

Prayer of the Heart: the duty of those living in the world

by Bishop Theophan the Recluse

You write: 'I had a visit from a pious woman, and we were discussing spiritual matters. The subject of prayer came up, and I was surprised to hear my guest insist that people living in the world not only have no strength for prayer of the heart but even that it is not suitable for them. I said what I could, but I should like to ask a word from you about this.'

Your guest was wrong in her reasoning. He who does not have prayer of the heart has no prayer, for only prayer of the heart is true prayer, acceptable and pleasing to God. It should form the soul both of private prayer and of church prayer; as soon as this is lost, one has only the semblance of prayer but not the essence.

For what is prayer? Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God--for praise and thanksgiving and beseeching Him for the good things necessary for soul and body. The essence of prayer, then is the mental ascent to God from the heart. The mind stands in the heart consciously before the face of God and, filled with proper and necessary reverence, it begins to pour out its heart before Him. This is prayer of the heart! And this should be true of all prayer. The reading of prayers, whether at home or at church, only gives us the words, the form; the soul or the essence of prayer each person carries within himself, in his mind and heart. The entire order of our church prayer, all the prayers composed for use at home, are performed in a mental turning to God. In performing these prayers, even with a minimum of attention, a person cannot avoid this mental communion with God, unless he is totally unconscious of what he is doing. No one can do without mental prayer. We cannot but rise to God through prayer, because our spiritual nature demands this. And we cannot do this otherwise than through the action of the intellect, for God is Intelligence. It's true, there is mental prayer that is spoken, or external--performed at church or at home; but there is also mental prayer that has no external form or physical condition; the essence of the one and other is the same. Both types are necessary also for people living in the world. The Saviour commanded: Enter thy closet and pray there to God your Father Which is in secret. This closet, according to the interpretation of St. Dimitri of Restoy, signifies the heart. Consequently, the Lord's command obliges us to pray to God secretly, with the mind in the heart. This command extends to all Christians. What does Apostle Paul command, when he says that we should pray always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18)? He is exhorting us to prayer of the heart--spiritual prayer--and he directs his exhortations to all Christians without distinction. After all, he exhorts all Christians to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17) But to pray without ceasing is possible only through prayer of the heart. This means that prayer of the heart is necessary for all Christians, and if it is necessary then one cannot say that it is impossible, because God does not ask what is impossible. It's true, it is difficult, but to say it is impossible is wrong. After all, everything good is difficult, and all the more can this be said of prayer which is the source for us of all good and its firm support.

Someone will ask: how is this done? Very simply: acquire the fear of God. The fear of God, as a feeling, will draw attentiveness and awareness to the heart, and, as fear, it

will force the attention and awareness to stand in the heart with reverence before God. Here you have mental standing before God; here you have mental prayer! As long as there is fear of God in the heart, this mental standing before God will not leave the heart. Here you have the effective means towards acquiring prayer of the heart.

But, someone will ask, what about distracting activities? They won't distract: only acquire the fear of God. It is not things or activities that interfere with standing before God or the remembrance of God, but vain and foolish occupations. Put aside what is empty, bad, leaving only that which is necessary - not according to the world but according to the Gospel--and you will see that the fulfillment of such obligations not only does not distract from God but, or the contrary, it draws the mind and heart towards God....Upon rising in the morning, stand more firmly before God in your heart, in your morning prayer, and then set out upon your work--which God has appointed for you--without turning away from Him your feelings or your awareness. And thereby you will accomplish your business by means of the powers of your soul and body, while standing before God with your mind and heart.

It is wrong to think, as some do, that prayer of the heart requires that one sit somewhere hidden away and by this means contemplate God. There is nowhere one needs to hide but in one's own heart, and having established oneself there look upon the Lord before you, as if He were at your right hand, as did King David. They say that solitude is helpful in cultivating prayer of the heart, and how can people in the world find solitudes they are constantly engaged in doing something, constantly running up against problems. It's true that solitude is necessary at times for prayer of the heart. But there are two kinds of solitude: one is complete, constant, when a person goes off into a desert and lives alone; the other is individual, occasional. The first certainly does not suit lay people, but the second is not only possible for them but they have it. Everyone has some time during the day when he is alone, even though he may not have consciously planned to set aside a certain period for solitude. And he can use this time to cultivate, strengthen and activate in himself prayer of the heart. Consequently, no one can give the excuse that he lacks favorable conditions for undertaking prayer of the heart. Find such a time and withdraw into yourself. Cast aside all your cares, stand mentally in your heart before God and pour out your soul before Him.

Besides external solitude, however, there is also internal solitude....Everyone has had the experience that when someone is pained at heart over something, it doesn't matter if he finds himself in the merriest company, he hears nothing, he sees nothing; instead, he sits alone with himself in his heart. If this is true of earthly concerns then why shouldn't it be possible also in spiritual life? When someone is afflicted by pain of heart relating to this worldly life, what can distract him from dwelling on this pain in the solitude of his heart? It follows that one need only establish this [inner] solitude in order to be alone. and from this point it is not far to stir up the fear of God, and you will experience the most contrite pain of heart which will cement the attention and the feelings to the "one thing needful," and in this way we shall come and appear before the face of God. Here, then, is solitude!

"There is still another perplexity: in undertaking prayer of the heart one should have a guide. Where is a lay person to find one? There, in the world- among spiritual fathers and even among laymen- It's true that there are fewer and fewer people to whom one can confidently turn for advice on the spiritual life. But they are always there and will be,

and he who desires to find them will do so by God's mercy. The spiritual life is a life in God, and God shows particular care for those who seek it. Only be zealous--and you will find everything necessary nearby.

And so we see that whether they want it or not, lay people have no reason to avoid prayer of the heart. Let them undertake it and learn.

Source: <http://www.roca.org/OA/87/87f.htm>