



St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov): "Learn to Pray to God in the Right Way"



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As it is natural for the destitute to beg, it is natural for man, who has been reduced to poverty by the fall, to pray.

Prayer is fallen and repentant man turning towards God. Prayer is the weeping of fallen and repentant man before God. Prayer is fallen man, slain by sin, pouring out the desires, supplications and laments of his heart before God.

The first revelation, the first movement of repentance is the weeping of the heart. This is the heart's voice of prayer, which comes before the prayer of the mind. For soon the mind, taken up by the prayer of the heart, begins to produce prayerful thoughts.

God is the sole source of all true blessings. Prayer is the mother and the chief of all the virtues, as it is both the means and state of man's communion with God. It derives virtues from the source of blessings, from God, and assimilates them to man when he tries to be in communion with God.

The way to God is prayer. The measure of the way undertaken is the various prayerful states, into which the one who prays gradually enters, constantly and in the right way.

Learn to pray to God in the right way. Having learned how to pray in the right way, pray constantly and you will duly inherit salvation. Salvation comes from God in its own time, as it irrefutably reveals itself in the heart to the one who prays constantly and in the right way.

For prayer to be right, it must be brought forth from a heart filled with poverty of spirit, a heart which is broken and contrite. Before it is renewed by the Holy Spirit, all the other states of the heart- for you have to admit that this is exactly what they are-are not fitting for the repentant sinner who entreats God to forgive his sins and to free him from enslavement to the passions, as from a dungeon and chains.



By the law of Moses, the Israelites were directed that only one place had been appointed by God for them to offer up all their sacrifices. And by the spiritual law, one spiritual place is appointed for Christians to offer up all of their sacrifices but most particularly the sacrifice of sacrifices- prayer. This place is humility.

God does not need our prayers! He knows what we need before we ask Him; He, the Most Merciful, pours out lavish generousities on those who do not ask Him. It is we who need prayer: it assimilates man to God. Without it, man is estranged from God, yet the more he practices prayer, the more he comes close to God.

Prayer is the Eucharist of life. Neglecting it brings the soul unseen death.

The Holy Spirit is, to the life of the soul, what air is to the life of the body. The soul breathes this holy, mysterious air by means of prayer.

When you rise from sleep, let your first thought be of God; offer up to God the very beginning of your thoughts which have not yet been marked by any vain impressions. When you are falling asleep, when you are preparing to sink into that image of death, let your last thoughts be of eternity and God reigning therein.

An angel revealed to a certain holy monk the following pattern of thoughts in prayer, which is well-pleasing to God: the beginning of prayer must be composed of the glorifying of God, of thanksgiving to God for His innumerable blessings; then we must offer up to God a sincere confession of our sins in contrition of spirit; to conclude we can put forward, but with great humility, requests to the Lord for the needs of our soul and body, reverently leaving the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of these requests to His will.

The initial basis of prayer is faith: *I believed, therefore I have spoken* (Psalm 116:10) through my prayer to merciful God, Who has graciously commanded me to pray and vowed to heed it.

Therefore I say unto you, what things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them (Mark 11:24), proclaimed the Lord. So therefore, casting aside any doubt or doublemindedness, be persistent in prayer before the Lord, who commanded us *always to pray and not to faint*; (Luke 18:1) that is not to fall into despondency from the constriction of prayer, which, especially at the beginning, is burdensome, unbearable for a mind which has grown used to wandering. Blessed is the soul, which constantly knocks at the door of God's mercy through prayer and through complaints about its *adversary* (Luke 18:3) -about the sin which oppresses it-constantly *wearying the Unwearying One*: in time this soul will rejoice in its purity and dispassion. Sometimes our request is heard immediately; but sometimes, in the words of the Saviour, God *bears long with us* (Luke 18:7), that is to say he fulfils what we have asked slowly: He sees that delaying this fulfilment for a time is necessary for our humility; that we need to languish; to see our powerlessness, which is always discovered abruptly when we are left to ourselves.

Prayer, like a conversation with God, is a great blessing in itself; often to a much greater extent than the things that man requests,-and merciful God leaves the supplicant in prayer through not fulfilling their request, in order that he does not forego it and does not abandon this higher blessing when he receives the one he asked for, which was a far lesser blessing.



God does not meet requests if the fulfilment of them is bound together with harmful consequences; He doesn't meet those requests which are contrary to His holy will, contrary to His wise, unfathomable destinies.

The great Moses, the God-seer, made a request contrary to God's purpose, that it would be granted to him to enter the promised land and he was not heard (Deuteronomy 3:26); holy David prayed, strengthening prayer with fasting, ashes and tears, for the life of his son who had fallen ill to be saved, but he was not heard (2 Samuel 12). And you, when your request is not fulfilled by God, yield reverently to the will of the All-Holy God, Who for unfathomable reasons has left your request unfulfilled.

To the children of the world, who ask God for earthly blessings to satisfy earthly lusts, the holy apostle James preaches: *Ye ask and ye receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts* (James 4:3).

When we wish to have an audience with an earthly king, we prepare for this with particular care: we examine what the disposition of our heart might be when conversing with him so that we will not be distracted by the outburst of some emotion into a phrase or a gesture which will not please him; we envisage beforehand what we will say to him so that we only say what is proper and thereby make him disposed to us; we take care so that our outward appearance attracts his attention. We should make the proper preparation all the more when we wish to come before the King of kings and enter into conversation with Him through prayer.

Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7); but in man, the disposition of the heart corresponds in particular to the expression of his face, his outward appearance. So therefore have the most reverential pose during prayer. Stand like a condemned man hanging his head, not daring to look up at the sky, with his hands at his sides or holding them behind as if they were tied together with rope, in the way that criminals are usually tied up when they have been seized at the scene of the crime. Let the sound of your voice be the pitiful sound of weeping, the groan of someone who has been wounded by a lethal weapon or suffering a harrowing illness.

God looketh on the heart. He sees our most hidden, most subtle thoughts and feelings; he sees all our past and all our future. God is everywhere present. So therefore stand in your prayer as if you were standing before God Himself. For you are indeed standing before Him! You are standing before your Judge and almighty Lord, on Whom depends your lot in time and eternity. Use your audience with Him to establish your wellbeing; do not let this audience, through your unworthiness, serve for you as grounds for temporal and eternal punishments.

[To be continued...](#)

Translated from the Russian by Nicola Dockray