

Prayer, Feasts, and Fasts

by the Ever-Memorable Saint Philaret, Metropolitan of New York

We all understand how important prayer is for the spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian. But how are we to pray? Two forms of prayer are evident in the Orthodox Christian life: private prayers said at home and unified Church prayer. Each has certain special characteristics. Our Saviour gave instructions in the Gospel about private prayer: "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door, pray to your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Mt.6:6). Of course, home prayers are basic to us. Prayer is deeply intimate and heartfelt. Everyone who has sincerely searched for heartfelt and moving prayer, knows well how easy and natural it is to pray in solitude, in silence and peace. Moreover, our Lord firmly warns us against hypocritical prayer done for show, to elicit praise from people.

When a Christian prays to God, he must strive to contemplate the words of the prayers which he reads, and to concentrate his thought on the content of the prayers. Everyone knows how difficult it is to struggle against the pressure of outside thoughts and images which tiresomely besiege the person who is praying. This comes to us both from our personal distraction and from the indirect action of the evil-one. The task of a Christian is to apply all his powers to persistently shake off all these side thoughts (which are sometimes impure) that torment him, and to pray piously and with concentration. One should remember that an extra pressure of thoughts and images—often vile and blasphemous—comes to us directly from Satan, and the struggle of resisting these thoughts is a direct struggle against evil. Consequently, one receives great benefit from such a struggle.

Usually, we pray with Church prayers which we learn from childhood. This is necessary, because they lead us into that prayerful atmosphere by which the Church breathes. In this, one must beware not to slide into an automatic, mechanical reading of prayers without attention and penetration into the sense and meaning of the words of the prayer. To this end, a full reverence and concentration of attention is demanded, so that one actually prays—converses with God.

According to the harmonious testimonies of the great ascetics of prayer, in addition to reading the Church prayers, one must add their own prayers in their own words, praying for one's own spiritual needs, and for neighbours and enemies. Often, a Christian cannot fully express his feelings and afflictions in the words of the written prayers. In this case,, a living, sincere prayer in one's own words is more appropriate, together with a confession of one's daily sins and an expressed determination to struggle, with God's help, against those daily sins. Such a prayer will come from the depth of the human soul.

Only a person who has developed sincere, penetrating and constant home prayer can fully participate in the public prayers in church. This participation is a firm necessity for every Christian. The Lord Himself said, "Where two or three [members of the Church] are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." The great preacher and teacher of prayer St John Chrysostom says, "One can, of course, pray at home also: but you cannot pray there as you do in church where so many people are gathered, where a harmonious voice is raised to God: for here is something greater than individual prayer: one-mindedness, a union of love, the prayers of the priest. During public prayers, not only do the people send up their own voices to God, but together with them, the angels and archangels glorify the Master." Thus, church prayer has a preeminently sacred character and it is given this nature by the grace of the Holy Spirit which, as we I know, enlivens our spiritual life, cooperating with our personal spiritual efforts.

A priest serves in church; he is not a priest because he receives a theological education, or has a calling to serve the Church. All this only prepares him for pastoral service. He is a priest only because he was consecrated to it by ordination, and enters through the mystery of priesthood into the pastorship, of the Church. So it is that our church is a consecrated temple, with a specially consecrated Holy Table. According to the word of the Holy Scripture, our church is a house of prayer. The Lord gave us an example of the honour due to God's house when, during His earthly sojourn, He twice cleansed it of all disorder and indecency. At the divine services, we repeatedly hear the Holy Church exclaim the petition, "For this holy house and for all those who with faith, reverence and fear of God enter herein, let us pray to the Lord." Each of us must enter a church in this disposition, remembering that here, one stands before the face of the Lord Himself.

One of the greatest and most painfully evident deficiencies of our contemporary life is our inability to celebrate our feasts in a Christian manner. Our lives are ordered in such a way that interests of a purely worldly character dominate them. Jobs, worry over income and shallow considerations and impressions of each day—all this fills our time and man does not have time to simply think about his soul, and its demands and needs. Our feasts are windows in our colourless lives of vanity and worldly cares. They teach us that this world is not so empty and impoverished as it seems to us, for above it, there is a different world giving our souls joy and ineffable peace. Who does not know what joy fills the heart of an Orthodox Christian in the days of the greatest feast, Pascha, the Radiant Resurrection of the Lord?

How often, though, do days of Christian commemoration and festivity turn out to be days of even greater emptiness and senseless idleness. A feast is a special day of God and should be dedicated as fully as possible to prayer and deeds of Christian mercy. In our tunes though, the feasts are often treated as any other day, and sometimes people even use them as excuses for drunkenness and unseemly partying. How often do we see that people, or even whole clubs, "societies", "institutes" and, God forbid, even parishes and diocesan centres, organize their "balls", dances and entertainments on the eves of major

feasts and on the feastsdays themselves. How do such persons differ from pagans and atheists?

Yet more reprehensible is the way many people view the fasts which the Holy Church has given us. We have many fasts: four lengthy ones, the Great Fast (Great Lent), the Apostles' Fast, the Dormition Fast and the Nativity Fast; and a number of shorter ones.

What an amazing and un-Christian relationship so many people now have to these fasts. The fasts are violated by people without a qualm of conscience, as if the matter was about some nonsense which had no significance. The Church, on the other hand, takes a very serious view of the matter, and excludes from Holy Communion those who refuse to keep the fasts without cause. Indeed, St Seraphim of Sarov very pointedly said, "One who does not observe the fasts is not a Christian, no matter what he considers or calls himself ... and you should not pay attention to him, no matter what he says."

Fasting is absolutely indispensable for man. From the external aspect, it is a struggle of filial obedience to God, Who has given us the rules of fasting through His Holy Spirit. From the inner aspect, fasting is a struggle of restraint and self-limitation. In this lies the great value and sense of fasting, since a strict observance of fasts tempers one's will and perfects the character of one who is firm in his religious convictions and actions. Let us not forget that Christ Himself fasted, and foretold that His apostles would also fast.

We hear people claiming that fasting is harmful to the health. But strict fasting is not required of people who are ill, and they fast only according to their strength. Most important, one should remember that it is only those people who do not fast who speak about the "harm to health" of fasting. But those who do observe fasting will never say this, for they know from personal experience that not only is fasting not harmful, but it is positively beneficial to bodily health.

Fasting is not merely a restraining from food. During the days of the fasts, the Church sings, "While fasting bodily, let us also fast spiritually..." True fasting includes deeds of Christian mercy. It is an alienation of the evil-one, a restraint of the tongue, a laying aside of anger, a cutting off of vices and an exposure of falsehood... Thus, for a Christian, fasting is a time of restraint and self-education in all respects, and a real Christian fast gives believers a great moral satisfaction. The great teacher of Christian asceticism Bishop Theophan the Recluse says of fasting:

"Fasting appears gloomy until one steps into its arena. But begin and you will see what light it brings after darkness, what freedom from bonds, what release after a burdensome life...."