
I N T E R V I E W

Editor's Note: We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Metropolitan Anthony for honoring us with this interview. Also we want to thank our dear friend Nicholas Chapman for braving the rigors of an unresponsive FAX machine, a frantic 11th hour phone call to the U.S., and a flat tire somewhere on the streets of London in order to do this interview on our behalf.

AGAIN: Many of our readers come from a non-liturgical Christian background. What advice can you offer for making liturgical prayer personal and from the heart, rather than repetitious and mechanical?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: All the liturgical prayers which we possess came from the hearts of the saints who composed them. They are not just ready made prayers which we can recite and call it quits. In order to be able to pray them with our mind and with our heart, we must learn the feelings and the attitudes of those saints who composed them.

It is not simply a matter of just using liturgical prayers in Church, but of meditating on them during the course of the week. We should read them thoughtfully and meditate upon them—not as a curious exercise, but thinking deeply about what they mean. We must try to gather from the thoughts and, at times, even the words of the various prayers, that which we possess of a similar experience. Then, when we come to Church, these glimpses of vision will come to life when the Church prays.

Once the liturgical prayers are prayed in Church, they should not be repeated at home.

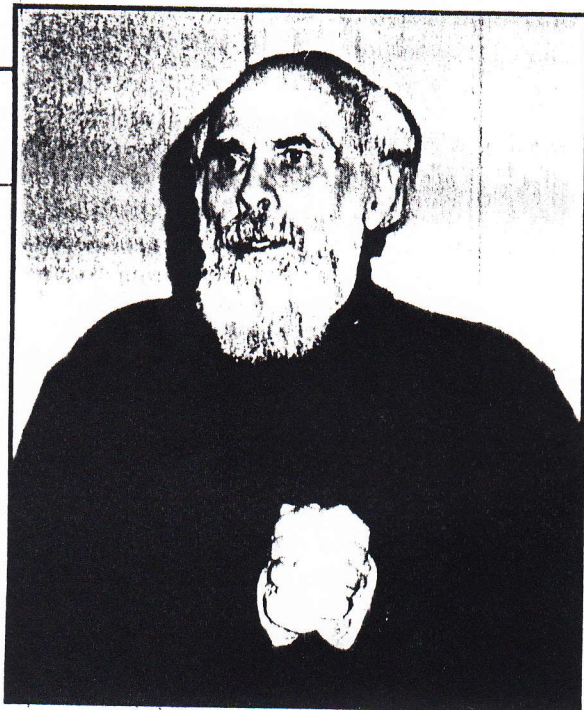
must listen with all our heart, all our life, all our perception, and allow the prayers simply to penetrate us, to pervade us without stopping one minute to ask ourselves, "What are they doing to me? How do I respond to this prayer?" That we can do better at another moment, but not during the liturgical service.

Something else which I believe to be important in learning to pray liturgical prayers is this: When we use prayers which were composed by the saints, we should pray to these saints for enlightenment—ask them to uphold our prayers and take them upward to God together with us. And if we do these things, I think we will gradually grow into the prayers themselves and into the liturgical action.

AGAIN: Is it hypocritical to pray a liturgical prayer and not consciously share the spiritual experience of that prayer? For instance, is it wrong to pray a prayer of repentance, when personally we may feel cold or indifferent to sin?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: No, not if we are sincere. If we start by saying to God, "I do not have the depths of perception, the depth of repentance, embodied in this prayer, but I am at least intellectually aware of being separated from You. I am separated from my neighbor, broken up within myself, and I read this prayer in the words of the saint—in words better and truer than mine—so that it can gradually shape my inner self."

It is not enough to pray the prayer just to be "on the safe side." It must be done in such a way that we can gradually



Metropolitan Anthony

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ON PRAYER

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composer perceived life, beauty, meaning—whatever he embodied in his service. But if you go and allow yourself to be carried by the music, pervaded by it, shaped by it, gradually you will become more and more aware of the things which the composer had to convey.

AGAIN: Why is prayer so difficult when it is such an essential part of our Christian life?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: I think there are two reasons. The first is that we are only dimly aware of our need for prayer. We know because we are Christian people that we should pray and have certain attitudes to life. But we haven't got them—and therefore, what can we do? We cannot pray with all our heart and mind when our heart and mind are divided.

Secondly, prayer is sometimes made more difficult because we fail to make it a part of our own experience. In order to pray sincerely, we must pray within our experience, not within the experience of others. In the multiplicity and variety of Orthodox prayers, to begin with, we should choose those prayers which make sense to us. Later we can try to use others that are more difficult. In this way, we can speak these prayers in our own name, as it were, caught inside with the words of prayer. If at any moment we find we can't do this, then we should say to God, "I cannot pronounce these words from conviction, but I *can* pronounce them as an act of faith and the sharing in the experience of others."

For instance, if you come to words like "forgive as I forgive," you can stop at that moment and say, "Lord, I do not forgive everyone to perfection. All I can do is to say, 'I wish

I could.' Forgive me at least to the extent to which it is healing and good for me." The same applies to other prayers in which we ask for something, or we proclaim something, and yet we are not up to feeling it deeply.

AGAIN: Is it possible for the layperson living in the hectic and frenzied world of the 20th century to lead the sort of lifestyle you are describing? Does a life of prayer lend itself to the non-monastic as well as the monastic?

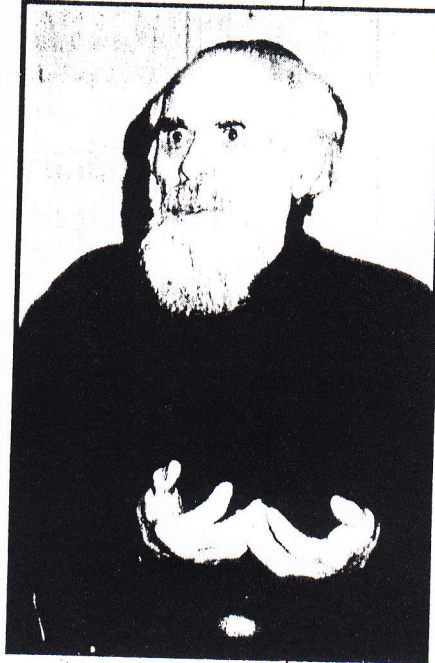
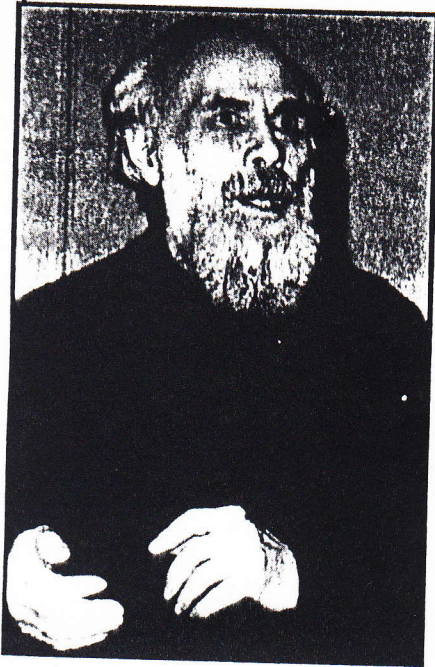
METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: I think it does, perfectly, provided we integrate prayer to life, and life to prayer.

If we try to ignore life, and pray imagining that we are attempting to be contemplatives, it cannot work. Our concerns will carry us away from prayer. But if we realize that the whole of life is a situation in which God has placed us to bring our faith where there is no faith, to bring hope where there is no hope, to bring light—even if it is a very dim light, a spark—where there is only darkness or twilight, to be salt to prevent corruption, to bring a flicker of love where there is lovelessness, then there is no evil or distracting situation into which we cannot enter in a prayerful way. We can say, "Lord, you have sent me into this twilight and this darkness. Be with me and let me be Your presence."

When we pray in that way, we can bring the situation to God. Very often people say, "I would like to pray undistractedly, and yet concerns press upon me." Why try to push the concerns out? Very often they are God's concerns, more than ours.

Before we try to be with God in serenity and peace and

*I can live without bread,
I can't live
without flowers.*



stillness, we should turn to Him and say, "Lord, here are a few things that worry and torment me." Someone's illness, someone's enmity of mind, even small things like the worry of a child preparing for an exam—there is nothing too small for God. Present the whole thing to God in detail, saying everything that you've got to say. And then make an act of faith, and say to God, "I have put it in Your hands, I will now leave it in Your hands for a short while."

You can add, if you are honest, "I don't think that I'll be able to leave it for long, because I don't trust You enough. I will take it back because I feel in my worry this problem is more central, perhaps, than You do." (You will discover later that this is not true, but still we must often start that way.) And then, once you have given it to God, say, "Now Lord, let us be together for a short while."

You would do precisely the same thing, would you not, with a wife or a friend. You would come loaded with worry, and you couldn't simply enjoy the company, the happiness of being together. You would first say, "Oh, I've had such a heavy day," and tell your wife or your mother or your friend of the worry of the day. Having unburdened yourself you could then sit back and say, "Ah, how lovely it is to be together."

There is a story in the life of a western saint, an 18th century Frenchman. He was a parish priest in a small village, and there was an old man who used to sit for hours and hours in the Church. One day the priest said to him, "Granddad, what are you doing sitting there hour after hour? Your lips do not move in prayer, your fingers don't run around the rosary, what

are you doing?" And the old man said, "He looks at me, I look at Him, and we're so happy together." But you can't do that until you have handed over or shared the worry. Then you can do it. And if you take it that way, then everything in life presents for you a situation of praying.

AGAIN: Is it a failure, or merely a necessary adaptation to our fast-paced lives today, that we often don't find the time to spend fifteen minutes or half an hour set aside solely for prayer before work?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: I think it is a failure of the same kind that a man would make who said to his wife, "I have no time for you, but I'm earning your bread, I'm buying your presents, what else do you want of me?" That's no relationship. Perhaps the wife would say, "Please, don't work additional hours in order to buy me a new muff or a new bag, but spend this time with me." The only thing that is of value between God and you is the way in which you relate.

At times there are things that are more important than prayer. I remember a friend whose parents were atrociously poor. One day he brought flowers to his mother. I flared up and said, "Look, do you realize there is no bread in this house?" And the mother said

to me, "Don't scold him. I can live without bread, I can't live without flowers."

That is the kind of relationship we need to establish with God. You can't speak in terms of half an hour or fifteen minutes; it is not a question of time. If you look at your wife and then you say, "Darling, I love you," it takes a split second and everything has happened. If you feel called one day, you might make a long discourse to her about the way in which marriage bonds create a oneness for eternity. She will probably listen and wait until you are finished and then say, "Darling, I must go cook." And God would react in the same way.

Unless you have a desire to be with God, what is the point in making discourse with Him? It is a relationship. It is a friendship. So if you don't feel any desire to spend five minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour with Him within twenty-four hours, perhaps you should ask yourself questions about what you really feel about Him. Is that the way you would act toward your wife? Your friends? It's just as simple as that.

AGAIN: There is often perceived to be a tension between private prayer which is personal, and liturgical prayer which is corporate. Do you think that this is a real tension, and if it's not, how do you integrate personal prayer with corporate prayer?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: I would say what comes first and foremost is your personal prayer, the way in which you relate personally to God. It's by having personal prayer, relating to God personally day in, day out, that when you come

into a liturgical sequence which is intensely personal, and at the same time greater than you, that you can bring into it, or receive from it, the spirit of prayer.

When you come into a liturgical service you must allow yourself to be immersed in God—immersed in prayer. And it is only if you are immersed in God and in prayer that you take part with others. It's not by singing, not by serving, not by acting, not by doing anything. It's by going into God in a situation which is peculiarly intense because the prayer of all the Church carries you, and you carry the prayers of others.

And then there is, of course, within the liturgical prayer the sacramental action. But you will take part in this sacramental action only to the extent to which you are in God. If you come to a service, Orthodox or not Orthodox, having been an Orthodox or not an Orthodox, and just stand there waiting for its end, you are not a partaker of the service. If you come to Communion just because it is a Sunday or a feastday or because it is your namesday or because everyone does, you may well not receive Communion at all.

There is a very powerful passage in Saint Symeon the New Theologian, when he says that God is fire, but He is our Saviour. And when you come to receive Communion unworthily, without awareness of what you are doing, He does allow it, but He retires from the bread and wine which is given you. You receive bread and wine, nothing else, because otherwise you would be reduced to ashes. And I think a non-Orthodox who is immersed in God during an Orthodox service is infinitely closer to the liturgy and even to the sacramental Communion in spirit, than an Orthodox who just stands there, hoping that the service will not be too long.

AGAIN: So personal prayer comes before corporate prayer and is necessary for true corporate prayer?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: I think it's a precondition in the same way in which a love relationship is the precondition for any communication in language, or the love of a group of people and their mutual trust—their friendship—is a precondition to whatever words may pass between them. Otherwise it would be a mechanical exercise in which you can show your knowledge, demonstrate to others that you are well read, but you would have contributed nothing. Your soul would have had nothing to do with it.

AGAIN: Is it good to pray first at home by ourselves before we come to liturgy on a Sunday?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: Yes, provided these prayers do not kill the spirit of prayer—provided you turn to God and say, "Lord, I'm going to attend the Liturgy, I'm going to the place which is dedicated to You. It's Your home, I'm going to meet a number of people who love You probably better than I do, who know how to pray better than I pray. What wonder

If it helps you to read the prayers, do, but don't imitate so many prayers, or those particular prayers, pray to God! If you need the support of the prayers of the saints, use them. If you feel that by using a prayer you prevent your spirit from flying, your soul from dancing before God, joy and love to be in you, then don't do it. I know it's impious to say that, but it's my conviction. I'm 75 now, I've had some time to reflect, I've been a priest for 40 years plus, and that is what I feel. You know the Apostles and the early Christians had none of the prayers which we possess, and how alive to God they were!

AGAIN: Let's conclude by changing the subject slightly. The 21st century is rapidly approaching. What do you see to be the future of Orthodoxy in the West—particularly with regard to the divisions which now exist along national lines? And how as laypeople can we work towards a true unity that overcomes the national and cultural barriers?

METROPOLITAN ANTHONY: Well, for one thing, living in the West erodes gradually a lot of cultural and national barriers. The first generation of emigres spoke Greek, Russian, Arabic, and all the languages of the East or the North. Now the majority of the young speak English, German, French, and so forth. In that sense a common language is being created that unites. If the original language subsists, it is a blessing, because to know two languages or three gives you a depth of perception of what the words mean, of what the thoughts mean, which one language cannot do to the same extent. So in that sense our ethnicity can remain whole without becoming a total wall of separation.

The second thing is that we must remember that every nationality, every ethnic group, has something to contribute to each other group in terms of the knowledge of God, the experience of God, the way in which this experience has been expressed throughout the centuries. So we must be able to possess our national heritage, our spirituality, and share it, because it is the sum total of the parts that makes Orthodoxy.

Next, we must be aware that unity is the unity of true Christians. If we share of the same Orthodox faith, and if we live accordingly, we become closer and closer to one another, whatever inability we have to speak the same language.

And lastly, I believe that unity will be achieved from the people and not from the hierarchy. The hierarchy has to overcome problems which may be theological, canonical, historical, diplomatic. The people do not have these problems. I'm absolutely certain that if people of different nationalities feel that they are brothers in Christ, brothers in Orthodoxy, and they become one on that level, sooner or later the hierarchs will discover that they are the only ones to be separated from one another. Perhaps then they will come to their senses.

AGAIN: May God indeed do that