

**PRAYER
IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

**2017 Pastoral Letter
of the Synod of Bishops
of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church
to
the Clergy, Monastics and Laity**

Lord, teach us to pray (Lk 11:1).

Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers!
Venerable Brother and Sister Monastics!
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

Having gathered at a session of the Holy Synod in Briukhovychi near L'viv from September 3-12, 2017 we, the bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, focused our attention on the central aspect of Church life, namely, on personal and liturgical prayer. We seek to share with you the fruit of our common spiritual reflection.

Even though prayer is a natural consequence and manifestation of humankind's faith in God, still it [prayer] needs to be learned, continually renewing and deepening the capacity to interact with God. The request of Jesus' disciples: *Lord, teach us to pray* (cf. Lk 11:1) – is relevant for us always, because the chief teacher of prayer is our very Lord Jesus Christ. And we today, as Church, approach Him with humility and repeat the disciples' request. In our modern world, which, on the one hand, proposes beautiful, unprecedented possibilities to humankind, but, on the other hand, overwhelms humankind with an avalanche of information and unsettles it with pseudo-values and ideologies, this request has special importance.

From the Gospel we see that Christ teaches to pray first of all by His own life and example. His relationship with the Father is shown continually, both in public work and in the special trusting interaction with Him. In proclaiming the Good News about the approach of God's kingdom, Jesus often calls His disciples to remain vigilant and to pray. The Divine Teacher also presents to them the rational model of prayer – the *Our Father*, that Christians consider from the first centuries to this day to be the most important and have the greatest authority. *All righteousness* (cf. Mt 3:15) about God and humankind is revealed in this prayer of Jesus to the Father, for through the lips of the Lord Himself it reminds us that God is a loving Father, close to humankind in all of its situations of life, needs and difficulties, but humankind is the beloved child of God, called to fulfill the Lord's plan: that His name be made holy, that His kingdom come and His will be done (cf. Mt 6:9-10).

The precondition of Christian prayer is our humility before God, the recognition of our inability to interact with the Creator. In our divine services we express this weakness of ours before God and humbly profess: *We do not know how to pray as we*

should, unless You guide us by Your Holy Spirit (the 7th prayer of Matins). And the Lord in His mercy gives us His Holy Spirit *Who searches hearts, helps us in our weakness, prays for us and intercedes for us according to the will of God* (cf. Rom 8, 26-27). This is why every divine service and every interaction with God in prayer begins with invoking the Holy Spirit.

True Christian prayer foresees a meeting with the living God and the establishment of a personal relationship with Him. This can be a silent hearing of the Word of God, which is especially needed during times of informational noise and commercial clamour, and praise, and thanksgiving, and humble supplication, and repentance. A very important element of this relationship is sincerity and authenticity. A Christian's personal prayer is encountering a living, real person with the living God. Before the face of the Creator a believer does not conceal the truth, he or she does not put on a mask, for he or she does not doubt in the goodness and the unconditional love on the part of the Lord God.

A characteristic feature of Christian prayer is humankind's openness to God's will and readiness to accept it: *Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God* (Ps 142:10). Therefore, prayer should not be seen as humankind's attempts to convince God that He fulfill our desires. Our sensitivity to the voice of God is much more important than our requests, for the Lord knows *what we need even before we ask or are aware of it* (the 5th prayer of Vespers).

A Christian is never solitary in prayer, he or she is united with his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. According to Christ's assurance -- *Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them* (Mt 18:20), -- prayer is most fully expressed in the common dimension. That is why it is most important for Christian life to have communal family prayer, and its summit and source is the Divine Liturgy.

Service rendered to God is a dialogical act: The Lord *blesses those who bless Him and sanctifies those who trust in Him* (The Ambo Prayer of the Divine Liturgy). This is why the central ecclesial divine service is called *The Eucharist* – a thanksgiving for everything that the Lord out of His mercy has done for us. The goal of Eucharist is not only the transubstantiation of bread and wine, but above all our change, our being united with Christ. The serving of the Eucharist is *for us, who share in this one bread, with one another into the communion of the one Holy Spirit* (the *epiklesis* of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great). Through the Most Holy Eucharist, *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* are present in this world. Through the Eucharist the Church becomes the mystery of the salvation of the world and at the same time the harbinger of *the life of the world to come*.

Prayer is humankind's cooperation with God, and that is why it is so indivisibly linked with humankind's responsibility for its life, for the life of the Church and for the whole world. Every Christian, who with an open heart turns in prayer to the Lord, the Giver of Life, is called with his or her life to build the Church and to spread God's saving work in the world. We need to remember the words of the apostle James: *So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead* (Jas 2:17). And our personal and communal prayer is a

manifestation of faith; prayer, therefore, must be reflected in good deeds, in service-*diakonia* in the Church and in society. Then all life will consist of unceasing praise of God through deeds, words, thoughts, intentions and efforts.

It is necessary to remember that the cradle and first school of prayer is the Christian family, which we traditionally refer to as the domestic Church. This is why we offer our sincere gratitude to the parents, grandmothers and grandfathers, from whom children and grandchildren first hear the words of prayer in their lives and learn to say them with proper attention and reverence. This prayer often lays the foundation for the Christian education of a child, and also it becomes the beginning of a child's gradual growth in the faith and virtues. We call on all Christian families to further carefully cherish family prayer, both in the morning and in the evening, and to begin work by prayer on their lips and to thank God for their daily bread at the table.

At the same time we encourage parents as well as catechists and the clergy to pay close attention to the education of children in prayer, using during the teaching of the Christian faith in catechetical schools, during homilies and days of recollection the great spiritual heritage of our liturgical tradition, especially the texts of the divine services, in which the faith of the Church and the prayerful experience of the saints are conveyed.

Since the sacred ministers are the leaders of prayer for parishioners within the confines of the parish community, we express recognition and gratitude to every priest and deacon who are the examples and teachers of prayer for their faithful. Together with this, we renew the call to all priests regarding being faithful on a daily basis to personal and liturgical prayer. Let us remember that a church community that does not pray, betrays its calling and deprives its members of a multitude of divine gifts, which members need in their temporal and spiritual matters. Our great desire and wish is that, through the diligent cultivation of liturgical and personal prayer, the spiritual educational institutes and pedagogical institutions of our Church help future ministers of the Church to gain an authentic experience of interaction with the living and merciful God.

We extend special recognition to the communities of consecrated life, whose foundational essence is prayer, both personal and liturgical. The prayerful ministry of monasteries is so important today for our people. Therefore, we call on consecrated persons to worthily keep a liturgical prayer rule in accordance with the regulations of our rite. We believe that our monasteries will remain schools of ecclesial prayer for its members and for all the Church's faithful.

We want to emphasize that, as Church pastors, we genuinely respect and appreciate the manifestations of prayerful piety among our faithful. In particular, concerning the prayerful brotherhoods, movements and communities, under the leadership of experienced spiritual fathers we encourage all faithful to participate in them. We especially want to recognize the practice of pilgrimages to the holy places, which the Lord has richly bestowed our land. Pilgrimages to the holy places, along with proper spiritual leadership, become a very important school of prayer for the faithful of our Church. The prayer of God's people that travels with and reflects the mission of the

Church is to forever enter into that saving presence of God. The Lord God continually comes for our sake and for the sake of our salvation, and the Church always goes toward her immortal Bridegroom. In this sense every Christian is a pilgrim – a living witness of God’s saving coming into this world.

Difficult trials have befallen our people over the past number of years. These important and tragic circumstances have shown the unprecedented strength of spirit of our people, strength stemming from prayer and trust in God. Many faithful of our Church have not ceased being prayerfully vigilant as a people in the most disastrous of moments. As a result of the enduring prayerful support, of the sacrifice and devotion of many of our priests, consecrated and lay persons, we do overcome great difficulties and we press forward. The strength of our people and the source of salvation is in prayer; therefore, we call for the continuation of this prayerful effort employing the words of the apostle Paul: *Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them* (Rom 12:11-14).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! The Lord has blessed our Church with the freedom to pray, a freedom we did not always have. At the same time He gave life to us – a space and time to meet and interact with Him. Let us use this gift!

As it was said in the beginning, the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray. Let us pray, let us remain vigilant and hear His Word in the silence of our hearts and our communities. He speaks and comes to us in order to be with us personally in the new year, to be with our families, to be with our communities and with our people. Let us rejoice in this mystery and let us live in peace!

The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

On behalf of the Synod of Bishops
of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

+ SVIATOSLAV

Given in Kyiv
at the Patriarchal Cathedral
of the Resurrection of Christ,
on the day commemorating
our holy Father Nicholas the Wonderworker,
Archbishop of Myra in Lycia,
19 December 2017 A.D.

We ask the clergy to read this Pastoral Letter to their faithful after each Divine Liturgy on Sun., Dec. 31, 2017.