

A MOST ESSENTIAL HABIT

Winning the Battle for Personal Prayer

By Marc Dunaway

Some time ago, a friend picked up a new prayer book from our parish book table. Smiling, he held it up to me and said: "I think I'll buy this—the others I've tried haven't worked too well yet." I laughed. He laughed. It was a frustration we both had experienced.

There's no doubt about it. Consistent prayer is the hardest thing any Christian is called to do. For years I knew prayer was supposed to be an important part of the Christian life, and for years I really did want to pray. The question was, how? The purely conversational-style prayer of my earlier Christian training was fine now and then, but it failed miserably over the long-haul. What I needed was a solid platform upon which an entire life-style of prayer could be formed.

The turning point came through a series of taped lectures on "Prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition."¹ After discovering this series, I gathered once a week on Tuesday nights with a group of men from our Church. We ate pizza, and began listening intently to a two-hour lecture on prayer. It changed our lives.

A "RULE OF PRAYER"

To begin with we learned a new definition for prayer: "Prayer is the conscious and purposeful act of uniting one's whole self, body and soul, mind and heart, to God the Father, in and through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in order to know God and His will, in order to do it." This was a bombshell. It meant prayer was not so much talking to God in order to try and change Him, as much as uniting ourselves to God in order that He might change us. This idea seemed both a little frightening and yet at the same time deeply attractive.

Next we learned where this kind of prayer needs to begin personally. It starts with a "Rule of Prayer." This phrase was somewhat familiar, but my notion of what it was—based on bits and pieces of information, as well as on my own perusal of page after page of "Morning," "Evening,"

1. This series of lectures is from a course given by Fr. Thomas Hopko at St. Vladimir's Seminary. It is available on cassette tapes from Light and Life Publishing Co., 4836 Park Glen Road, Minneapolis, MN 55416.

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and even “Noon” prayers in various prayer books—often overwhelmed and burdened me down. I had tried to use these prayer books several times over the years (certainly the first few weeks of every Lent), but always ended in frustration, exasperated at my own weakness and lack of discipline.

So for years I fell back on all the usual excuses. I was obviously too busy to pray. I had no perfect place to pray. I had no suitable “spiritual father” to guide me in prayer. (Whew! What a relief! Everyone knows you shouldn’t even attempt any prayer whatsoever without such a spiritual guide.) So I didn’t pray. I decided that my reading, my study, my regular attendance at church services, and my whatever else would have to “count for” prayer for me. In the meantime I would read about prayer and simply wait for the day until I was ready.

Another bombshell. According to Orthodox tradition, every Christian—every priest, every monk, every layman, every mother with a dozen children and housework to last ‘til kingdom come—must have a Rule of Prayer. But—and this is the key—there is not one universally applicable Rule that everyone must follow. In fact, each Rule must be and will be uniquely personal, according to one’s abilities and circumstances in life. It must, however, be a “Rule.”

This means it must be at a regular time every day, devoted exclusively to the act of “uniting one’s self to God,” in a form that is clear and consistent, and not dependent on moods or feelings. Furthermore—and perhaps this was the most important thing we learned—a Rule must be based not on what you want to do or feel like doing or even feel you ought to do, but rather on what you can do and on what you sense God is calling and enabling you to do. Generally speaking, then, a Rule will be short rather than long, perhaps even very short by some standards and expectations.

This idea of a Rule was liberating,

even exciting—to think that one might actually begin a journey toward knowing God, down a path blazed by saints and proven successful. This did not mean prayer would now be easy. Constant discipline and effort were required: “blood to the end,” as one old monk put it. But now it seemed possible, and my desire to pray began to grow. We began to formulate exactly what things were necessary to establish a Rule. Below are some of the factors we considered.

A TIME AND A PLACE TO PRAY

When and how many times a day will I pray, and how will it fit into my (and my family’s) routine? The time is not strictly limited to morning, evening, or noon. It can be any time in a day that is predictable and regular, any time that will work for each individual. One thing I quickly learned about morning prayers, however, was that the time to fight (and win!) the battle of getting up “just a few minutes earlier to pray” is not just after the alarm goes off in the morning. It begins the night before by making a determined effort to get to bed “just a few minutes earlier.”

Where in my house (or other place) will I pray? We all need to have a place where our time of prayer will not be interrupted, seen, or overheard, since prayers are often said aloud. I personally had to come to an agreement with my wife and family that this was important and that they would have to allow me the “space” to do it.

THE PHYSICAL SIDE OF PRAYER

What will be the physical arrangement of icons, books, a cross, a sheaf, etc.? Will I use candles (or oil lamps) and if so, when and how? Will I use incense, and if so, when and how? Will I use any other physical items (prayer ropes, etc.) to aid me in my attention at prayer? All of these things are part of the tradition of Orthodoxy and can be helpful tools in uniting soul and body. For

ample, the routine of lighting a candle before an icon can give a definite beginning, a focal point to help get our mind on track. One pitfall to avoid, though, is imagining that the perfect arrangement of beautiful icons and a beautiful cross with beautiful candles on a beautiful shelf, all of them facing perfectly East, will automatically bring about perfect and beautiful prayer. It won't. This is the mistake my friend and I laughed at earlier in blaming our frustrations on a particular prayer book.

Will I stand, kneel, or sit, or use a combination of these? Will I bow or prostrate myself at any time? Will I make the sign of the cross or raise my hands at any time? These physical things help us maintain our attention and turn our bodies from being enemies of prayer into allies.

What adjustments might I need to make in my Rule when I travel, and what items will I need to bring with me? Anyone who has travelled and tried to keep a Rule of Prayer will testify how difficult this is and how important it is to commit to it ahead of time.

THE CONTENT OF PRAYER

The answers to the above questions gave us the external framework for establishing a personal Rule of Prayer. Still left, however, was the question of content. What are the basic ingredients of prayer?

Orthodox tradition provides a basic outline that begins with a simple invocation of the Name of God, that is, to make the sign of the cross and say, "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." This is followed by the prayer to the Holy Spirit, "O Heavenly King," and then by what are known as the "Trisagion Prayers." These latter end with the Lord's Prayer, and if nothing else this prayer alone should form the center of any Rule, since it was given by Christ Himself and contains all the petitions proper and necessary for one seeking to know God.

After this beginning a Rule may and

will often include some psalms (ideally sung, not read), other written prayers or hymns (here is where prayer books may be useful), Scripture reading, the Nicene Creed, a time of silence, intercessions for other people, and a conclusion. These are the basic elements of a Rule.

A word needs to be said here, though, about the attitude of prayer. There is no magic worked by the mere recitation of syllables. In other words, liturgical or "written" prayers are not just to be "read." The goal in using them is to unite the mind and the heart in the words, that is, to pour one's self into them so that they become one's own, molding, teaching, and then eventually leading to prayer in one's own words.

What we needed to do next was to form these elements into a personal Rule by answering once again, very specifically and concretely, the following questions.

What other prayers or hymns, if any, will I add to the basic outline that begins with the Invocation and ends with the Lord's Prayer, and where will I add them?

Will I include any psalms in my Rule, and if so, what psalms, and how will I sing (or read) them?

Will reading the Scriptures be part of my Rule, and if so, specifically what Scriptures will I read or what lectionary will I follow?

Will a time of silence be a part of my Rule, and if so, will I use any meditative verse or prayer to help me control my thoughts?

Having worked through these questions and settled on that to which I personally felt God was calling me, there were only two things left to do. First, according to Orthodox tradition, I needed to submit my Rule to someone for feedback and direction. It might have been nice if this were a wise, old monk from Mount Athos or a starets from one of the great Russian monasteries. This being slightly unworkable it seemed more likely that my pastor

or another Christian brother whom I respected would get the task. Why take this step? It is simply an expression of the humility which must accompany any desire for true prayer. It allows someone beside me to see and judge what I am doing. It also gives me someone to turn to in the event that discouragement sets in, because in my pride I've once again bitten off more than I can chew.

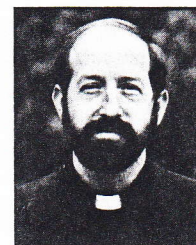
The last thing left to do, of course, was to begin.

A CALL TO PRAYER

Now I want to encourage you. Perhaps you have been frustrated with prayer. Perhaps you are still looking for the perfect prayer book as I was, coming up with a million good reasons why you have not yet begun to pray. I encourage you to quit waiting, to quit reading still one more article about prayer and instead begin to form a Rule of Prayer. Start humbly and simply. Answer for yourself each of the questions highlighted above. Answer them in writing so that your Rule will be very clear and concrete. Begin and trust God that the Holy Spirit will lead you and guide you in what adjustments you may need to make. Begin with no preconceptions, no expectations—just begin.

Finally, at the risk of sounding commercial, perhaps you should consider ordering the series of tapes I mentioned at the beginning and listening to them with a group of men or women in your own Church. I truly believe it will fan the flames of your desire to pray.

Do it today.



Fr. Marc Dunaway
St. John the Evangelist
Cathedral
Eagle River, AK