

Children and Prayer

By Translated by Mary Mansur

As Orthodox parents, our most basic task is to bring our children to a sense of the truth, of the real-ness, of God. This is not the same thing as head-knowledge about God; it is a personal experience, through prayer, of the reality of God in our lives.

When we bring our children to God through prayer, we are performing a truly God-pleasing act, as He Himself said: Suffer the little children to come unto me...

St. John of Kronstadt said that the most wonderful moments of our lives are those we spend in prayer, for "only then do we truly live." And this is because prayer brings "Christ into your heart, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and will thus strengthen your soul against any evil."

May the following incident from the life of Abbot Theodosius of Optina, wherein a holy bishop instructs children on the subject of prayer, serve as an example and inspiration to Orthodox parents of the last times!

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One episode from our life in the town of Atkarsk was especially engraved on my memory, leaving an indelible trace on my whole life. This episode was bound up with a visit to Atkarsk by His Eminence James, Bishop of Saratov and later Archbishop of Novgorod.

On a tour of his diocese, the Bishop visited Atkarsk and served the Divine Liturgy in the cathedral. He was a highly educated man and he always delivered his sermons to the people without the help of notes, extemporaneously, for which reason he left no trace in the literature of church sermons. The people loved His Eminence and listened to his sermons with great reverence. The simplicity and heartfelt warmth of his sermons were extraordinary, and so close were these qualities to the hearts of the people, and so deeply did they penetrate, that even I, a boy of eleven at the time, have clearly retained in my memory one of these talks of his which, in passing, I wish now to record in my memoirs.

The people considered His Eminence to be a saint. And so it was that this holy man, after celebrating the Divine Liturgy in the Atkarsk cathedral, came out onto the ambon in his hierarch's mantle, surveyed with his kind and penetrating gaze those standing before him, and, noticing in their midst some children, amongst whom was I myself, said: "Children, come closer up to me!"

Several of us came forward, and I stood in the very front. I stood before the very face of the Bishop and he, as if addressing me personally, began to speak.

"I wish, children, to talk to you about prayer. Do you know how to train yourself to pray? First, you must pray just a little, but as often as possible. Prayer is like a spark: in time it can turn into a great flame, but in order to kindle this flame you must have untiring zeal, and you must also have time and skill. Let us take for example two pieces of coal: one is red-hot, and the other cold. Try to kindle the cold one with the other. What must you do? You must put the cold one next to the red-hot one. But simply to place them together is not enough to make the cold piece of coal red-hot, unless you constantly and gently blow on the burning piece. If you blow too hard, sparks will fly out but the cold piece will not begin to burn, and your efforts will be in vain. But if you blow on the burning coal constantly and not too hard, then soon your entire piece of coal which was placed next to it will become itself red-hot. Then not only will these two pieces burn, but if you separate them one from the other a certain distance, everything that you place between them will also catch, and then it can spread into a whole sea of flame.

"But just think how much time is needed to light a stove of wet wood or to ignite and fan a damp piece of coal - how much time, effort, patience and, most of all, perseverance! And so, I would say to you my children: prayer is a fire; and even more I say: it is a burning coal, while our hearts are dead coals. For this reason we must pray every day. This is the same as placing the dead coal of our hearts next to the burning coal of prayer and blowing on it a little at a time. Believe me, children, if you listen to me and pray just a little every day, but consistently, then your hearts will become ignited by the love of the divine flame. But take care not to pray simply in moments of inspiration - do not just scatter sparks from the burning coal of prayer. Remember that after such outbursts laziness follows, and it is not by sparks that you will ignite your hearts.

"Begin this way: at first make three prostrations with these words: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner,' and again a prostration; 'All Saints, pray for me a sinner,' and again a prostration; and let that be enough for you. And the next day again repeat this without fail. Continue in this way day by day, and then you will notice, my children, that in the beginning you will be overcome by laziness like some heavy burden. But if you persist in making these three prostrations, later you will see that instead of three you will want to make more, and then prayer itself will demand an increase in the number of prostrations. This will mean that already the coal of the heart has begun to burn by the power of faith and has become ignited with love towards God and that the constancy of your efforts has begun to bear fruit, from which comes the thirst for more prayer.

"Test my words in action, children, and you will see for yourselves that it is just as I have told you. Run to God as to your own mother. He is good and all-knowing; He

loves us as a Mother loves her own children. If you ask Him, He will surely hear you and will fulfill your request, if only it is not contrary to His holy will. He Himself said "Ask and it shall be given you" - and so run to Him with boldness with all your needs: on your way to school get down on your knees but in such a way that only God sees you, and ask Him to enlighten your mind and memory, and you will see that you will be able to learn your lessons more quickly and more easily than others or than you yourself when you were not turning to God for this. Do this always before you begin anything. Pray, children, pray more often. Forgive those who offend you, and the God of peace will be with you always. Every evening and every day, repent before the Lord for whatever sins you have committed, and implore His goodness and try not to sin in this way any more; and if somehow you fall again into sin, again straightway repent and say: 'Lord, I have sinned; have mercy on me and help me to change my ways.' And He will forgive you and help you to change. Pray more often to God, children, and He will save you."

This teaching so impressed itself on my memory that although already so many years have passed, I am recording it as if reading it from a book.

When the Bishop finished speaking I took his blessing, and ever since then, from the evening of that ever-memorable day, I begin daily to make three prostrations: to the Lord Jesus, the Mother of God, and to all the Saints.