SESSION 5

Prayer

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and Of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

O Heavenly King the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who are in all places and fill all things, treasurer of blessings and giver of life. Come and dwell within us and cleanse us from every blemish and save our souls, O Blessed One.

In the Name of the Father and Of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory Be to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!

Last week we discussed the main Doctrines and Dogmas of the Orthodox Faith - the main teachings or truths about the Orthodox Christian Faith that have been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, through Holy Scripture and the gatherings of the Church in Council. In particular we studied the Creed. I must admit that I covered a large amount of material in a relatively short period of time and I am sure that it was too much to absorb. And, you might have even thought or said after the class was over, that this information was beyond you and concluded that dogma is something that should be left up to theologians and scholars to debate. If you thought this way, I do not blame you, I even recall being overwhelmed in Seminary with many of the same topics, But let me share with you a very helpful
explanation that one of my professors gave me as to the relationship between theology, that is the study of the teachings of God, and the life in Christ. He quoted the fourth-century Orthodox monastic writer Evagrius of Pontus who said, “..a theologian is one who prays, and one who prays, is a theologian.” This statement tells us a lot about Orthodoxy. In Orthodoxy we understand that the teachings of the Church must not only be learned about, but, experienced and practiced. And how do we best practice or live our faith? We do so by joining our hearts and mind with God in prayer.

Prayer, according to St. Theophan the Recluse, a famous Orthodox spiritual writer of the last century, “... is the raising of the mind and heart to God in praise and thanksgiving to Him and in supplication for the good things we need, both spiritual and physical.” According to St. Theophan, in conversing with God, we “... enter through grace into communion with Him, and live in God.” When we enter into a living communion, a vibrant relationship with God, our minds, souls and hearts are transformed.

With this in mind we see how essential prayer is in the Christina Life. As St. Theophan the Recluse also wrote, “Prayer is thus the test of everything, the source of everything and the director of everything; for if our prayer is right, then everything else will be right as well.” Therefore, to sum up the point I am trying
to make, the whole point of everything we do in the Church is to bring us to union with God, to lead us to true prayer which is in a sense what the word Orthodox literally means. With this in mind, today, I would like to talk about prayer in the life of the Church and the individual Christian, that is private prayer and public or liturgical prayer and how we can strive with the help of Almighty God to make our prayer “right” and pleasing in the eyes of the Lord and in the depths of our souls.

**Private Prayer**

Every member of the Church is encouraged and expected to have a personal prayer life. More specifically, from the time we can first speak and even before that, the Church calls us to develop a personal relationship with God. It is a beautiful tradition within the Orthodox Church that parents pray for and in the presence of their infant children making the sign of the cross over them and asking God to protect them. Not only is it beneficial for our children to experience prayer from the earliest moments, even while in their mother’s womb, it is also a great blessing to parents, because if they are spiritually sensitive, they will sense the presence of God and the host of angels invisibly surrounding their child in their innocent and tender years. But again I digress.....
As in all relationships, communication is key, for unless we talk to the person we wish to develop a close relationship with, and keep doing so, we will never get to know him or her. And of course we all wish to know God, and therefore must communicate with Him, and talk to him in prayer. We are taught to do so daily, both in the morning and evening, and throughout the day. As Orthodox Christians we begin by praying the prescribed prayers of the Church which we find in specially prepared prayer books. In our diocese we have a beautiful prayerbook that contains a manageable daily rule of prayers, prayers for special needs and the entire text of our Divine Liturgy. If you wish to obtain a copy you can get one online at OrthodoxGoods.com. There are many other such prayer books available as well from other Orthodox Sources. You can view an abbreviated online version in the Prayer Corner section of our diocesan website, www.acrod.org.

At this point, I would like to address a concern that I am sure some of you might have, “why should we pray other people’s prayers, isn’t this too formal, doesn’t this formalize and deaden true prayer?” This is a good question, but I believe I have an even better answer, we do this in imitation of Jesus Christ, Himself. In His earthly life the Saviour used the "prayers of other people" on a regular basis. In fact, one of the last prayers He uttered was by His famous ancestor, King David: from Psalm 22.
About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama  sabathani my God, why hast thou forsaken me…

From His childhood, Jesus was raised with "other people's prayers" such as those found in the Book of Psalms as well as in the Synagogue services that formed a part of His daily life and that of the Apostles.

To quote Protopresbyter Lawrence Barriger, a professor at Christ The Saviour Seminary, the use of established prayers and Psalms in our prayer life is like a sail on a ship - they provide a strong fabric to catch the wind of the Spirit and move us in the right direction. They provide a bond of unity with the generations past and those yet to be born. (Fr. Lawrence Barriger, Lord, Teach Us To Pray – A Guest Sermon in The Church Messenger)

So you see the Church in her wisdom, provides us with this spiritual resource to help us to pray in the right spirit.

Along with our rules of prayer, comes the daily reading of the Bible. I encourage all of the parishioners of our parish to at least read the daily scripture readings that are prescribed by the Church. I include the daily scripture references in every church bulletin, they are printed on our wall calendar, and the actual text for each day is posted on our parish website. These prayers of the Church and Scripture
readings are given to us to teach us how to pray, for they are written by the saints of the Church who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. We are not to just merely read the words, but also to feel the words we are praying and sense the presence and nearness of God. And when this happens, by all means we can stop praying the prescribed prayers and just experience the healing presence of God, as The Prophet David wrote in the Psalms, when this happens “Be still and know that I am God…” (Psalm 46:10)

When we pray, we can pray on both bended knees, in humility or stand before the majesty of God, as we do especially during the Paschal Season. We also can bow deeply to the ground doing what we call prostrations. We do this especially during Great Lent. Our church uses these different postures in prayer, which are often difficult, for instance try kneeling for more than five minutes or making 100 prostrations during the Lenten Canon of St. Andrew of Crete. It does so precisely because , it recognizes the need for our whole body to cooperate when we pray. Our bodies can either distract us from prayer or assist us in prayer. This is why during Lent, we fast, so that we lighten our bodies and then we can pray better. Have you ever tried to pray after eating a very big and luxurious meal? If you have you know how difficult it is.
The purpose of private prayer at home is to keep a daily connection with the Lord and grow in our relationship with Him. To encourage us to pray, and be reminded of God, the Church encourages us to have icons in our homes, and in particular a special home altar or icon corner which is preferably in the eastern corner of a room. Here we can burn candles, and even incense when we are praying to help us better focus on the Kingdom of God which is both to come and which is invisibly present.

In our quest to establish a personal rule of prayer, we are not left to our own devices. This is why we have parish priests, to guide us. In Orthodoxy we call our priests father, because of the role they are called to live in the life of a parish. They are called to be spiritual guides or spiritual fathers, to their flock. We are there to help you. Sometimes people don’t wish to bother their priest and discuss such matters. Trust me when I tell you, We Priests LOVE these kinds of questions. I remember when I was ordained my Metropolitan in his words of instruction to me cautioned me not to get discouraged when instead of asking me for the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, I may only be asked for the keys to the boiler room! In America today there is a tendency for many Christians to be "lone-ranger" Christians. They want do it on their own. "Me and Jesus, that's all that I will ever need." But this is a dangerous misperception. The Holy Fathers love to say that the
person who has chosen himself as his own spiritual guide has chosen a fool. This is why priests must have their own spiritual father.

Public or Liturgical Prayer

Moving on now to the second aspect of prayer in the Church, that of public or liturgical prayer, I must at once say that while we talk about there being two types of prayer, public and private, they are not two separate entities. In fact our souls need both, in equal measure. We are better able to pray at home when we regularly worship in Church and conversely, we are better able to pray in Church when we are used to praying at home. While we speak of private prayer, we are really still in a sense praying within the context of the Church, or as St. John Chrysostom calls it the home Church. Even at home, we need to pray as a family with our husbands or wives and with our children.

Speaking now more specifically of public or liturgical prayer, it is important that we know that the Church prescribes that we pray eight times a day.

Following the example of Moses, who, describing the creation of the world by God, began the "day" with evening, the Orthodox Church begins the day with the evening service, Vespers.
Vespers is the service celebrated towards the end of daylight, in which we express our gratitude to God for the day which has passed.

Compline is composed of the reading of a series of prayers, in which we ask the Lord God for the forgiveness of sins. We also ask that He grant us repose of body and soul as we retire, and to preserve us from the wiles of the Devil as we sleep.

The Midnight Office is to be read at midnight in remembrance of the prayer of the Saviour during His night in the Garden of Gethsemane. This service summons the faithful to be ready at all times for the day of the Dread Judgment, which will come unexpectedly like "the bridegroom in the night" in the parable of the ten virgins.

Matins is celebrated in the morning prior to the rising of the sun. In this service we give thanks to God for the night which has passed, and we ask Him His mercy for the approaching day.

In Old and New Testament times, an "hour" meant a "watch" that lasted for three of our modern hours. Each service of the daily cycle corresponds to one of these three-hour divisions.

The First Hour covers the time from 6 A.M. to 9 A.M. The First Hour sanctifies the already breaking day with prayer.
The Third Hour covers the time from 9 A.M. to 12 P.M. It reminds us of the
descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.

The Sixth Hour covers the time from 12 P.M. to 3 P.M. It reminds us of the
Passion and Crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Ninth Hour covers the time from 3 P.M. to 6 P.M. It reminds us of the death
on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

While it is not possible to celebrate these services everyday as is done in most
monasteries, we should pause at these times during the day to remember our
Lord’s self-emptying love. What I loved so much about the Seminary I attended
was the fact that I lived next door to a monastery and got to experience these
beautiful services, which are for the most part, quiet and peaceful services, filled
with psalms and beautiful hymns that speak of the joy of repentance, of becoming
more Christ-like and the glories of Heaven. In these troubled times, we really need
to get re-discover the Church’s function as being a house of daily prayer – this is
why I will offer many different types of services on weekdays throughout the year
to familiarize you with them, and also, to remind myself that the primary calling
of the priest is to teach and encourage prayer.
Of course, in addition to the daily cycle of prayer, there is the Divine Liturgy, which is not considered to be a part of the daily cycle. Instead we understand the Liturgy to be outside of time. When we pray the liturgy, we leave the world and enter into eternity, where past, present and future are one unbroken reality. If you do not believe this, look at the quiet prayers that are prayed by the priest at the time of the Elevation of the Gifts at “Yours of Your Own”, right before we sing “We Praise You,” where I pray, “Remembering all those things which have come to pass, the Cross, the Tomb, The Resurrection, the Ascension into Heaven, the sitting at the Right Hand of the Father, AND the Glorious Second Coming.” Of course we know that all has come to pass except the second coming. So by participating in the Liturgy, we leave the earth, and go to Heaven. The Liturgy has the power to transfigure us if we truly pray it and participate in it – that is we prepare ourselves to receive Holy Communion. Coming to Liturgy and not receiving communion is like going to our parents home for Thanksgiving, with a festal table being set, and a delicious meal before us, and us saying no thanks, I am not hungry, can I be excused? We wouldn’t do it because we would offend our parents. The same is true for the Liturgy. We need not worry, however, if we think by coming every week to Communion, the Eucharist will lose its intensity and become common place. On the contrary, by frequently partaking of it, we will
become more aware of our dependence on God for everything in life – our daily bread, and the great sacrifice of His own blood that He made for you and I.

We are fortunate in our Diocese, having its origins within the Carpatho-Rusyn experience, (our founders came from the humble villages of the Carpathian Mountains in what is now Slovakia, Ukraine, Poland and Romania), That we have a very strong tradition of participation in the Liturgical services, through congregational singing. The Carpatho-Rusyn Plain Chant, is a jewel in the crown of our diocese and our parish. Unlike many other Orthodox Churches, our people can and are encouraged to participate in the singing of the services. I encourage you to watch the video of the First Liturgy in our newly Consecrated Church at Camp Nazareth, which is posted in the diocesan events video section in the multimedia section of our diocesan website, the singing was phenomenal. Over 500 people were singing with every harmony imaginable. How very powerful it is and how accessible it makes the Liturgy.

In Speaking about Public Prayer and the daily cycle of services, it is important that we also speak about the The Weekly and Annual Cycle of Divine Services

The Weekly, or Seven-day, Cycle of Divine Services is the term for the order of services extending throughout the seven weekdays. Each day of the week is dedicated to an important event, or else an exceptionally revered saint.
On Sunday, the Church remembers and glorifies the Resurrection of Christ.

On Monday, the first day after the Resurrection, the bodiless hosts are celebrated. They are the angels created before the human race, who are the servants closest to God.

On Tuesday, St. John the Baptist is glorified, as the greatest of the prophets and the righteous of the Old Testament.

On Wednesday, the betrayal of the Lord by Judas is remembered; the services are thus centered around the Cross of the Lord. This day is a fast day.

On Thursday, the Holy Apostles and St. Nicholas the Wonderworker are glorified.

On Friday, the Passion and death of the Saviour on the Cross is remembered, and the services honor the Cross of the Lord. This day is kept as a fast day also.

On Saturday, the Sabbath or Day of Rest, the Mother of God is glorified (she is also glorified every other day), along with the forefathers, prophets, apostles, martyrs, monastics, righteous and all the saints who have attained peace in the Lord. All those who have reposed in the true faith and in the hope of resurrection and life eternal are also remembered.
The Annual Cycle of Divine Services

The Annual Cycle of Divine Services is the term for the order of services conducted during the course of the entire calendar year.

Each day of the year is dedicated to the memory of one or more saints, as well as special sacred events, either in the form of feast days or fasts.

Of all the feasts, the greatest is that of the Bright Resurrection of Christ, Pascha. It is thus called the feast of feasts. Pascha occurs no earlier than the twenty-second of March (the fourth of April, new style), and no later than the twenty-fifth of April (the eighth of May). Pascha is on the first Sunday after the equinoxal new moon and always after the Jewish celebration of Passover.

In addition, twelve great feasts are held in honor of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Theotokos throughout the year. There are also feasts in honor of the great saints and of the bodiless hosts of heaven, the angels. Thus, the festivals of the year are distinguished, by their content, into those of the Lord, the Theotokos, and the saints.

The celebration of the feasts is further divided into the immovable and the movable. The immovable occur every year on the same calendar date of the month;
the movable occur every year on the same day of the week, but fall on various
dates of the month due to their relationship to Pascha.

The celebration of the church services of the feasts are distinguished according to
various degrees of solemnity. The great feasts are always celebrated with an All
Night Vigil; lesser feasts will have a Vigil according to custom. The solemnity and
joy of all other days in the church year is indicated by guidelines in the rubrics.

The church year begins on the first of September, according to the Julian (Old
Style) calendar. The entire yearly cycle of divine services is constructed around its
relationship to Pascha.

Sacramental Life

Lastly, I would like to talk briefly about the Sacramental life of the Church. The
Sacraments of the Orthodox Church, like the Church Herself, can be said to have a
visible and invisible character, for they are at the same time inward and outward.
They combine in themselves both an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual
grace. For example, in the Holy Eucharist, we partake of the Body and Blood of
Christ, although to our physical eyes they appear to be bread and wine. The same
is true in Holy Baptism where there is an outward washing with water, but at the
same time an inward cleansing of sins. This is why we refer to the Sacraments as
being mysteries, for, as I have said, there is more taking place in them than what meets the eye.

In most of the Sacraments, the Holy Church takes things that are material, for example, bread, wine, water, and oil, and make them vehicles of the Holy Spirit, in imitation of Christ’s Incarnation, his taking on of flesh, when He, the Second Person of the Trinity, took material flesh and made it a vehicle of the Holy Spirit.

There is another characteristic of the Sacraments that we must keep in mind... that they are personal. Through them, the Grace of God is given to every Christian individually. When the sacraments are administered, the priest uses the Christian Name of the person in the service. For example, at the Holy Eucharist, when giving Holy Communion, the Priest says, the Servant (or Handmaid) of God [Name] partakes....

While in the Orthodox Church we speak of Seven Sacraments, the Fathers of the Church, disagreed as to the actual number some said two, some six, some ten, and there were even those who said seven, but differed among themselves as to what constituted that seven. Many other sacramental acts, such as the Blessing of Waters at Theophany, the Monastic Tonsure, the Burial Service, and the Blessing of Any Object, for example, possess the same criteria as the earlier definition of
sacrament. In any case, the number seven has no absolute dogmatic significance in our Orthodox theology, but is used only for teaching convenience.

The Sacraments, as they are traditionally numbered, are:

1. Holy Baptism  
2. Holy Chrismation  
3. The Holy Eucharist  
4. Repentance (Penance, Confession)  
5. Holy Orders  
6. Holy Matrimony  
7. The Anointing of the Sick  

These mysteries are offered to us at various times in our lives. No one is born a Christian, instead, we are born again of water and the spirit in Baptism and Chrismation. After being initiated into the faith, we are invited and encouraged to receive Holy Communion and when we are at an age of reason and can understand the consequences of our actions, we receive the Holy Mystery of Confession or Penance. If we are called to marry, we come to the Church and seek the Holy Mystery of Matrimony, where a man and women become one flesh and are blessed to live a life together as husband and wife. If a man is called to the Holy Priesthood or other Holy Orders, then he may become ordained by God through the laying on of the hands of the Bishop. Finally, during our lives when we are ill and especially at the end of our lives, we may receive the mystery of Holy Unction for the healing of Soul and Body.
We see in the public worship of the Church and especially the Sacramental life of the Church, the common theme of Union, Union of God and man. Through prayer as I said at the onset, we lift our minds and souls to God. By prayer, we nourish our souls. Through prayer, we find peace. Through prayer, our hardened hearts are softened and we can experience an increase in faith, hope and love. I pray that You have found this evening’s presentation spiritually profitable. In closing, I would like to leave you with not my words, but the timeless wisdom of the Fathers of the Church and in particular St. Basil the Great.

“Prayer is a request for what is good, offered by the devout of God. But we do not restrict this request simply to what is stated in words... We should not express our prayer merely in syllables, but the power of prayer should be expressed in the moral attitude of our soul and in the virtuous actions that extend throughout our life... This is how you pray continually -- not by offering prayer in words, but by joining yourself to God through your whole way of life, so that your life becomes one continuous and uninterrupted prayer. (St. Basil the Great, Homily on the Martyr Julitta)

May God Bless you for your attentiveness and desire to understand more deeply our precious Orthodox Faith. Amen.

Any Questions?