesychast prayer). The Savior Jesus Christ, the Son and Word of God is the name in which the prayer must be made (John 16, 23), because not every Jesus is also Christ, just as not every Christ is the Son and Word of God since false Christs will come (Matthew 24:24). But prayer must be done with the whole being, with the whole mind, with a pure heart (Matthew 5, 8), with fear of God, with faith and love, approaching liturgically, sacramentally, eucharistically, rejecting "all worldly care": "if Moses, asking to approach the burning pyre, could not approach it until he threw off his shoes, why don't you also detach yourself from every passionate thought, if you want to see the Most High and talk to Him"¹⁴.

Through his sermon and wonderful deeds, the Savior sensitized people to mutual, eucharistic love. The norm of the Gospel is precisely this: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22, 39), which is only possible through the transformation of the heart, through prayer¹⁵. The supreme guide for all Christians remains the double commandment of Christ, of the unlimited love of God and of the love of fellow men, according to the measure of one's own love. On the way to respond to this divine command and considering the challenges of our time, an ever-renewed reflection is required, on the difficult combination between internalization and employment in society, so that internalization does not mean indifference to the concrete world that needs us, and the engagement in the service of the fellows should not be devoid of the spiritual dimension that gives it strength. That is why true prayer, say all the Holy Fathers, is a gift from God¹⁶.

Father Cleopa Ilie, paraphrasing Holy Fathers such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, Saint John the Ladder, St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Anthony the Great, St. Isaac the Syrian and even Saint Paisie from Neamț, talks about the 7 steps of prayer, starting from the lowest, called "soul prayer" (prayer with the lips, tongue, mouth) and up to its higher forms (prayer with the mind, with the heart, self-moving, spiritual or seeing with the spirit). Walking on these steps of prayer, each according to his ability, man ends up praying incessantly and his life becomes a prayer, regardless of time, place, and space. The exhortation that emerges from the spiritual words of Father Cleopa Ilie, regarding prayer, is to persevere until the end of life in our direct dialogue with God and not to allow ourselves to a lower level of spiritual ploughing, lest we fall irreparably in the temptation of sin: "this people is close to Me, with their mouth and lips they honor Me, but with their heart they are far from Me" (Isaiah 29, 13), especially since the first 3 steps of the prayer are within everyone's reach: "with my voice to the Lord I cried" (Psalms 141, 1).

¹³ **Ilie Ecdicul**, *Moral Heads*, in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 4, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Publishing House Tipografia Archidiecezana, Sibiu, 1948, p. 294.

¹⁴ **Evagrie the Monk**, *Word about prayer*, in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 1, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Electronic edition, Apologeticum, 2003, p. 93.

¹⁵ **Tomas Spidlik**, *Spirituality of the Christian East*, part II, "The Prayer", translation Diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1998, p. 277.

¹⁶ **Petrov, G. D.** (2021). *The relationship between the priesthood and the church from the perspective of unity*. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 22(1), 812–818. <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v22i1.4365>

But what do we do with those who don't even want to engage in this minimal effort? What cure do we find for them? Here are questions to which we must offer urgent solutions, such as the "school of prayer"¹⁷ without omitting the parable of the Sower, the parable of the talents, the sacramental mission of the clergy, the threefold ministry and the mission of the laity. Holy Scripture gives us true models of plenary prayer, such as the Magi of the East, who worship the King of Heaven in all perfection, eloquent, contemplative, moving, seeing. This worship of the Magi represents the prototype of the prayer of the heart, having as its foundation the very Gospel (John 14, 13) and its highest form: "once the air of the heart is purified, it is impossible for the divine light of Jesus not to shine in the heart"¹⁸.

The prayer of Jesus (better said to Jesus) is not easy to digest, as some theologians have considered and have fallen into the trap of presenting it only from the perspective of a physical exercise, with spiritual implications, according to the oriental model of yogic practice, which has no connection with Christianity. This prayer represents the bimillennial path of the entire Orthodox monasticism, from history to practice, from preaching to teaching and from the Gospel to the Resurrection, the synthesis of the authentic Christian faith, the righteous conscience and the earnest of the Kingdom. That is precisely why practicing it without a spiritual guide can hide unimaginable spiritual dangers. "The practice of the Jesus prayer begins with its simple repetition, it begins to move incessantly on the lips, and, on the inside, to gather the mind in the heart and to sit unceasingly, before the Lord, and to leave all other thoughts, but above all to fall with brokenness and humility before the Lord Savior. The beginning of this habit is put through a saying, as often as possible, of this prayer, in the heart. The thick utterance gathers the mind together, to stand before the Lord. The establishment of this arrangement inside is accompanied by the warming of the heart and the banishing of thoughts, even the simplest ones, not only the passionate ones. When the fire of our attachment to God will begin to glow in the heart, then with it a pastoral settlement of the heart will settle inside, with a humble fall of the mind before the Lord. This is where our own toil reaches, with the help of God's grace. The power of this prayer is not in the words, but in the disposition of the mind and heart. Through the prayer of Jesus, we should not seek to feel a physical warmth in the heart, but to seek for the fire of grace to drip in the heart and to begin the unceasing prayer, through which we will determine the state of grace"¹⁹.

The conclusion of the hesychists is that, in order to make yourself heard by God, you must first learn to listen and be silent²⁰, as the Son of God Himself was also the Son of silence, for "he came like a lamb to the slaughter and like a sheep without a voice before those who cut it, so He did not open His mouth" (Isaiah 53, 7) and as the right Joseph is mentioned in the Gospel without saying a word, because it represents the prayer of the mind made in the heart²¹, as interprets father Dumitru Stăniloae, paraphrasing Saint Grigorie Palama. From here we draw the conclusion that this journey of man towards deification passes through three stages of spiritual perfection: purification of the heart, enlightenment of the mind and deification. This journey is carried out synergistically, with the help of divine energies and through the participation of man, since God works, and man cooperates. When God's grace cleanses man,

¹⁷ **Antonie de Suroj**, *School of Prayer*, Polovragi Monastery, 1994, p. 84.

¹⁸ **Saint Isihie Sinait**, *About sobriety and virtue*, in "Filocalia or collection from the writings of the Holy Fathers that show how man can be purified, enlightened and perfected", vol. 4, translation, introduction and notes by Rev. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Staniloae, Publishing house Tipografia Arhidiecezăna, Sibiu, 1948, p. 86.

¹⁹ **Saint Teofan Zăvorătu**, *Învățăături și scrisori despre viața creștină*, traducere de Elena Dulgheru și Richard Sârbu, Editura Sofia, București, 2001, p. 4, 28-29.

²⁰ **Paul Evdokimov**, *Ages of spiritual life*, Christiana Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 175-176.

²¹ **Dumitru Stăniloae**, *Ascetica și Mistica Ortodoxă*, Editura IBMBOR, București, 2002, p. 292-293.

it is called the stage of purification, when it enlightens him, we are dealing with the stage of enlightenment, and when it deifies him, it is the last stage, that of deification. God's grace is not non-hypostatic, but enipostatic, and is given "in the Person of Jesus Christ". To achieve this ideal, it is necessary for man to cooperate, to respond to these uncreated energies of God and not to fall into heresy but to permanently remain a living member of His Church.

We say this because prayer, in its highest spiritual form and not only, represents an unfathomable, experientially apophatic mystery of faith towards eternity with God, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Through and in prayer, the teaching of the Church is not only passed through the filter of reason, but of the reason from the heart, without the exhaustive claim of the theological treatment of Revelation, towards which the reason of any authentic Christian thinker and liver tends. Nor is living the faith by evading its rationality a solution, and precisely this aspect is emphasized in the prayer (especially in the hesychast prayer), which combines the two in a sublime way. Even so, we are still witnessing a theological current that tends predominantly towards a strong intellectualism, while spirituality has acquired an exaggerated pietistic tinge in its turn of feeling²². This explains why in the West, for example, that "cult of the heart of Jesus"²³ appeared, which promoted the primacy of love in Christian living, an aspect neglected by scholastic theologians, who reduced the heart to a simple psychology.

Orthodoxy, which has preserved the fidelity of scriptural interpretation, stands at the point of convergence between the two cultural models, pacifying and unifying, as determined, from the very beginning, by Alexandrian, Syriac and Cappadocian theology. For example, from Saint Diadoch of Photica, through scriptural arguments from a semantic perspective, we understand that the term heart in Holy Scripture sums up *noūs* and *kardía*, as a place of contemplation, from where thoughts spring, the place of will and moral life, of thoughtful decisions, the place where the spiritual life is born and the prayer room. The heart is the spiritual battlefield of every Christian, a continuous battle, fought even in its members, as the Holy Fathers teach us. Because the heart is the place of the two realms of darkness and light, as father Dumitru Stăniloae testifies²⁴, taking certain theses from the Philocal Fathers.

That is why we need constant prayer, so that the Son of God Himself fights with us and for us, through the voluntary capitulation of the human being in the source of divine love. Only in this way can we remove from our heart's evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, stealth, false testimony, and blasphemy (Matthew 15, 19) to make room for the Kingdom of God (Luke 17, 21). Through this prayer, as perceived by Orthodox theology, becomes Birth, Cross, Sacrifice, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension for each individual Christian, subjectively. The incursion of the mind into the depths of the heart leads to the intensification of the spiritual life and the unity of the two poles through unceasing prayer for the discovery of the Kingdom within us.

Conclusions

If the Church of the first centuries could not think of excluding the body from the union with God through prayer, the Incarnation of the Son of God being precisely the unshakable basis of this positive conception of the body²⁵, as a collaborator of the soul and an organ of its

²² Marko Ivan Rupnik, *Words about man. I. Person - being of Easter*, translated by Maria-Cornelia Oros, Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1997, p. 122.

²³ Vasile Ignătescu, *Cult of the heart of Jesus among Catholics*, in "Orthodoxia", vol. VII, no. 3, Bucharest, 1955, p. 403.

²⁴ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetics and Orthodox Mysticism*, IBMBOR Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 74 and 126.

²⁵ Jonathan Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, translated by Timotei Manta, Casa Cărții Publishing House, Oradea, 2007, p. 122.

manifestation, a prompt helper (through asceticism) in prayer²⁶, all the more we are obliged today to continue, with the awareness of the lack of exhaustiveness, the treatment of such a beautiful theme, with the humility due and imposed by the comparison, paraphrasing a personal conclusion in the paradigm of the words of St. Basil the Great: "These I had something to say about this topic. If you think that's enough, let's end the discussion here. If it seems to you that something is missing, I will not be angry if you will diligently apply yourself to the research, and by questions, without a spirit of argument, you will fill in what needs to be known. And the Lord will give, either through me or through others, the fulfillment of what is missing, through the knowledge that the Spirit gives to those worthy of His gifts"²⁷.

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