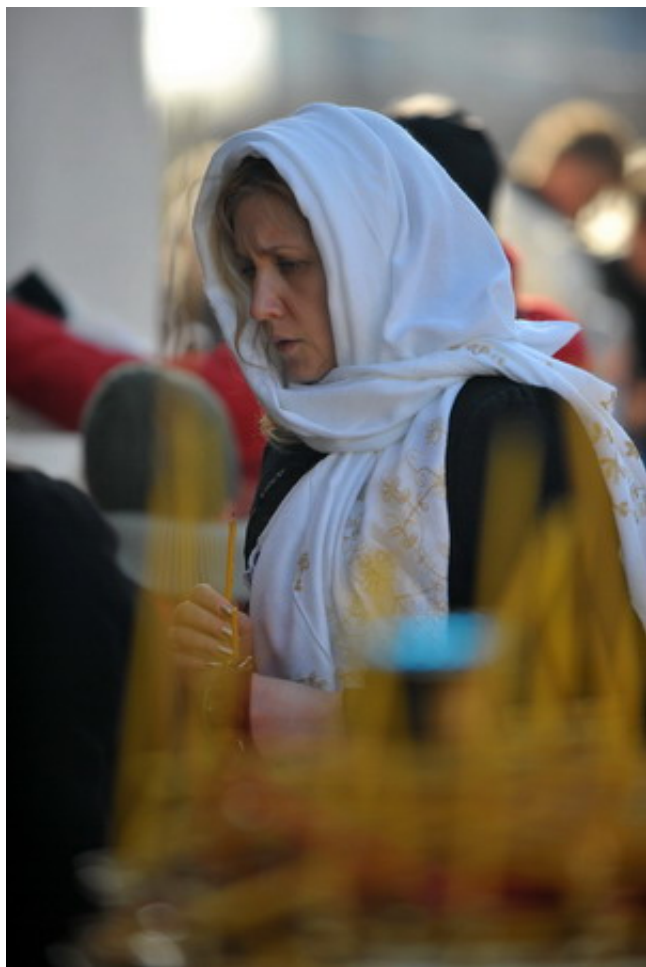




Distractions During Prayer and the Place of the Heart



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Many sincere Christians have experienced distracting thoughts or even bad thoughts during prayer and are naturally distressed when this happens. After all, their intention is to communicate with God, not to talk to themselves about things mundane or even worse! Some have become so discouraged by such thoughts that they give up on prayer altogether. And yet, seeking to find the Lord Jesus even when He seems lost in an unruly crowd of our distractions and bad thoughts is very much a part of our struggle as Christians. The presence of these unwanted, yet to be honest, not totally rejected, thoughts, provides us with a wealth of self-knowledge that can also become a source of genuine humility. They show us that our best efforts are not enough without God's mercy and love coming to us to save us. They also show us that we are living and searching for God in and with our minds, instead of using that unique instrument with which we can come into contact with God, namely, our heart.

Archimandrite Zacharias has noted, "The great tragedy of our times lies in the fact that we live, speak, think, and even pray to God, outside our heart, outside our Father's house. And truly our Father's house is our heart, the place where 'the spirit of glory and of God' would find repose, that Christ may 'be formed in us'. Indeed, only then can we be made whole, and become hypostases in the image of the true and perfect



Hypostasis, the Son and Word of God, Who created and redeemed us by the precious Blood of His ineffable sacrifice. Yet as long as we are held captive by our passions, which distract our mind from our heart and lure it into the ever-changing and vain world of natural and created things, thus depriving us of all spiritual strength, we will not know the new birth from on High that makes us children of God and gods by grace.”

Distressing distraction in prayer, which sometimes develops into extensive conversations with ourselves, means that we are praying with our minds, but not with our hearts. In [Ancient Christian Wisdom](#), I make reference to how we should pray in spite of the distractions and bad thoughts. “The watchful fathers knew by experience that *when the believer’s mind is gathered in the heart* and repeats the prayer, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’ demonic thoughts, fantasies and illusions are exposed as false and thus can be more easily rejected. The correct application of this approach known as monologistic prayer entails ‘cognitively’ paying attention to the words of prayer and ‘emotionally’ feeling compunction in the presence of the Lord Jesus. Attentive and compunctious prayer in turn augments the believer’s yearning for Christ and watchfulness over the thoughts, thereby bringing him clarity of mind. Although it requires much toil, humility, and even ‘assistance from heaven’, the holy fathers consider this ‘cognitive method’ to be as effective in bridling unruly thoughts as the behavioral technique of not voicing one’s reaction to an insult is successful at stifling anger.”

It is worth noting that demonic thoughts, fantasies and illusions can appear even if someone is praying correctly and in a God-pleasing way. The difference lies in the ease and the speed with which distractions are rejected. The mind is always making associations, churning out thoughts, saying, “Look over here, look over there.” And the mind has an exquisite knowledge of our buttons (which are often our passions) and knows full well which ones to push to get our attention. When we pray in the heart, though, we can tell from afar the difference between the real gold of Christ and the fool’s gold of the devil. And so when praying from the heart, we ignore extraneous thoughts with the blink of an eye, and keep looking to the radiant countenance of our compassionate Lord.

The problem is not really distraction in prayer. Distraction is a symptom of our spiritual state. When we find ourselves especially distracted, when conversations in the mind with ourselves are more vociferous than our cry of repentance, we need to humble ourselves and strive again to turn to the Lord with compunction, praying to Him with all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength. Perhaps it might be helpful to recognize that one who engages in prayer, especially during the period of purification from the passions is not going to experience it as all “sweetness and light.” If that were so, the passions would remain forever hidden and one could hardly make any progress against enemies that remain lurking in the heart. Rather, it might be beneficial to consider the time of prayer as one’s entrance into the spiritual arena in which the wild beasts of our passions are let loose, in which the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour, and in which the Angels, the Saints, and Christ Himself watch on ready to help us if we call out for help with our entire soul. Prayer introduces the faithful to the battleground for the heart. Let us not grow discouraged by distractions, but take note, and turn to the Lord with increasing fervor. Seeking, always seeking, what the Lord seeks most of all, our heart. The Lord reminds us that trials and temptations will come our way and that includes trials and temptations in Church and at the time of prayer. But He also told His disciples, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” and with it every possible distraction and evil thought arising in our own inner world during the hallowed time of prayer.



Source: [Ancient Christian Wisdom](#)