

## **PRAYER, SPIRITUALITY AND LITURGY IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION**

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At the end of the 10th century, Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, sent out envoys to discover the true religion and to advise him on what should become the state religion of the Slavs. The envoys first visited the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga, but found no joy among them "but mournfulness and a great smell." In Germany and Rome, the worship and liturgy was without beauty. But in Byzantium, they were so dazzled by the splendour of liturgy in Aghia Sophia they instantly decided that Orthodoxy should be the faith of the Slav people. "We knew not whether we were on heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendour or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty."

For anyone interested in prayer, spirituality and liturgy, the Eastern Orthodox tradition is worth engaging with not merely because of its beauty, but for a number of practical reasons too.

An understanding of Orthodoxy can enhance our cultural experiences. We cannot understand many of the dimensions to modern movies (from *Zorba the Greek* to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*), modern literature (from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* to the novels of Kazantzakis, the poems of Ritsos or J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, or the music of modern composers (such as John Taverner), without some understanding of Orthodox spirituality.

Four European Union member states now have an Orthodox majority - Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Bulgaria. An understanding of Orthodoxy helps us to explore many aspects of modern Europe: Why did faith survive in Soviet Russia and in Ceausescu's Romania? What role had religion in the horrors of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia? Who are the Christians caught between the extremes of militant Zionism and militant Islam in the Middle East? Or, on a more practical level, how should I behave when I visit a church when I'm on holidays in Greece, Cyprus or Russia?

In addition, Orthodoxy may be the fastest growing Christian tradition in Ireland. Five, distinct Orthodox Churches are now members of the Irish Council of Churches, and there are three Orthodox churches in Dublin (Greek, Russian and Romanian), a Coptic Orthodox Church in Bray, and Orthodox parishes in many other towns and cities. Over the past three decades, I have travelled through many Orthodox countries, experiencing the worship and prayer life of a variety of Orthodox Churches and visiting monasteries throughout Greece, Romania, Egypt and the Middle East, especially on Mount Athos, Mount Sinai, Patmos, and in the Western Desert in Egypt. The Orthodox Churches and their traditions offer rich gifts through their insights into worship, liturgy, spirituality and prayer.

## **Orthodox understandings of prayer**

The life of an Orthodox Christian is one of prayer. In the Orthodox tradition, it is the person who truly prays who is a theologian and a God-seer. The purpose of all life is to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to become one with Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, this is known as *theosis* (deification).

In the Orthodox understanding, prayer is doxology, praise, thanksgiving, confession, supplication and intercession to God. "When I prayed I was new," wrote an Orthodox theologian, "but when I stopped praying I became old." For the Orthodox, prayer is the way to renewal and spiritual life, prayer is being alive to God, prayer is strength, refreshment and joy. Prayer lifts us up from our isolation to a conscious, loving communion with God in which everything is experienced in a new light. Prayer becomes a personal dialogue with God, a spiritual breathing of the soul, a foretaste of the bliss of God's kingdom.

The Orthodox teach that God does not ask that we converse with him using beautiful words, but that what we say emanates from a beautiful soul. God's door is always open and he awaits us; all hours are appropriate and all places good; and prolonged instruction in the art of prayer is unnecessary. It is sufficient that we want to pray; then learning becomes rapid and effortless. However, six specific aspects of prayer life and spirituality within the Orthodox tradition are worth examining: the Liturgy; Daily and Personal Prayer; Icons and Prayer; the Jesus Prayer; and the monastic life.

### **The Liturgy**

The first experience for many of Orthodox prayer, worship and spirituality is as a visitor to an Orthodox church. That first experience can be so overpowering that many people will agree with the envoys from Kiev who said: "This we know, that God dwells there among humans." But Orthodox liturgy also had an immense influence on the western liturgical movement in the late 20th century: our understanding of the separate Services of the Word and of the Sacrament, the Gospel procession, the *epiklesis* in the Eucharist ... even the fact that we stand far more often during the liturgy.

The word Orthodoxy means, primarily, not right doctrine but right worship or praise, and Orthodoxy understands doctrine in the context and setting of worship. As Georges Florovsky (1893-1979) wrote: "Christianity is a liturgical religion. The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second." Or as Bishop Kallistos Ware says: "Orthodoxy sees human beings as liturgical creatures who are most truly themselves when they glorify God, and who find their perfection and self-fulfilment in worship."

For the Orthodox, the Divine Liturgy is the celebration of the Eucharist alone. The beauty of the worship is often mediated to the non-Orthodox through the singing and through the decoration of churches with frescoes and icons. The singing is often *a capella*, and there is a noticeable lack of seating or pews (Canon 20 of the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 forbids all kneeling on Sundays). The mixture of formality and familiarity that is peculiar to Orthodox worship leaves the worshipper assured that he/she is in the house of their true Father. In that mixture of formality and familiarity, the church and the liturgy truly are meeting points between heaven and earth.

On a daily basis Divine Offices or daily services are conducted in the church, by the clergy, and must have at least one other person present. These services consist largely of readings from the Psalms, with introductory prayers, and other prayers surrounding them. Personal prayer in the home is also important for every devout Orthodox, usually before the family icons. But even when individuals pray alone, they still pray with the Church. As Georges Florovsky wrote: "Personal prayer is only possible in the context of the community. Even in solitude, 'in the chamber,' a Christian prays as a member of the redeemed community, of the Church."

### **Icons and prayer**

For the Orthodox, the church building, the whole edifice, is one great icon of the Kingdom of God. The frescoes, the icons and the icon screen (*iconostasis*) separating the congregation from the sacred mysteries behind the royal doors are not there to make a church look pretty or beautiful, but are central to the worship, liturgy and prayers.

The dispute over doctrinal orthodoxy of icons was settled at the seventh Ecumenical Council (843). Icons are part of the heritage of the undivided church, before the Great Schism of 1054. Their use has increased among Anglicans in recent decades, although for some they are often decorative religious items rather than the aids to prayer, while for others they raise questions about idolatry or, at the least, about an emphasis on things seen rather than faith. But Orthodoxy has had a remarkable influence in the West through the traditions and spirituality of icons. Our understanding of the Trinity has developed in recent decades through the fresh insights on the Trinity of contemporary theologians through Andrei Rublev's famous icon of the *Visitation of Abraham*.

The word "icon" (Greek (*eikon*)) simply means a depiction or pictorial representation. The New Testament describes Jesus as the *eikon* or the image and exact representation of God (Hebrews 1: 3). The Ecumenical Councils declared the incarnation made it permissible to represent God in visual form. If Jesus had made God visible, then visual theology was as valid as verbal theology. The Orthodox say an icon is written rather than painted, and speak of icon-writers rather than icon-painters, and carved images still remain largely unacceptable in Orthodoxy. However, in liturgy and prayer icons are no more worshipped than the pages, ink and typeface of a prayer book are worshipped in prayer. The Orthodox believer prays through but not to an icon, and the reverence an icon is given is simply the reverence that should be given to the sacred person represented in the icon.

Large icons can be found on the walls of churches, and icon-style frescoes often cover the inside walls completely. They begin with more worldly scenes at ground level, and work their way up through the Gospel stories and the stories of salvation, so that as we are distracted by worldly thoughts during the liturgy, we are called back to the purpose of worship, until our eyes are drawn ever upwards, so that at the height of dome we see the evangelists and angels surrounding the highest and holiest of all in the dome, Christ the Pantocrator, the one through whom all things are made.

Orthodox homes have icons on the wall, usually together on an eastern facing wall, and in a central place where the family can pray together. Every Orthodox believer will also have an icon of his/her saint.

## The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is one of the best known traditions within Orthodoxy. It says simply: Kurie Ihsou/Kriste, Uie. Qeou/eIehson me ton amartwlo, ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner"). This prayer has been widely taught throughout the history of Eastern Christianity, although the exact words have varied from the most simple forms, including the name "Jesus" or "Lord have mercy," to the more common extended form.

For the Eastern Orthodox, the Jesus Prayer is one of the most profound and mystical prayers and it is often repeated continually as a part of personal ascetic practice. The practice of repeating the prayer continually dates back to at least the 5th century. It was described by Saint Diadochos of Photiki (400-486) and Saint John Cassian (d. 435), and its use is recommended by Saint John of Sinai (523-603) in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The theology of the Jesus Prayer was most clearly set out by Saint Gregory Palamas (1296-1359).

The use of the Jesus Prayer according to the tradition of the *Philokalia* – a collection compiled in the late 8th century – is the subject of the Russian classic, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, in which the pilgrim places himself under the guidance of an experienced elder and engages in a struggle to develop inner prayer that occupies his whole life. The anonymous author of *The Way of the Pilgrim* says the Jesus Prayer has two very concrete effects upon his vision of the world. It transfigures his relationship with the material creation around him, and it transfigures his relationship with his fellow human beings. A 19th century Russian spiritual writer, Theophane the Recluse, distinguished three levels in saying the Jesus Prayer. It begins as oral prayer or prayer of the lips, a simple recitation which Theophane defines as prayer's "verbal expression and shape." The next level is when we begin to pray without distraction, when "the mind is focused upon the words" of the Jesus Prayer, "speaking them as if they were our own." The third and final level is prayer of the heart, when prayer is no longer something we do but who we are.

Through continuing practice, the Jesus Prayer becomes automatic. In the Eastern tradition the prayer is said or prayed repeatedly, often with the aid of a prayer rope (Greek *komvoschini*), sometimes accompanied by prostrations and the sign of the cross. Humility in the practice of the Jesus Prayer is emphasised, with many warnings about the disaster facing those who use it in pride, arrogance or conceit. In many texts it is said that the Jesus Prayer must only be used by members of the Orthodox Church in good standing. However, the Jesus Prayer and *The Way of a Pilgrim* became familiar to many in the west in the 1960s through J.D. Salinger's novel, *Franney and Zooey*. Today, Mount Athos is a centre of the practice of the Jesus Prayer, and is the most important centre of monasticism in the Orthodox world today. The mountain has nurtured great 20th century writers on spirituality and the life of prayer, including Saint Silouan (1866-1938), his disciple Archimandrite Sophrony (1896-1993), and Father Joseph (died 1959). There has been a revival in the fortunes of many of the monasteries on the Holy Mountain in recent years, with new monks arriving from Cyprus, Romania, Russia and Australia.

## Conclusions

According to the *Philokalia*, "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian." Orthodox insights into and traditions about prayer have influenced many Anglicans, including Archbishop Michael Ramsey and Archbishop Rowan Williams. Many in the Western world have been helped to pray through the books of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom.

To pray truly, we can learn from the traditions of others. Perhaps the beauty of Orthodox liturgy, the insights provided by Orthodox use of icons, the practice of the Jesus Prayer, and the rich treasures in the writings of Orthodox monks will help each of us to develop our own practice of prayer.

## READINGS AND RESOURCES

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Note: The four small illustrations in the original article have been omitted here.