

## The Church's Prayer for the Dead

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At every Divine Service, the Holy Orthodox Church offers up prayers for her departed children. Special prayers and Troparia are read at Compline (Night Service) and Nocturns (Midnight Service), and at Vespers and Matins the departed are remembered in the Litany of Fervent Supplication. At the Divine Liturgy the departed are commemorated at the Proskomedie, in the Litany following the Gospel and when It is truly meet... is sung. In addition, it is customary to have a Service for the departed on Saturdays, unless this coincides with a feast on that day.

### The Third Day.

On the third day after death, it is customary to commemorate the departed, since they had been baptized in the Name of the Holy Trinity-Father, Son and Holy Spirit and had kept the Orthodox Faith they received at Holy Baptism. In addition, as the Apostolic Constitutions point out: Let the third day of the departed be celebrated with psalms and lessons, and prayers, on account of Him Who arose within the space of three days (Bk. 8, Ch. 42], that is, in honor of the Third-Day Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### The Ninth Day.

On the ninth day after death, the Orthodox Church offers prayers for the departed both in remembrance of the living [Apost. Const.] and that the departed soul be counted worthy to be numbered among the choir of the saints, through the prayers and intercessions of the nine ranks of angels.

### The Fortieth Day.

From earliest times the Church had commanded that the departed be commemorated during the course of forty days and on the fortieth day itself, for so did the people lament Moses after his death [Apost. Const.]. This is also done in remembrance of the victory of Christ over Satan after He had spent forty days in fasting and prayer. The Church also commemorates the departed on the yearly anniversary of death and, in some places, on the twentieth day, and the third, sixth and ninth months, as well. It is also customary to commemorate the departed on their birthdays and patronal saint's days.

Koliva (grain or rice, cooked with honey or sugar, sometimes mixed with plums, raisins and other sweets) is often offered on these days of commemoration. The grain and fruit signify that the dead will again rise from the grave by God's might, for both the grain (sown in the ground) and the fruit (which falls on the ground) decay first and then

afterwards bring forth abundant, ripe and whole fruit. Sugar and honey signify that after the Resurrection of the righteous, there will come a joyful and blessed life in the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than one bitter and sorrowful.

As St. Simeon of Thessalonica says:

The [Third Day Service] is celebrated for the reason that [the departed one] received his being through the Trinity and having passed to a state of good being and being changed he shall [at the Resurrection] appear in his original state or one superior. The [Ninth Day] is celebrated that his spirit dwell together with the holy spirits the angels being immaterial and naturally similar to them for these spirits are nine in number and by them [the orders] they triply proclaim and praise the God in Trinity and so that he may be united with the holy spirits of the Saints. The [Fortieth Day] is celebrated because of the Savior's Ascension which came to pass after so many days after His Resurrection in the sense that [the reposed], as it were, having also risen and having ascended...being caught away in the clouds, shall meet the Judge and thus being united with Him, he should ever be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:17).

Now the third, sixth and ninth months are also celebrated as proclaiming the Trinity, the God of all, and to His glory in behalf of the deceased, for by the Trinity a man is fashioned, and when loosed from the body he returns to Him, and by the Trinity he hopes to receive resurrection. But the end of the year is celebrated because it is the consummation, and our God, the Trinity, is the Life of all and the Cause of being, and shall be the Restoration of all and the Renewal of human nature [On Things Done for the Departed].

In general, the custom of observing prayers for the dead has been held by the Orthodox Church since earliest times. The Divine Liturgy has always been celebrated in memory of the departed and, on these days, many have increased and continue to increase their offerings in the Church, assisting the poor and needy brethren out of love for their departed loved ones.

In addition to these personal days for remembrance of the departed, the Church has also set aside a number of universal days of commemoration. These are:

**Meatfare Sunday.**

This Saturday falls during Meatfare Week, which is the last week for eating meat before the start of the Great Fast. On the following day, Meatfare Sunday, the Church commemorates the Dread Judgment of Christ, and for this reason, on the Saturday before she prays for all who have departed in faith and hope of Resurrection, that Christ show mercy to them at the Universal Judgment. This commemoration dates from very ancient times and here the Church especially prays for those who have met

untimely deaths and have been left without a proper funeral. This is evident from the hymns of that day, including the following from the Matins Canon:

To those hidden by the deep or cut down in battle, swallowed by earthquake, murdered, or consumed by fire, grant in Thy mercy a place with the faithful and the righteous [Ode 1].

Those whom the creatures of the sea or the birds of the air have devoured, O Christ our God, raise up in glory on the Last Day, as Thou judgest right [Ode 3].

Give rest, O Christ, to all the faithful destroyed by the wrath of God: struck down by deadly thunderbolts from heaven, swallowed by a cleft in the earth, or drowned in the sea [Ode 9].

#### **Second, Third and Fourth Saturdays of Great Lent.**

Since the usual Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is not celebrated on the weekdays of Great Lent, but rather the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, it is the accepted custom of the Church to commemorate the dead on these three Saturdays (the other Saturdays being dedicated to special celebrations: St. Theodore on the 1st Saturday, the Akathist to the Theotokos on the 5th, and the Resurrection of Lazarus on the 6th), so that the dead not be deprived of the Church's saving intercession.

#### **Tuesday of St. Thomas Week.**

According to pious custom, a commemoration of the dead is made so that, having celebrated the bright festival of Christ's Resurrection, the joy of the Paschal feast be shared with those that have departed in the hope of their own Resurrection. Thus this day bears the name, Day of Rejoicing (Radonitsa).

#### **Trinity Saturday.**

On this day (the Saturday before Holy Pentecost) the Church asks that the saving grace of the Holy Spirit wash away the sins from the souls of all our forefathers, fathers and brethren that have reposed from all the ages, asking that they all be united in the Kingdom of Heaven.

#### **Commemoration of Departed Orthodox Warriors.**

The Church has also set aside two days of remembrance for those who have laid down their lives in battle:

### **Beheading of St. John the Baptist (Aug. 29).**

On the day of the Beheading of the Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord, the Church prays for all who have died for faith and homeland, as being like the righteous John who suffered for the truth.

### **St. Demetrius Saturday (Sat. before Oct. 26).**

This commemoration was originally initiated by Great Prince Dimitry Donskoy on his Patron Saint's Day (St. Demetrius of Thessalonica Oct. 26) in 1380. In remembrance of his great victory over the Tatars on Kulikovo Field (in the present-day Province of Tula in Russia), Prince Dimitry made a pilgrimage to the Trinity-Sergius Monastery at Zagorsk (Sergiev Posad) (near Moscow). After commemorating all who fell in that war, he later decreed that the annual remembrance be made on the Saturday before October 26. Later, Orthodox Christians began to commemorate on this day, not only Orthodox warriors fallen for the Faith, but also for all Orthodox Christians who have died in the Faith.

### **The Jesus Prayer Prayer of the Heart.**

For the Orthodox, the prayer par excellence is the Jesus Prayer, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner (or, in its shorter form, Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me). From New Testament times, the Orthodox have believed that the power of God is present in the Name of Jesus. When the Apostle Peter healed a crippled man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, he was questioned by the High Priest: By what power or by what name did you do this? (Acts 4:7). St. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answered: Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Whom you crucified, Whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man is standing before you well (Acts 4:10).

Our Lord Himself, comforting His disciples before His passion and death, told them that Whatever you ask in My Name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in My Name, I will do it (John 14:13-14). Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in My Name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in My Name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:23-24).

Later, in the era immediately following the time of the Apostles, St. Ignatius of Antioch (who had known St. John the Evangelist), when he was being led into the arena in Rome to suffer martyrdom by wild beasts, when he was asked by the soldiers guarding him why he kept repeating the name Jesus unceasingly, replied that It was written in his heart.

Thus, praying this prayer in the Name of Jesus Christ has been a vital part of the Orthodox spiritual tradition from earliest times and has been especially treasured by monastics since the 4th Century. In the Service for the Tonsuring of a Monk, when he is given the Prayer Rope (Komvoschoinlon Chotki), the Abbot says, as it is handed over: Take, brother, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, for continual prayer to Jesus; for you must always have the Name of the Lord Jesus in mind, in heart, and on your lips, ever saying: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

However, while especially practiced and popularized by monastics, praying in the Name of Jesus is every bit the privilege of all Christians. As the Prayerbook says, At work and at rest, at home and on journeys, alone or among other people, always and everywhere repeat in your mind and heart the sweet name of the Lord Jesus Christ, saying: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' In our busy lives, however, how can an ordinary Orthodox Christian practice this unceasing Prayer of Jesus?

In our daily affairs, there are many things that we do out of habit. At the beginning of the day, for example, we wash, we dress, we have breakfast, and so on. As we go on our way to work, there is usually much free time. During the working day, whether at home doing housework, or at the factory, shop or office, there are many idle moments or moments of repetitious work. Even in such recreational activities as hiking, jogging, or whatever, there are many opportunities to engage in prayer. And what better time to do good, to unceasingly call on the Name of Jesus, can there be than at times such as these? Even the most monotonous task can be transformed into a sweet and joyful experience!

Even if we are in a crowd, at work, at a family gathering, in situations that demand all our thought and attention, it is possible to say the Prayer of Jesus, perhaps not for long, continuous blocks of time, but from time to time. As Archbishop Paul, Primate of the Orthodox Church of Finland and a Valaam Monk states: If we get into the habit of reciting the Name of Jesus in this way even for half a minute at a time and it is possible to arrange such a pause for oneself in almost any work remembrance of God's presence will remain as an undercurrent in our soul. [This and other passages herein are taken from *The Faith We Hold*, by Archbishop Paul, p.85-86.]

The Jesus Prayer, then, is a prayer of amazing versatility; it is a prayer for beginners and equally a prayer that leads to the deepest mysteries of the contemplative life. For some, there comes a time when the Jesus Prayer enters into the heart, so to speak, which is why it is also called The Prayer of the Heart. At this point, the Jesus Prayer is no longer recited by means of a deliberate effort, but repeats itself spontaneously,

continuing even when one talks or writes, is present in one's dreams and wakes him up in the morning.

According to St. Isaac the Syrian,

when the Spirit takes its dwelling-place in a man he does not cease to pray, because the Spirit will constantly pray in him. Then, neither when he sleeps, nor when he is awake, will prayer be cut off from his soul; but when he eats and when he drinks, when he lies down and when he does any work, even when he is immersed in sleep, the perfumes of prayer will breathe in his heart spontaneously [Mystical Treatises].

Thus, both to those who recite this prayer ceaselessly and to those who are only occasional users of it, the Jesus Prayer is found to be a great source of joy and reassurance.

### **The Psalter a Book of Prayer.**

The Psalms have become a part of our Christian life, so much so that we the people of the New Testament sometimes tend to forget that the Psalter is also an Old Testament book. The Apostles mention the use of Psalms during the prayer meetings of the first Christians (1 Cor. 14:26). They called on believers to edify themselves with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Already by the beginning of the 4th Century the use of the Psalter in private homes was widespread.

How can we explain this widespread use of the Psalms in Christian times, when the Church already had new prayers inspired by the Gospel teaching and compiled with regard for the fundamentally new relationship between God and man a relationship made possible through the act of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ? Did not St. Paul say, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17)? Why do so many of the Holy Fathers, themselves authors of outstanding prayers, speak with such feeling about the ancient prayers of the Psalter?

It is known that Christ sometimes used the Psalms in prayer and some scholars consider that He and His disciples sang Psalms after the Last Supper. But even these Gospel references do not fully explain the widespread use of the Psalter.

The popularity and widespread use of the Psalter are due, first of all, to its special spiritual inspiration, poetic expressiveness and theological depth. As St. Basil the Great wrote, the Book of Psalms embraces everything contained in the other Holy Books. It prophesies about the future, and recalls the past, and stipulates laws for life and rules for action. The Psalter is sometimes called, rightfully so, The Little Bible, for it speaks in the tongue of prayer about the creation of the world and man, and traces in

detail the thousands-year-old paths and fortunes of nations. It describes the struggle between Good and Evil and the psychology of sin and virtue with unusual depth.

The theme of most of the Psalms is the providential paths of God and in the course of these paths God is revealed to the Psalmist in all His might, holiness, wisdom, love, righteousness and mercy. The Psalms are filled with deep reflections about God's Law and spiritual and ethical admonitions. The many Messianic prophecies to be found in the Psalter are especially astounding in their historical accuracy.

The Psalter is first and foremost, however, a book of prayer. The Psalmist prays, opening his heart to God. The prayer of the Psalmist is often so emotional and spontaneous that he does not pay attention to its outward form and one feels that the Psalms were born in the process of prayer.

In the Psalter are many Psalms of a contemplative nature. Contemplating the beauty and grandeur of the world and reflecting on God's acts as described in the other books of the Old Testament, the Psalmist recalls times long past and bygone years, and tries to grasp the significance and aim of human life. The language of such Psalms becomes particularly profound and rhythmically expressive. Every word is weighed, and the author strives to endow the Psalms with the stern beauty of an epic literary form.

But even in these instances the Psalmist does not aim to systematize the Biblical teachings upon which he meditates, for Psalms of a contemplative nature are also prayers. Above all, these contemplative Psalms are the prayers of the author himself, who sets the Lord always before him (Ps. 16:8). By spiritually reliving the events of the Bible he learns to perceive God and seek Him. For the Psalmist nothing is accidental and insignificant. He interprets both crucial episodes in biblical history and 'everyday human affairs and aspirations. The Psalmist does not merely write what he has heard from his fathers in order to convey the facts to posterity (Ps. 44:1); he is more concerned with the spiritual comprehension and evaluation of the events enriching his wisdom and helping him to perceive the right hand of the Lord leading His people.

The Psalmist's prayers express concern for the future of his people and the coming generations. These words contain a call not to repeat the mistakes of the past, not to be a people who err in heart (Ps. 95:10), grieving and trying the patience of God. Most often the Psalmist turns to the theme of the Exodus and the Israelites' forty-year wandering in the desert (Ps. 95; 106; 135; 136, etc.). The Psalmist prays for his people and offers his Psalms for the edification of posterity.

The worth and authority of the Psalms are explained by their authors' great experience of prayer. The Psalms contain frequent reminders of how this experience is gained. The Psalmist loves to pray; his soul seeks and thirsts after God (Ps. 27:8; 63:1) as a

heart longs for flowing streams (Ps. 42:1); seven times a day he praises Him (Ps. 119:164); he loves the splendor of the temple and the place where [God's] glory dwells (Ps. 26:8). Fervent is his morning prayers (Ps. 63:1) and even the night hours are given over to God (Ps. 63:6; 119:55,62). At night he shed tears in his bed as he recalls the years he has lived, his failings and the errors he has made (Ps. 6:6). However, even his daytime prayer is full of sorrow and weeping, too (Ps. 42:3), accompanied by fasting and sackcloth (Ps. 35:13).

The prayers of the Psalmist are always full of confidence because they are born in a pure heart that knows how to pray and is constantly ready to meet God (Ps. 57:7). God, for him, is his strength and fortress, his shield, his high tower and deliverer, and the horn of [his] salvation (Ps. 18:1-2). The Psalmist lovingly refers to God as his Shepherd, Who makes His people to lie down in green pastures and leads them besides still waters (Ps. 23:1-2), and he refers to himself as the sheep of His pasture (Ps. 100:3).

The Psalmist gives thanks for the bestowal of God's help, even before he receives what he has asked for and he also offers up thanks without asking for anything. Always and everywhere the Psalmist finds occasion to glorify God, for God is vested in honor and majesty, He is clothed with light as with a garment; His herald is flaming fire; He walks upon the wings of the wind (Ps. 104:1-4).

Turning to the earth, the Psalmist is filled with wonder at God's numerous works of wisdom (Ps. 104:24). Life, man, the beauty and harmony of the world, are an eternal miracle to him. For all this from the rising of the sun until its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised (Ps. 113:3). Praise and thanks are offered up to the Lord in joy (Ps. 92:1-5) and grief (Ps. 109:30-31), for deliverance from danger (Ps. 56:13) and trials encountered (Ps. 119:71), for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever (Ps. 136:1).

The action and power of the prayer of the Psalms extend to every worshiper and the Psalms help one to achieve the constancy and peaceful disposition of spirit so necessary in prayer. The Psalm is silence of the soul, writes St. Basil the Great, the giver of peace, for it calms turbulent and troubled thoughts, soothes irritation of the soul...and man is filled with quiet delight....

While implacably struggling against evil and demanding the triumph of justice, the author of the Psalms shows exceptional compassion for the poor, the persecuted, widows, orphans and the unfortunate. He well realizes that the reasons for the victims' woeful plight are often to be found in the wickedness and greed of evildoers. The Psalmist intercedes in his prayers for the deprived (Ps. 10:2,12,17-18). He knows that all victims of injustice are dear to God (Ps. 86:14-17), that God is the helper of orphans

and the poor (Ps. 10:14) and that one of the deeds of the Messiah will be to defend the rights of the needy and the poor (Ps. 72:12).

Thus, the Psalms have such indisputable merits, especially in prayer, that they have been accepted wholeheartedly by the Christian Church and are used, not only for private devotion, but in the Divine Services themselves. It should also be noted that the Church accepted the Psalms as prayer without changing the words, but their meanings were enhanced, for the New Testament Revelation helped to reveal more fully the meaning of the Old Testament images and prophecies contained in the Psalter, and made it possible for all the Psalms to be sung not in the antiquity of the letter but in the renewal of the spirit.

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