

Again and Again, Let Us Pray to the Lord

by Dr. Andrew Cuneo

"What I tell you three times is true."—*The Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll

In an old Anglo-Saxon manual is a formula for the blessing of fields. It instructs the farmer to do various actions, such as cut four pieces of sod from a field (to represent the four evangelists) and drip holy water, oil, and honey on the pieces three times, thrice repeating a blessing and thrice repeating a *paternoster*. The sod is then brought to the church to be blessed during four masses, followed by many other thrice-invoked prayers of blessing, before being returned to the field. It is a charming story of a charm wherein the God-centeredness of the farmer stands out as much as the intricacy of the ritual. However, one aspect of the ritual strikes a modern reader as peculiar, not to say magical—the repetition. This ritual element of repetition, so prominent in the Divine Liturgy, deserves its own attention.

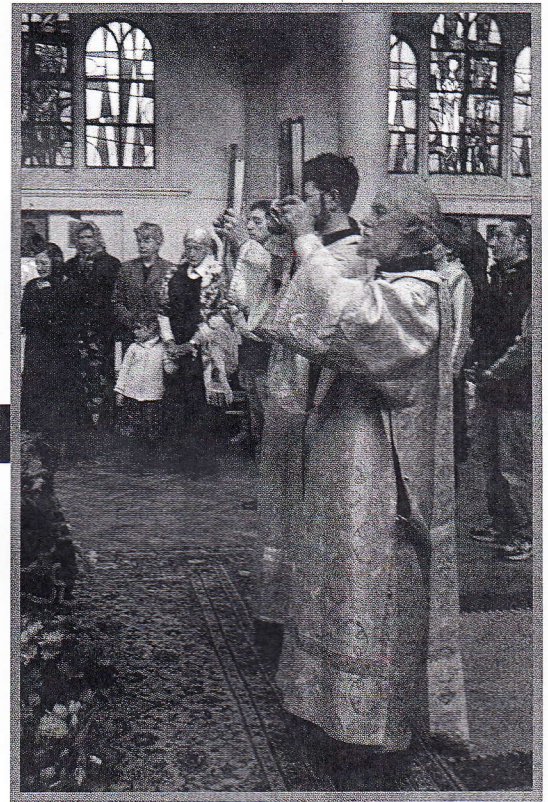
A Foreign State of Mind

I think I was not unlike many new to Orthodox services in wondering why we should pray to the Lord "again and again." Surely He heard us the first time. The newcomer's encounter with Orthodoxy can be perplexing in so many ways. Icons, incense, and vestments are enough: repetition of prayers in the Liturgy only makes the experience considerably more foreign. However, such a reaction—prominent when my mind was keen to get on with things—concealed its own truth. Was not a certain habit of mind being frustrated? What expectation was being asked to give

way to a new pattern of worship?

All I could discern as a new Orthodox Christian was the entirely different *feel* of the Liturgy from that of any Western liturgy I had known. At its best, the Divine Liturgy seemed to be timeless, almost another state of mind that I hoped would go on forever. When the angels sing with the choir, we simply forget about the clock and earnestly hope for the service to continue. This *feel* is not a matter of emotion, but the mental atmosphere deliberately inculcated by the rhythms of the service. One rhythm is unmistakable. In all the litanies, present and repeated, chanted and invoked, is the call for *mercy*. The prayer "Lord have mercy" runs like a golden stream throughout the words of the Liturgy, and yet each request is different.

Something about the repetition of this phrase, something about what happens to the mind when it is repeated, holds a secret. In no Western liturgy had I been asked to do so many things in triplicate—much less to ask for the Lord's mercy well over thirty times. The direction, by contrast, of a Western liturgy was linear: the worshipper said things once and progressed to the next item of business. It was formal, efficient, sequential. Even the best Roman Catholic mass aims straight and true like an arrow. There is, of course, repetition in Catholic masses, but less so *within* the liturgy itself. It is found more notably in the repetition of the whole mass—typically two or three times in a Sunday. Such repetition of the whole in turn invites simplicity of the parts, not to say brevity.



An Orthodox service, however, in part because of its unique celebration each Sunday, invites something more consciously unrestricted. The preparation of Great Vespers on Saturday and the fasting preceding the Liturgy on Sunday implicitly build to a climax. It is as if the Divine Liturgy culminates in the fullest possible array of prayers, missing nothing. "It only happens once," the service seems to say on the day of Resurrection, "so we had better repeat each prayer to make sure, absolutely sure, that we did it." This desire of the Liturgy to be comprehensive and majestic is evident in other ways, too. The shape of this full array of prayers is not simple. An Orthodox Liturgy often wraps around itself and returns. It circles in a spiral upwards. Because of this motion, and because of its dramatic use of the senses, we are dealing with an action which aims at a part of our soul that is not analytical. The shape of the Liturgy itself asks for less strictly rational participation while involving more of the whole self.

In comparison, there are definite losses, for example, when one misses through inattention a segment of a Protestant or Catholic service. To miss the words is to miss a vital step one must be vigilant to catch, lest the prayer or action be irretrievable. The

Orthodox service is more forgiving. If you forget to pray for “freedom from wrath” at one moment in the liturgy, you will be given another chance, at the very least. Or, if you are mentally sharp during the Liturgy, you could even pray the same prayer, such as “for a peaceful death,” for yourself at one turn, for your parent at another, and for a sick friend at the third. The repeated prayer allows for a new recipient even if the words are the same. Indeed, the repetitions in principle coax us away from focusing our prayers solely on ourselves; it would be too dull, not to mention scandalous, to place ourselves squarely at the center of each prayer.

The lure of solipsism is never far, and it calls to mind an anecdote told by Bishop Kallistos Ware. A young monastic went to his spiritual father and asked the following question, with some exasperation in his voice: “How many times must one pray the Our Father in a single day? I have not sinned in the past hour!” The spiritual father then gently clarified what it means to repeat the Our Father and said, “You may very well *have* sinned in the past hour, but more importantly, we pray not just for our own sins, but for the sins of all humanity. It is the *Our* Father, not the *My* Father.” The repetition of prayers, even if verbatim, emphasizes that it is not just “oneself praying for oneself,” but all of us praying for each other.

Patristic Footprints

When we turn to the great early patristic commentators on the Liturgy, we notice how few concern themselves with repetition in any explicit sense. There are notably few patristic footprints to trace. Dionysius in his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* offers a profound examination of the connection between the earthly liturgy and the heavenly liturgy, but says little about repetition as such. St. Germanus’ *On the Divine Liturgy* is similarly unconcerned with the matter. He gives brilliant commentaries on each part of

the church building, the vestments, the anaphora, and more, but the repetition of things like the cherubic hymn he takes for granted. Furthermore, the Liturgy of his day (early eighth century) lacked several of the litanies wherein overt repetition does take place, for example the litany of peace and the litany after the great entrance. This may point to a Liturgy of the early Church that lacked the repetition so prominent in our own. Our experience of repetition may owe as much to the accretion of prayers over time as anything else.

A century earlier than Germanus is St. Maximus the Confessor’s work *The Church’s Mystagogy*. Here, too, we find rich exposition on the Creed, the Our Father, the kiss of peace, and the like, but the theology of repetition is not a matter for reflection. As with our Anglo-Saxon farmer, we might simply be faced with a cultural divide. Early and late antiquity take repetition for granted; it does not seem to need discussion. Numerological issues and numerical symbolism garner attention, and lots of it (mostly in ways foreign to us). But the psychology of repetition remains a dormant theme.

And why revive it? The fathers might skirt the issue not so much because it is unimportant as because it is assumed. It is only fair to ask our own age, habituated against repetition, to explain itself in turn. Would a liturgical commentator today feel the need to explain why our liturgies, especially the Western variants, are so streamlined, so pruned? The desire for verbal economy is as assumed by our recent centuries as resplendent repetition was during earlier eras.

A peek into Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* (a manual of college writing from about 1910) gives a wonderful illustration of the modern desire for verbal sleekness: there must be no excess verbiage! What would Strunk and White have done to Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*, with its doubled language? To a Sarum or Tridentine Mass? Whatever the merits

or demerits of the post-Vatican II mass, we can at least say that it is modern and streamlined, a product of our own century’s imaginative outlook. A contemporary liturgist would not feel impelled to explain why his liturgy says something only once.

But writers as recent as the Victorians knew the value of accumulation in language. The rolling prose of a Newman or a Dickens or a Ruskin matches a Victorian drawing room—full of heavy things in rich colors. Our Byzantine liturgical inheritance is not unlike that Victorian drawing room. Few corners of the liturgy (or the church building) are left free from color, sound, or prayer. Seventy icons are better than seven, and there is always room for one more saint.

Returning to the fathers’ reflections on the Liturgy, it is not until Nicolas Cabasilas in his fourteenth-century *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* that we see a conscious nod to “the inner kingdom.” In discussing the state of mind the Liturgy seeks to form, Cabasilas carefully adds to the idea that the Liturgy should simply remind us of the historical truths of salvation. It is more than pedagogy. The Divine Liturgy initiates a richer participation in the divine life. The service attempts, in his view, to banish all distracting thoughts and cultivate fitness of soul by regulating the dispositions, thoughts, and feelings aroused in worship:

The aim of setting all this [liturgical symbolism] before us is to influence our souls the more easily thereby; not merely to offer us a simple picture but to create in us a feeling. . . . This goes on throughout the liturgy, in order that [the divine sacrifice] may not be forgotten, and our thoughts be not distracted by anything else before it has led us to the holy table.

The kind of feeling suitable to the Liturgy, Cabasilas explains, is “fervent attention.” Repetition is not meant to



lull a soul into reverie. The assembled worshippers cry for mercy—a single response to the varied petitions of the priest—and that cry comes out with alert reverence. At its best, our Orthodox repetition carries a sober force.

Repetition and Eternity

Lastly, there is a certain kind of math to the madness of repetition. To say “Lord have mercy” once, attentively, suffices for a well-aimed prayer. It makes a point. To say it twice or three times creates a trajectory. To say it even more makes the trajectory unmistakable—the points form a line. The prayer, simply by its manifold repetitions in the Liturgy, suggests a line aiming towards eternity. Eternal repetition can mean two very different things, however. It can mean a repeated action of the will and heart which is new each time; or, it can mean and form a habit or disposition of soul. In the latter case, we ask “Lord have mercy” not so much with new *content* each time but to form a *state* of soul. Prayer here slips below the layer of rational content and seeks to permeate the whole person. It is hard to make an enduring mark on the soul any other way. Being creatures in time, such as we are, the closest way to approximate eternity is to repeat oneself, “again and again.”

Simply through repetition (or stillness, a topic for another time) we can approximate eternity. The world of poetry tells the same tale in familiar images. When Tennyson begins his poem, “Break, break, break / On thy cold grey stones, O Sea,” he has caught in three words the never-ending waves. Moreover—and this is one of the mysteries of poetry—the repetition of words, meter, and sounds does something crucial to the rational mind. Such rhythms satisfy it. The effect of a meter or a refrain is to quiet the reason and open up more receptive faculties. The imagination and the emotions become more pliant. The senses become alert to another world. In the case of the Divine Liturgy, our deeper soul, our *nous*, opens up. Maybe this time, the soul will catch the peace Christ offers when the priest says, again and again, “Peace be with you all.” How many times will he have to say it before it is heard, what doubts and doors must the Lord walk through to give us such peace?

It is this antiphonal atmosphere of call and willing response which the Orthodox Divine Liturgy so often suggests. We have stepped, for a time, into an eternal service making its eternal cry to the Lord for His mercy. As my parish priest likes to say, the service does not begin and it does not

end—it prays continually. We merely join in with what was always occurring. How beautiful it is to step into the church when the chanting has already begun and to leave as it continues. The prayers of the saints and angels before the Lord do not crank up and wind down like a machine turned on and off. They are as endless as the waves of the ocean itself.

The repetition of our liturgical prayers is in the end fathomless. They work and wear us down. By grace, the liturgical prayers also give the soul a kind of patina and depth. There is no mistaking a repeated phrase, as St. Peter knows. To renounce Satan three times over gives no doubt as to the catechumen’s desire. To fully immerse the infant three times is a triple joy. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon farmer was not far wrong.

All these repetitions establish firm facts in our world of flux. However, just as one can never step into the same river twice, there truly is no exact repetition at any point in the Liturgy. The placement of the prayer in the liturgy, the harmony with which it is sung, the intensity with which it is spoken, all vary in subtle ways. The litanies themselves, as Nicholas Zernov indicates in a lighthearted metaphor, are like a corkscrew: we repeat the prayers, but they go deeper the further we progress into the Liturgy. Maybe the prayers will be heard this time, and maybe they will echo eternity, for they address a God who is ever old and ever new. ✦

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