

# A Century on Prayer

By Fr. Deacon Matthew Steenberg

*AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION: This offering on prayer is made, unworthily, in emulation of the old written form of the Fathers: the "century," or collection of one hundred short reflections. Each of its main sections contains seven texts, which number honors the symphony of creation and the rest of the Lord on the seventh day. Within each of these, there are three groupings of two texts, honoring the Holy Trinity and the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ in His two natures—Divine and human—followed by a summary paragraph. At the end there is a triad of sayings on Faith, Hope and Love, concluding the text once more in honor of the Trinity.*

## PRAYER AS SABBATH, AS REST

1. Prayer is the call of God to the heart, and the response of the heart to God. It is the rest of which the Savior spoke: *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,*<sup>1</sup> in which the soul and body, which *labor and are heavy laden* by the burdens of this world,<sup>2</sup> abide in the true Sabbath of rest in the comforting bosom of the Lord.

2. This rest is not a rest of idleness, of absence; it is, rather, the rest of the Savior Himself, Who in His ineffable condescension rested in the tomb on the Great and Most Holy Sabbath, drawing the departed to the embrace of life. The inner Sabbath of true prayer is the stillness of the heart in its Creator, where the Psalmist's words are obeyed: *Be still, and know that I am God,*<sup>3</sup> and where the mystical resurrection of the ailing creature is begun in the depths of the heart.

3. As the Lord's rest creates life and His descent to hades proved the

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 11:29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Matt. 11:28.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 45:11.

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universal power of His Resurrection, so prayer is full of life in its stillness, abundant in its rest, and raises up the fallen in us by its Divine power.

4. Just as the Savior raised up Adam with Himself in the fulfillment of His mystical Sabbath on the seventh day, so too our heart, finding its rest in the Sabbath of true prayer, will seek out the lost portions of our Divinely created life and lift them up to our Master. Just as on the Great Sabbath Christ descended to the depths to lead all things to new life, so through the Sabbath of prayer, the Spirit will lift us up to communion in unending and undying life.

5. Like the gracious Savior in the tomb, true prayer exists where a death to the world has already occurred. As long as the attractions and compulsions of worldly cares continue to bind the heart to the fruit of sin, it cannot find the rest in which its genuine longing resides and is fulfilled.

6. The Resurrection came only after the tomb. So, too, the heights of prayer come only with our death to sin. We must entomb ourselves in the grave of repentance, remaining attached to no worldly thing, if we are to be lifted out of death to the life of prayerful communion in Christ.

7. So let us heed the angelic words of the earthly choirs who sing at the mystical entrance, "Now let us lay aside all worldly cares, that we may receive the King of all."<sup>4</sup> For if we do not cast off such cares, do not die to them and flee from them as the waste of our former sin, we shall not find the stillness of heart necessary to receive the King; and it is the King Himself who builds the edifice of true prayer within us, just as the Psalmist says: *Lift up your heads, O ye gates! And be lifted up, ye everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall enter in.*<sup>5</sup>

## COMBATting THE PASSIONS

8. How shall we cast off these binding cares? How shall we join our precious Savior in the tomb? How shall we attain the mystical Sabbath in which we find the rest of prayer and contemplation? We shall make no progress in these things if we do not, first of all, discover the passions that war in us and set ourselves against them by the grace of ascetical warfare handed to us by our guardian mother, the holy Church of the Lord Himself.

9. To grow in prayer, then, we must be attentive to this rooting out of the

<sup>4</sup> From the Cherubic Hymn of the Divine Liturgy.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 23:7.

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passions. It is no good to say, "I shall pray," if we continue to give the passions free reign over the heart and mind. If we are to make a real beginning, we must make an intelligent one, as the Church directs. Else we are like the ailing man who says, "I shall now be well," but refuses to take the medicine prescribed by his doctor. It is utter foolishness, and a sign of our own pride.

10. The passions are the true enemies of prayer. Satan may oppose prayer, the demons may fight it; but the passions destroy the very space in the heart where prayer may grow. They prevent the edifice of prayer from ever being built. Their context can be compared to the building of a house: Satan is like one who terrifies the builders, so that they are afraid to engage in their task. The demons are like those who steal in by night and remove this plank or that, frustrating the efforts of the workers. But the passions are like a mold that has eaten its way into the foundation stones, weakening them into dust. Whatever is laid upon such foundations will inevitably fall.

11. If we wish to pray, then, let us begin by combatting anger, defeating lust, and destroying pride.

12. If, when we are combatting our fallen passions in the struggle for prayer, they are redoubled in their power, let us take heart. As the Fathers teach, the passions are concentrated in the heart that seeks the Lord; and the closer we draw to true contemplation, the more their force is focused against us.

13. As we see in the holy icon of the Ladder, the ascent of prayer calls the struggle against the passions into ever sharper relief. The higher we ascend, the more the passions draw together within us, for we become distanced from the worldly attractions and habits in which they are normally dispersed. This is why some of our holiest and most God-bearing Fathers have experienced the struggle against the passions to so high a degree, while most of us are deadened to their presence and foolishly believe them to be minor things.

14. We cannot pray truly when we are dominated by the passions, for true prayer is the heart's rest in God, while the passions are the heart's captivity to its impulses and fallen desires. *You cannot serve both God and mammon;*<sup>6</sup> and if "mammon" represents, in earthly terms, our attachment to wealth and money, then in the spiritual life it represents our attachment to the compulsions of the passionate soul and body. If we wish to serve the man-befriending Lord and find our rest in Him, we must learn to serve Him alone and cast off the familiar masters that are our passions.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13.

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### THE DEMONS

15. The demons provoke and stir up the passions in a man who seeks authentic prayer, for they see in such a one a man who actively works against their aims. Such a man has lifted himself out of the usual lethargy by which the demons' work is accomplished by man himself, without the requirement of their constant provocation; and to such a man they rush with renewed vigor. So we must not be surprised when, in those moments that we set our heart to true prayer, the demons collude against us with stronger force: this is neither arbitrary nor accidental. They act according to their true nature when, by God's love and grace, we begin to act according to ours.

16. The true terror of a demon is a man genuinely struggling after prayer. In the face of this threat, the demon will do everything in its power to upset its enemy: the Godly soul seeking sanctification.

17. Nevertheless, the demons' power is no power. They exercise force through deception and wield a sword through a lie. This is why our Holy Fathers instruct us that their defeat is so easy. By the simple sign of the precious Cross, the demons and all their terror can be put to flight.

18. The demons follow their chief, Satan, who *is a liar and the father of it.*<sup>7</sup> They convince the soul that they can foretell the future, when in truth they have power only to guess, or to behold with higher vision as spirits; they convince the soul that they have power to grant life and gifts, when they possess in reality only what they steal. What the soul ought to fear is not the demons' power in these regards, but rather their power to deceive; for it is a deceived heart that remains at odds with its Lord.

19. By deception, the demons provoke the passions. The real defeat of man comes from within, not without. The demons provoke, but the passions corrupt. So let us exercise an awareness of demonic activity, but let us cast the deepest accusations against ourselves, where the passions are given reign to conquer our hearts.

20. We must remember that the demons could have no foothold in our hearts if our impurities did not prepare there an abode fitting to their presence. They reside where it is comfortable for them to live. So if we wish

<sup>7</sup> John 8:44.

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to attain to prayer unaffected by demonic temptation, let us begin by fostering purity of body and mind, that our house may become barren and uninviting to the demons and a fitting temple for the presence of the Lord.

21. All my passions rage against me at every hour, and the host of demons tempts me at every moment. Behold, the true state of my miserable soul! But the Lord looks into the heart of man and sees the trouble there, and He speaks the word that quiets the demons and calms the raging passions. Just as the Psalmist declares, *My help cometh from the Lord, Who hath made heaven and earth,*<sup>8</sup> so must we remember that true prayer comes ever from this gracious Lord, Who defeats the enemies that war against us.

### DEFEATING THE PASSIONS IN PRAYER

22. If we wage war against the passions by a consistent repentance and gentle obedience, the purification provided by the grace of the Holy Trinity will become our ally and aid in their defeat. Just as misguided passions prevent the heart from fully approaching union with God, repelling its every impulse to communion in the splendor of the Lord, so a mind devoutly intent on inner prayer naturally repels those passions which fail to drive the soul closer to Christ. In this way, the aim of our contest also becomes the tool of its attainment.

23. When a mind is focused on true prayer, its desires for earthly passions are weakened by its longing for Divine union. The truer longing displaces its weak, disfigured brother. Seen in a renewed way as obstacles to pure prayer, familiar passions such as anger, greed, and lust are driven out, that the mind might be clear and holy, made ready for spiritual contemplation.

24. Look, how visible is God's mercy! In His infinite love He makes prayer the very tool by which we may learn to pray! He gives us prayer, which weakens the passions that keep us from prayer, so that by what is at first a weak and surface-level contemplation we might mature in due course to the heights of Divine union. How little ought we to fear the obstacles that lie in our way, in the face of such love and Divine favor from the Lord!

25. There are times when, in His infinite loving-kindness, the tender Lord banishes the passionate impulses wholly from our hearts for a brief

<sup>8</sup> Ps. 120:2.

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time in prayer. This wonderful solace serves to show us what can be obtained through genuine repentance, giving us a foretaste of blessed dispassion. If ever this miracle is wrought in us, let us embrace it not as a sign of our maturity or accomplishment; rather, let us recognize it as a condescension to our great sin: that the Lord provides us, even in our unworthiness, with a glimpse of Paradise. And so let us rise up with new vigor to its right and full attainment.

26. Gentleness of heart is a tool of infinite value in the struggle against the passions. Just as the king declared to the Lord, *Thy gentleness hath made me great*,<sup>9</sup> so too the gentleness of the Lord's presence may distill the troubles of the heart and raise us to the great heights of prayer. But we will not find gentleness where our will reigns, for an unchecked will is the father of arrogance and pomposity. The Lord's gentleness comes to us through humility and obedience.

27. The Lord Himself is our example in this: in all things was He obedient to His Father, even saying to His disciples, *I have come down from heaven not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me*,<sup>10</sup> and in the garden, *Not My will, but Thine be done*.<sup>11</sup> So was He *gentle and lowly in heart*,<sup>12</sup> One Who *humbled Himself*,<sup>13</sup> Who *opened not His mouth*,<sup>14</sup> Who was kind to the sinner even as He pronounced the just and mysterious judgment of the Kingdom. In this, the Savior was ever in perfect communion with His Father and the Holy Spirit, for the gentleness of His obediently humble will maintained at all times that Divine union, untouched by the passions that might thwart it.

28. If we are to discover true prayer, let the passions be banished through our intent and unbending love of the Lord. We cannot pray if we do not conform our wills to His; and we cannot emulate the Lord's will if ours is held captive by the passions. Let us cast off this heavy yoke of sin, and take upon us instead the yoke of the Savior, which is light and easy to bear.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> II Kings 22:36 (Septuagint).

<sup>10</sup> John 6:38.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:42.

<sup>12</sup> Matt. 11:29.

<sup>13</sup> Phil. 2:8.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Acts 8:32; Isaiah 53:7; Ps. 38:10.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Matt. 11:30.

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### ANGER, THE OPPONENT OF PRAYER

29. As the Holy Fathers teach us, prayer itself can be directed against the passions that disrupt the heart. If we find that we are angry with one person or another when we strive to pray, let us direct our prayer against that passion by praying for the person against whom we have sinned. If we are worried for this one or that, let us remember him especially in our prayer. In this way, prayer calms the passions that prevent the deeper contemplation of God.

30. Different passions will disrupt the heart in different ways, and so pose different obstacles to prayer. For the more physical, sensual passions, fasting and ascetical labors will often prove a useful aid, and to some extent may free the mind from them in prayer. But the more a passion is centered in the heart, the more it works its way into the very temple of prayer itself, defiling it. This is particularly the case with the more emotive passions such as avarice and, above all, anger.

31. Anger against our brother is a poison to prayer—a poison more potent than almost any other. If, when we pray, we discover such an anger in our heart, we must combat it immediately; else, we mix the poison into the draught we drink, and a small ailment becomes immeasurably greater.

32. Anger is a fuel for all the passions and a provocation of the demons. Let us remember the life of our holy Father Isidore of Scetis who, when asked why the demons were so terrified of him, replied, “Ever since I became a monk I have tried never to let anger rise as far as my mouth.”<sup>16</sup>

33. I have been instructed that the surest route to conquering anger against a brother in prayer is to seek his salvation and mine together with an abundance of prostrations. When we recognize such an anger in ourselves, let us first remember that it is we who are sinners, not our brother, and the anger is a sign of our own weakness. Then let us fall prostrate and beg the loving Lord: “My Creator, save me through the prayers of my brother!” If we do this a hundred times, the Lord will calm the passions of our heart.

34. If our anger remains after one hundred prostrations, by all means let

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, Revised Edition, 1984), pp. 96–97.

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us perform another hundred. And then another, if it be needed. And if we must keep from sleep through the whole night and prostrate ourselves to the rising of the sun for the sake of defeating the anger we harbor against our brother, so be it! It is better to cast off sleep than to lose our souls.

35. Only let us never imagine that we can offer true prayer in the temple of our souls and bodies while they rage with anger against our brother. We are then convicted by the words of St. John: *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*<sup>17</sup>

### STRUGGLES IN PRAYER; SEEKING COMFORT IN PRAYER

36. The best solace for a troubled mind is the practice of prayer, for through prayer the mind is purged of worry and distress, and these are replaced with the refreshing light of Christ within the soul.

37. We will not always feel this solace when we pray: indeed, there are times when, due to the hardness of our hearts, our prayer will serve to show up our lack of dispassion and make it painfully obvious to our minds. It is then that we cry out to the Lord: *The waters have surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep has closed in around me.*<sup>18</sup> It is then that prayer does not seem to ease the heart but causes us to cry out with greater conviction: *I am weighted down by many an iron fetter, I am rejected because of my sins and I have no relief.*<sup>19</sup> Yet in these moments we must not despair: the Lord in His tender mercy knows our heart and our struggle, and when it is most fitting for our salvation, allows prayer to convict rather than ease our minds. In this we are provided with a precious opportunity to be humbled by our sin.

38. True prayer is a function of the heart, and if we were genuinely attentive to preserving the stillness of the heart in the Lord, our prayer would not be tossed to and fro by the affairs of the external world. Yet our sin draws us out of the heart, and there arise situations that prevent, or at least make difficult, a true devotion in prayer. The result is a feeling of emptiness, or at times a kind of dryness: signs of a removal from God. But in these moments it is yet best to pray, for even by means of a shallow and unfocused prayer the

<sup>17</sup> I John 1:8.

<sup>18</sup> Jonah 2:6.

<sup>19</sup> Prayer of Manasseh.

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lips still call upon the Name of Christ; and where the lips lead, the heart will follow.

39. I have sometimes found that my heart is cold when I pray, yet through the acts and words of prayer is warmed by Christ. But I have never found that my cold heart is warmed without it.

40. The greater the coldness of heart and inattentiveness of the mind in prayer, the more we ought to rely on the helpmeet of prostrations. The holy Apostle tells us that *at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow*:<sup>20</sup> let us, then, bow the knees of our bodies when our heart finds it difficult to call out this Name!

41. If, when we are seated at prayer, our mind wanders, let us stand. If words said in silence are overpowered by a distracted mind, let us speak them aloud. If, in standing, our minds continue to go astray, let us fall down again and again to our faces in our prayer. The body may at times oppose us, but it can also be our helpmeet and tool. Let us not forget to use the body to call our heart and mind to task.

42. Make the sign of the precious Cross when you pray. Without it, you will never find the joy of true prayer; for “through the Cross, joy has come into all the world.”<sup>21</sup>

### PRAYER AND MYSTERY; THE RATIONAL MIND

43. Prayer is a mystery. It can be attained only in a mystery.

44. We must never forget this essential mystery at the heart of prayer! We must never let our weakened minds see prayer as simply a conversation, as a mere exchange of words. These are the tools of prayer at certain levels; but the depth of prayer is the quiet rest of the heart in loving communion with its Maker.

45. Prayer is the union of a finite being with God, Whose nature is infinite and Whose existence is eternal. By it, the substance of the former is made holy, and the image of the latter is made more clearly manifest in the human race.

<sup>20</sup> Phil. 2:10.

<sup>21</sup> From the hymn following the Sunday Matins Gospel reading, “Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ.”

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46. When we are told that “if you pray truly, you are a theologian,”<sup>22</sup> we are reminded of both the majesty of prayer and the true nature of theology. Our salvation is not to be found in books or letters: it consists in the communion of the heart in God. Let us attain this theology through repentance!

47. Prayer is the cure for a diseased mind. The intellect that believes it can gain the Kingdom by rational power has only this cure as sufficient for its ailment.

48. In our modern age, where the mystery of God is ever more thoroughly removed from man’s vision through a growing faith in debased rationalism, this remedy is difficult for some to prescribe, more difficult still for most to swallow. Yet it has the power to transform the dead bones of debased reason into the living assembly of divine and true knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

49. Prayer is not the antithesis of reason: it is an activity of the heart and mind beyond reason. It does not deny the intellect: it perfects and transcends it. Prayer does not say to modern man, “Deny your rational faculty,” for this too is the gift of God. Rather, prayer says, “Remember that your reason is like a foundation stone. It is good and can be pure; but unless something is built upon it, its existence is in vain.”

## PRAYER IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

50. The beginnings of prayer reside in a simple phrase: “Lord, have mercy”; but the heights of prayer go beyond all words. The holy Apostle Paul reveals this when he affirms that the Holy Spirit *Himself makes intercession for us*.<sup>24</sup> For, as the saint says, the Spirit dwells in you;<sup>25</sup> and so He manifests prayer in our innermost being, where our own words are incapable of expressing the true groanings of the heart.

51. When we are weak in prayer, when we are ailing in spirit and broken in body, then let us fall upon the Lord’s promise with deeper conviction. It is

<sup>22</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts*, 61; in the *Philokalia*, vol. I (ed. Ware et al.), p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ezek. 37:1–14.

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 8:26.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Rom. 8:11.

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then that the Spirit shall bind our wounds, touch our hearts, and lift up our prayer to the Father.

52. We must endeavor not to do battle with the Spirit, Who is our Helper and Comforter in prayer. We do battle with Him when we defile His dwelling-place, our body, with lustful passions; and we do battle with Him when we muffle His Divine voice with our paltry words. Let us offer instead a pure body and a quiet heart, for these present the Spirit with a peaceful country in which to reign.

53. Fall upon prayer as your only aid and help in this life. When you are weary, pray. When you are joyful, let your joy feed deeper prayer. When in hunger or thirst, open your heart to the Lord. When in exultation, bind your life more firmly to God. When prayer itself is hard, pray all the more. For prayer is, as our holy Father says, “the ascent of the heart to God,”<sup>26</sup> Who is its true and proper Master in every condition of this life.

54. This Spirit knows your heart better than you do. When through weariness or inattentiveness you fall dumb in prayerful openness before the Lord, do not fancifully invent conditions to present to the Master. Quiet your mind, and let the Spirit reveal the true condition of your heart.

55. To pray without the Spirit is to breathe without air, or eat without food, or drink without water. It is impossible: yet how often we make the vain attempt!

56. When the Spirit prays in a man, his heart is transformed from a cold rock to a living fire. The unsatisfying water of his soul becomes the true wine of spiritual life.<sup>27</sup> The raging sea of his mind is parted, that he might come directly into the presence of his Lord.<sup>28</sup> The meager rations of his Christian life are multiplied a hundredfold into the nourishment of the eternal Kingdom.<sup>29</sup> In short, all the miracles of God’s love are manifested in the heart where the Spirit has kindled the flame of true prayer.

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF REPENTANCE TO PRAYER

57. If we wish to pray in the Spirit, but make no attempt to purify

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Evagrius of Pontus, *On Prayer*, 36; p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. John 2:1–11.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Exod. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Matt. 14:13–21, 15:32–38; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14.

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ourselves through asceticism, can we expect any fruits for our labors? Can we expect to welcome Him into a temple to which we have barred up all the doors through our passions? Ought we expect Him to sit upon a throne we continue to muddy with our sins? So we must begin the ascent of prayer with purification, that prayer's Master might be with us.

58. The beginnings of such asceticism lie in repentance, which turns the heart from sin to true life. Repentance and prayer are inseparable kinsmen. The one will not be found without the other.

59. I have tried many times to pray, but have found my prayer to be lifeless and dry because I approached it with an unrepentant heart. Prayer was then my production, my construction, my false edifice; and like the tower at Shinar before it,<sup>30</sup> the Lord in His mercy destroyed my vain attempt to gain the Kingdom through arrogance and pride.

60. Where arrogance and pride lead, prayer does not follow. Oil and water may appear to mix together for a time, but eventually the one will repulse the other. So prayer may appear to exist in an unrepentant heart that is the haven of pride and the other passions; but in due course their true incompatibility will reveal itself as prayer departs.

61. When I examine my heart, when I behold my false repentance, I can say to the Lord only, "My God, I have never made any beginning in prayer!"

62. We know that we must repent, yet irrationally we fail to do it. This is as St. Paul has said of himself: *What I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.*<sup>31</sup> Let us, then, make our own the words of the father of the demon-possessed child in the Gospel, who cried to the Savior: *Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*<sup>32</sup>

63. It is never too late to make a beginning in repentance, and so it is never too late to begin to pray. A thousand times we may have tried and failed, yet at every moment the saving Lord calls us toward His Father. Only let us remember that we *know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming,*<sup>33</sup> when we shall be called from this life to the soul's fearful judgment; so let the moment of our true repentance be now, today, at this moment and no other!

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gen. 11:1-9.

<sup>31</sup> Rom. 7:15.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 9:24.

<sup>33</sup> Matt. 25:13.

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### THE GARDEN OF THE HEART

64. Have you ever planted a garden? Then you are aware how much care goes into every act: the preparing of the soil, the sowing of the seed, the watering of the seedling, the pruning of the mature plant. So it must be with prayer. True prayer is not the accident of happenstance, but the ripe fruit of a well-tended garden.

65. What good is it to spread seed or pour water over untilled soil? The good farmer knows that dry and packed earth, if not broken up and tilled, will resist both seed and water. So too with our hearts: if we spread the seed and pour out the water of many prayers, but have not broken up the hard ground of our resistant hearts, such prayer will remain only on the surface, on our lips. It will not take hold, and will easily be cast away by the winds of temptation. But if we are attentive to the heart, using the ascetical arsenal as tools to break up the hard ground of our pride and furrow the soil of our wills, then may prayer take root deep within, becoming the flower of a heart in which lives and thrives the Spirit of the living God.

66. The Fathers teach us that the soil of prayer is watered by tears; yet on account of our sins, we often lack the blessing of these spiritual tears by which the saints have watered the earth. God will bless our struggle still, yet let us remember: a single tear, shed in the true repentance that comes from the Spirit, brings more nourishment to the parched earth of the heart than a thousand streams of words and thoughts.

67. Just as a farmer at times must bring in water from an external source, when his own well has run dry, so too we must have recourse to the repentance and humble piety of our Fathers when our own is weak. Their lives are a spring that can replenish the dry well of the heart, and which can provide the nourishment to refresh what is weak in us.

68. A farmer cannot create his own seed: seed always comes from the mature plant that produces it—it is always inherited, always received. This, too, should serve as a reminder for our life of prayer. The grace we seek cannot but be received, handed to us from the mature experience and living mystery of the Church.

69. As we are reminded in the Gospel, we do not receive only the

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seed, but also the soil, the rain, the very earth, and the light of the sun from God.<sup>34</sup> The farmer seeing a full harvest, or the gardener a beautiful array in full bloom, can glory only in the joy that comes from being a participant in the Lord's work—of having a part in His creativity and budding of new life. So, too, with the garden of the heart: the Lord provides the soil, which is our very creatureliness, fashioned after His image and likeness. He provides the seed, which is the grace of true prayer in the Spirit. He offers the rain and the sun, which are the gifts of repentance and transfiguration. And then He hands us the hoe and says, "Till," calling us to asceticism and a life of spiritual action.

70. When the garden of the heart is tilled, when it is tended, it produces a hundredfold. A small seed produces not just a fine fruit or a beautiful flower, but a new life, joined to the life of the eternal God. It blossoms into Paradise. It refashions Eden in the heart, and man is called back to his Maker.

### THE DIVINE MYSTERIES: THE NOURISHMENT OF PRAYER

71. Returning in this way to his Maker and Fashioner, man finds himself anew in the temple of true prayer. A man cannot pray apart from the presence of God, even as a son cannot receive the embrace of his father if he does not run to his father's house.<sup>35</sup> So must we run to our Father's dwelling-place, the Church, and receive our precious Christ fully, wholly, in Body and Blood. In this way we embrace the presence of God—or rather, God embraces us—and prayer has a foundation on which to grow.

72. True prayer is this banquet of the heart in Christ. Its plate is the holy diskos, its cup the divine chalice. Its table is the altar of bloodless sacrifice, and its banqueting hall the sanctuary of the living Lord.

73. The divine Mystery of our true thanksgiving is both the icon and food of prayer. As the Lamb upon the altar is broken yet never divided,<sup>36</sup> the heart at prayer is broken by asceticism, yet never divided against itself. True prayer crushes the heart, yet does not break it. It crucifies the will, but

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Heb. 6:7.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Luke 15:18–20.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the priest's prayer at the fraction of the Lamb in the Divine Liturgy: "Broken and distributed is the Lamb of God, Who being broken is not divided, being eaten is not consumed, but sanctifies those who partake thereof."

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offers this sacrifice in order that the will may be raised. And so we hear it proclaimed: “Let your hearts be on high,” and we reply: “We lift them up unto the Lord.”<sup>37</sup> Exultantly debased, and debasingly exalted, we receive our Savior in body and in spirit.

74. In this manner, the Divine Services nourish us in communion with Life, and train the heart, mind, and body in genuine prayer. Run to the temple, if you wish to convert and make stalwart the heart!

75. Each of the Church’s Mysteries nourishes and feeds the life of prayer, and thus we must have recourse to all as best suits the needs of soul and body. Among these we must particularly remember regular confession, by which the heart is lightened of the burdens that weigh it down with worldly cares. Without the practice of such confession of thoughts and sins, we fetter to the earth that which might otherwise ascend to the heights of heaven.

76. Prayer is the sacrament of the heart. Our bodies are washed in baptism, anointed by chrism and oil; our souls, sealed by the Spirit, are liberated through confession. The Eucharist joins us, body and soul, to the incarnate Lord. And prayer transforms the receptive heart into the vessel and throne of God.

77. The training ground of prayer is the cell, for the cell is the icon of the heart. But the cell is made more spacious than all the cosmos because, through participation in the sacred Mysteries, the heart that struggles within it is united to the infinite and uncontainable God. It is only in the fully sacramental life that the cell is a fruitful plot; but by this life, it can bear more fruit than any other.<sup>38</sup>

## MAKING A FRUITFUL BEGINNING

78. For all that we hear of the heights of prayer, we must not become arrogant or deluded. Let us not become exalted by words that are too lofty, which serve only to give the lie to our true condition, fallen and debased as we have in our transgression made it. Rather, receiving from the Church and her saints the icon of the heights prayer can attain, let us return to our own

<sup>37</sup> From the anaphora of the Divine Liturgy.

<sup>38</sup> And this is true not only of the monastic’s cell, but of the cell of our Christian struggle wherever it may be quietly, attentively kept—whether in the home or the monastery.

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hearts, taking their first steps in prayer, and ask God to give us a productive, simple beginning.

79. Great advances and many steps made in the growth of prayer are easily defeated by a single second of pride. Be on guard, lest this small enemy creep in through the gates and defeat you.

80. Only a heart that is broken can be mended. Pray to the Lord that He will help you crucify your heart. Then, at times of prayer, lay it quietly in the tomb of your mind, stilled of all thoughts, and wait upon the Lord of its resurrection.

81. Do not fritter about in times of prayer, worrying whether your clothes are just so, the lights just right, the candles properly arranged, your books all in order. When it is time to pray, pray.

82. Who can know the mystery of God? How different are God's ways than man's! He makes Himself present to the sinful heart, and purifies it by His radiant fire. He cleanses what cannot be cleansed, heals what cannot be healed; He restores to life what is already dead. He makes the impossible ascent of prayer possible to the feeblest of human hearts. Glory be to our man-befriending Lord!

83. Breathe in the Lord: let His presence be the beginning and end of every breath. Fill your heart, as your lungs, with His life, which is so near to hand. Consider every breath wasted which is not the new work of the Spirit, breathing true life into the dust of your nostrils and making of you a living being.<sup>39</sup>

84. If too many words (including those of this little text) distract or confuse your heart, remember that the whole Paradise of prayer is contained in the cry of the tax-collector: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*<sup>40</sup> By such a prayer of divine simplicity, many have attained the Kingdom of God.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gen.2:7.

<sup>40</sup> Luke 18:13.

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### A CONCLUDING TRIAD ON FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

*And now abide faith, hope and love, these three;  
but the greatest of these is love.*

—I Corinthians 13:13

#### FAITH

85. Let us hear the words of the great Apostle, and see how they speak to us of prayer. Faith, for its part, stands at the beginning of prayer. It is *the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*,<sup>41</sup> and when our sight is not yet such as to see God face to face, faith draws our prayer close to the unseen God and accustoms us to dwell in His presence.

86. By faith our ancestors were led out of the wilderness into *the land of promise*.<sup>42</sup> By faith they were led to the sacred cities. By faith they were led from the cities to the deserts, and by faith from the desert to the Kingdom of God. So wherever we may be in our prayer—the wilderness of confusion, the city of stability, or the desert of true freedom—faith will lead us further toward salvation.

87. Faith is the fatherland of prayer. It is its home, its country, and its territory of fertile growth.

88. Faith calls down upon us the grace of God, and so waters the soil of prayer.

89. Where faith sows a seed, a great plant will grow. Even if the seed is small, or the smallest of them all,<sup>43</sup> great shoots may arise. And the plant that grows from the seed of faithful prayer is the very Tree of Life, the source of hope and eternal rejoicing. Let us seek out, then, the speck of faith that remains through our sin and our blindness. The Lord will make of it a seed capable of planting Eden in the heart.

<sup>41</sup> Heb. 11:1.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Heb. 11:8–9, 23–29.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Matt. 13:31–32—the parable of the mustard seed.

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### HOPE

90. Together with faith abides hope, its partner and friend, which guides it from the present to the future. Hope takes the faithful heart and moves it ever towards the Coming One and the Kingdom which is to come. Hope picks up faith, gives it legs, and pushes it toward its object and aim.

91. Our prayer, given its body by faith, thus receives its motion from hope. Hope moves our prayer beyond the tongue, beyond the mind, into the heart—for we know that in the heart it will journey further still: into the Kingdom which has no end.

92. Hope lives in the Kingdom. It lives at the end, even as it stands in the present—just as Christ once said to the repentant thief, *Today thou shalt be with Me in Paradise*.<sup>44</sup> So prayer, nourished by hope, lives today in the *parousia* of the tender Lord.

93. True hope is not expectation, but knowledge and surety. In this way, genuine hope is the stability of prayer.

94. Prayer that is rooted in sure hope is no longer tossed to and fro by desires, by passions, by worldly concerns. It is grafted into the Lord, ever moving toward and residing in Him; and so it has the stability to give rise to the highest of virtues.

### LOVE

95. Higher than that which resides solely in faith and hope is that prayer which exists also in the embrace of love, to which these give rise; for love knits the heart to God and makes of prayer a true communion of life in Life.

96. Love is the truest language of prayer, for love is the language that needs no language, no words, but only the gentle rest and uninterrupted communion of the purified heart.

97. Bound to love, upheld by love, prayer becomes unceasing: it never ends and never fails.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Luke 23:43.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. I Cor. 13:8.

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98. Without love, my prayer—whether made with words or without—sounds only as *a clanging symbol*.<sup>46</sup> Without love, my prayer is a dry well. Without love, my prayer stands alone, stands only with itself. But with love, my heart finds what is good, what is patient, what is kind:<sup>47</sup> it finds God Who is love,<sup>48</sup> borne within—and entertains this communion in its deepest chambers.

99. If faith, even the faith of a mustard seed, can move the mountains,<sup>49</sup> how much more can the heart infused with Divine love transform the cosmos!

## GLORY TO GOD, THE HOLY TRINITY

100. Let us, then, who seek to make a beginning in prayer, rush to God with hearts rich in the fervor of love, even if this love be yet untrained and imperfect. The Lord Himself will kindle love's flame in our heart, and we shall find ourselves wholly His. He will offer us true prayer, by which and in which we will receive His love and love Him all the more. Glory to this God of love! Glory to this pre-eternal King, to Whom we pray and Who prays in us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to the ages of ages.

AMEN!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. Matthew (M. C.) Steenberg received his doctorate in Theology from the University of Oxford. He has served as Professor of Theology and Head of Theology & Religious Studies at Leeds Trinity and All Saints College, England, and is currently the principal of the St. John of San Francisco Orthodox Academy in San Francisco, California. His books include *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* and *Of God and Man: Theology and Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius*. He is the creator of [www.monachos.net](http://www.monachos.net), a valuable resource of Orthodox patristic theology.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. I Cor. 13:1.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. I Cor. 13:4–7.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. I John 4:8, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Matt. 17:20.