

Aids to Success in Gaining the Habit of Prayer

The teachings of St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain

If you desire to seek success in the work of prayer, adapt all else to this, lest you destroy with one hand what the other builds.

- 1) Keep your body strictly disciplined in food, sleep and rest. Do not give it anything simply because it wants it; as the Apostle says: "Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:14). Give no respite to the flesh.
- 2) Reduce your external contacts to the most inevitable. This is for the period of your training in prayer. Later, when prayer begins to act in you, it will itself indicate what can be added without harming it. Especially guard your senses, above all, eyes and ears; also tie your tongue. Without this guarding, you will not make a single step forward in the work of prayer. As a candle cannot burn in wind and rain, so the flame of prayer cannot be lit in a flood of impressions from outside.
- 3) Use all the time left from prayer in reading and meditation. For reading, choose mainly such books as deal with prayer and generally with inner spiritual life. Meditate exclusively on God and on divine matters, and above all on the incarnated dispensation for our salvation, chiefly on the passion and death of our Lord and Savior. Doing this you will always be immersed in the sea of divine light. In addition, go to church, whenever you have the possibility to do so. Merely to be present in church will envelop you in a cloud of prayer. What then will you receive if you stand throughout the service in a true state of prayer?
- 4) Know that it is impossible to make progress in prayer without general progress in Christian life. It is absolutely necessary that no sin, not purified by repentance, should burden the soul. If during your work on prayer you do something, which troubles your conscience, hasten to purify yourself by repentance, so that you can look up to the Lord boldly. Keep humble contrition constantly in your heart. Moreover, neglect no opportunity for doing some good, or for manifesting some good disposition, above all humility, obedience and cutting off your own will. It goes without saying that zeal for salvation must always be burning and fill the whole soul; in all things, great or small, it must be the main impelling force, together with fear of God and unshaken trust.
- 5) Thus established, labor in the work of prayer, praying now with set prayers, now with your own, now with short appeals to the Lord, now with the Jesus Prayer, omitting nothing which can be of help in this work. And you will receive what you seek. I remind you of the words of St. Macarius of Egypt: God will see your work of prayer and that you sincerely wish to succeed in

prayer -- and He will give you prayer. For you must know that, although prayer done and achieved with one's own efforts is pleasing to God, yet that real prayer, which comes to dwell in the heart and becomes constant, is the gift of God, an act of Divine grace. Therefore, in your prayer for all other things, do not forget to pray too about prayer.

6) I shall repeat to you what I heard from a God-loving man. "I was not leading a very good life," he said, "but God had mercy on me and sent me the spirit of repentance. This was during preparation for communion. I was trying hard to plant in myself a firm resolve to mend my ways, and especially before confession I prayed for a long time before the Icon of the Mother of God, begging Her to obtain this resolve for me. Then, during confession, I candidly related everything. My Spiritual Father said nothing; but while he was reciting the prayer of absolution over my head, a small sweet flame was lit in my heart. The sensation was like swallowing some delectable food. This little flame remained in the heart, and I felt as though someone was gripping my heart. From that time I prayed continuously, and kept my attention there, where this sensation was, my only care being to preserve it. And God helped me. I had not heard about the Jesus Prayer, and when I did hear of it, I saw that what was within me was precisely that which is sought by this prayer." I mention this story to make you understand what the work of prayer seeks and what are the signs that it is received.

7) I shall also add the following words of St. Gregory of Sinai (from the Philokalia). "Grace abides in us from the time of our holy baptism; but, through our inattention, vanity and the wrong life we lead it is stifled, or buried. When a man resolves to lead a righteous life and is zealous for salvation, the fruit of his whole labor is, therefore, the restoration in force of this gift of grace. It comes to pass in a two-fold manner: first, this gift becomes revealed through many labors in following the commandments; in so far as a man succeeds in following the commandments, this gift becomes more radiant and brilliant. Secondly, it manifests and reveals itself through constant invocation of the Lord Jesus in prayer. The first method is powerful, but the second is more so, so that even the first method gains power through it. Thus, if we sincerely wish to open the seed of grace concealed in us, let us hasten to train ourselves in this latter exercise of the heart, and let us have only this work of prayer in our heart, without forms, without images, till it warms our heart and makes it burn with ineffable love of the Lord."

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