

A large, dark, gnarled tree trunk and branches against a light background. The trunk is textured and layered, with many branches extending from the right side. The background is a soft, mottled blue-grey.

THE MESSENGER

A Journal of Orthodox
Christianity

Volume 3, Summer 2020

THE MESSENGER, VOLUME 3 SUMMER 2020

- 4 Letter from an Editor *R. Irvine*
- 9 Prayer at Home *Mark Najjar*
- 16 On Becoming a Mother *Abigail Holt*
- 19 Praying With and For Your Children *Lindsey Birdsall*
- 24 A Short Rule of Vigilance *Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov*
- 28 Worship in Quarantine: Barred Light *Derek Matthew Holt*
- 31 Sunday of a Blind Man *Marta Irvine*
- 34 New Beginnings *Brittany Barbara Pagel*
- 37 Why just okay is not okay *Lydia Super*
- 39 Tears *Theron Mathis*

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The Messenger is a labor of love, produced and published by the parish community of the Archangel Michael in Louisville, Kentucky.

Saint Michael Orthodox Church has been witnessing to the truth of Christianity since the early 1930s, and its confession of faith has been preached unchanged for two thousand years. Orthodox Christianity is the historic and apostolic Way revealed by Jesus Christ.

Glory to God for all things!

Letter from an Editor

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

—Saint Paul

I wasn't prepared for the reluctance I would meet when I began asking people to consider writing for this issue of our parish journal. The theme would be *prayer*. Nor was I prepared for the series of events that knocked me off course, first of all, and knocked the whole world off course, second. Who could have foreseen the closure of our churches or the broadening division in our streets? I lament a souring even within our parishes: for want of unity among the laity in response to official directives, and an apparent lack of trust in God as would otherwise be expressed in simple love and obedience to our bishops, local pastors, and parish councils.

These past months, as our world and nation were thrown into the fires of pandemic and sociopolitical unrest, it was impressed upon me by spiritual fathers to *guard my peace*. For inasmuch as what Saint Seraphim says is true, that as we acquire the spirit of peace thousands around us will be saved: so must the opposite be true, that if we lose the spirit of peace thousands around us will be lost.

Those three little words—*guard your peace*—and that inverse of Saint Seraphim's famous saying, have kept me on my feet—if indeed I am found standing at all. It truly is a struggle, every moment of every day, to guard one's peace. We might fall—and I really mean *fall*—into any number of interpretations, theories, or judgements about the pandemic, mask-wearing, the decisions of our parish councils and bishops, the protests and riots, political doings and undoings, etc. It is good to remember, the line separating good and evil passes not through political parties, nor

between holy synods, nor parish councils, but right through every human heart. Mine and yours.

Because I am a beginner, for several years I've been reading over and over the first pages of my patron saint's collection of 7th century spiritual writings, in which he has much to say about Christian peace. On the first page, Saint Isaac of Syria begins by saying that the fear of God is the beginning of virtue. Virtue, he says, is that we should be unoccupied with the world. In later homilies he specifies what he means by *the world*—he means *the passions*: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth.

And, for a striking image of what it means to be *unoccupied with the world*, the Apostle Saint Paul puts it this way: “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:22-24). This—*dispassion*—is Christian peace.

In the biography of Saint Nektarios of Pentapolis, we see an inspiring example of a man who crucified his passions. Before he was unjustly deposed and exiled from Cairo, one day his attendant warned him, “The archimandrites are secretly arranging something concerning you” In a prior scene we are a fly on the wall of a meeting between jealous clergymen conspiring against Metropolitan Nektarios. Learning of this, the saint would only say, “It does not matter I love them, and that is enough for me to keep my inner peace.”¹

Looking again at Saint Seraphim's counsel, we see that he's not talking about acquiring merely an outward peace, but the *spirit* of peace: the Spirit that is Holy and is God Himself. This is the goal of every Christian, that God would come to us and make his abode in us (John 14:23). As is written

elsewhere in this journal, prayer is essential to Christian life. Prayer is where we perform the work of guarding ourselves and bringing our heart and mind to union with God. The evil one—the very real and restless enemy of our souls—is wresting every opportunity to wield this time against us. He is far more subtle, clever, and havoc-wreaking than any virus, riot, or human conspiracy. He is, in fact, the great and *only* conspirer. If there is anyone aligned to the work of conspiracy, they are merely co-conspirers. For there is only one real conspiracy: to knock us off course the Kingdom of Heaven. If we are Christians we really must take up the example of saints like Nektarios, and strive: first in acquiring the spirit of peace, second in zealously guarding it. Our salvation depends on it.

When Saint Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside Jesus's tomb, she did not have even his reposed body to console her. His tomb was empty. Where had they taken him? She did not understand the significance of what she saw. Neither did Saints Peter and John, having previously hightailed it to confirm the same scene. Later that evening, after the Lord had revealed himself to the weeping Magdalene, Jesus's disciples gathered behind locked doors *for fear of the Jews*. These barriers notwithstanding—their fear, the locked doors, and even death itself—Jesus came, alive, standing among them (John 20). For he had promised, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I” (Matt 18:20). Standing among them now and seeing their fear, he said, “Peace be unto you,” and, with instruction to forgive the world, “Receive ye the Holy Spirit.”

Today as our church doors are unlocked and we begin to reassemble in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—even though we may be burdened by anxiety, or lack

understanding: Christ's priest continues to come forth from the altar, standing among us, proclaiming, "Peace be to all." And when we have responded by confessing the Holy Trinity in love, the priest again assures us, "Christ is in our midst!"

Whatever may be happening in the world and our nation—even as our churches may be given a foretaste of oppressive suffering—nonetheless: the tomb *is* empty and Christ *is* risen. The Holy Spirit has descended upon us, and the apostles have taken this Good News into the world—and we have received it! God *is* with us.

As we struggle to remain standing with the risen Lord and patiently endure the present storm, we will surely increase in grace. With God's grace, no measure of social or physical distancing can quell our piety and love. If we have love, we can be at peace. If we have peace, we can pray. If we have prayer, we can attain to union with God. It doesn't come automatically, but our baptism enables us to stand against the tide.

R. Irvine
Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene

¹ Sotos Chondropoulos, *The Saint of Our Century*, part one, chs. 1-2



Prayer at Home by Mark Najjar

Prayer is essential to the life of a Christian. In the Orthodox Church there are two basic categories of prayer: communal prayer and personal prayer. Communal prayer happens in the liturgical cycle of the church services. Personal prayer, in general, is our journey of striving and raising our soul Godward for the unification of our mind and heart with God. To have a dialogue on prayer alone would fill volumes before we could scratch the surface of the depth and height of prayer. This article is focused on having and establishing prayer in the home; something I only know a little about, since I am neither experienced in prayer nor worthy to instruct others. Of the innumerable resources on prayer within the Orthodox Church, consider Fr Thomas Hopko's wonderfully concise book, *The Orthodox Faith, volume IV: Spirituality*, which starts by saying, "All of the virtues and powers of God are attained primarily by prayer. Without prayer, there is no spiritual life."

The Icon Corner

It goes without saying that prayer should exist at all times, and in all places, but it is especially important to establish a special place in our home designed for prayer. In the beginning pages of the New Testament, Jesus offers his Sermon on the Mount throughout chapters 5, 6 and 7 in the Gospel of Matthew. One of his instructions is how to pray: "When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matt. 6:6). A few verses later, he teaches us the Lord's Prayer. The meaning of "your room" can be two-fold: praying physically in secret as well as praying within yourself to enter your soul.

An “icon corner” can be placed in a corner, but it can also be a shelf, a wall, a closet, or even take up an entire room in a house. The icon corner ideally is a miniature church in our home. It should be in a quiet and easily accessible location to encourage prayer as well as veneration. The ideal place of the icon corner is recommended to be at an easterly-facing location in the home, just as we face east in church. There are many biblical references and spiritual writings regarding the east, many which reference that we face the new day, as the sun rises in the east, since Christ is the “true light” of the world and the “Sun of righteousness.” If there are no easterly locations suitably available in the home, any place conducive for prayer is acceptable.

Icons are usually the center focus of an icon corner, and they should be similarly placed hierarchically like the iconostasis at church, with the centrally-located primary icons of Christ to the right of the Theotokos, and other saints surrounding the primary icons. Votive candles or lampadas are often placed in front of the icons or hung on the wall. Incense can also be used. If you choose to use an oil lamp for continual burning, or burn incense, follow all safety precautions. Orthodox spiritual items such as prayer books, service books, Orthodox spiritual books, bibles, and relics can also be very helpful at the icon corner. Conversely, secular books and art should ideally be separated away from the icon corner.

Praying at the Icon Corner

When praying at the icon corner, it is common to use prayer books or service books to help set a prayer rule, or a consistent time and set of prayers. Orthodox prayer books are a *guide* to help us, and are compilations of prayers written by holy members of the Orthodox faith who were immersed

and experienced in prayer. Prayer books can be found in many translations, and not one is better than another. You will find that prayer books are organized into prayers by the time of day (e.g. morning and evening prayers) as well as certain occasions, such as entering and leaving a church, before and after meals, before and after communion, in times of sickness, to your Guardian Angel, and so forth. Common sets of prayers usually begin with the Trisagion prayers, which is the set of prayers for the Trinity that start with “O Heavenly King, Comforter...” and end with the Lord’s Prayer. The Creed, Psalm 50¹, and the Doxology are also commonly used. Alternatively, you may choose to pray or sing an entire supplication service, such as the Paraklesis or an Akathist.

Using the pre-written prayers is a great place to build a foundation, but since these are guides to teach us to pray, we are also encouraged to *add* our own prayers. Since prayer is entering our heart, our own words may often penetrate deeper than pre-written prayers. Saying prayers as a family together is important, but it is also encouraged that each family member should set aside time for private prayer as well.

Routine is essential. It is important to establish and maintain a rhythm of prayer. Find a consistent time of day that works best for you, start small and build upon it. When someone is starting out, praying for 5-10 minutes once a day can be a good target. It takes lots of practice to say prayers multiple times per day for longer periods of time consistently. Just as it may take someone years of fasting to be able to fully comply to the Orthodox standard of eliminating all animal products, prayer takes time and experience to delve into. Establishing a prayer rule may be better with guidance from the local priest, or a spiritual

father or spiritual mother.

Short prayers can be significantly powerful. Don't be misled to believe that long prayers are necessary, especially if one becomes distracted. It is more important to be focused in prayer for a short time, than to be distracted for a long time. Jesus continues his instruction on prayer during the Sermon on the Mount: "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matt. 6:7).

Be vigilant. The devil despises prayer, and will work to distract those praying, no matter their level of experience. Sometimes people get discouraged because they are distracted during prayers. That's what the devil wants. Don't worry, pray anyway. (The devil doesn't want you to fast, either. Fast anyway. The devil doesn't want you to read scripture. Read anyway.)

Posture is another thing to consider. Standing may be the accustomed practice when praying at home, but depending on culture and instruction, kneeling may be encouraged. In either case, your spiritual father or local priest can help direct this. Sitting too comfortably or lying down is quite discouraged, unless there is a medical reason for doing so. Metanias and prostrations may be used at appropriate times. A metania is when we make the sign of the cross and bow to touch the floor, which may be used during certain prayers, before venerating icons, and when receiving a blessing from a hierarch or priest. A prostration is when we kneel and touch our forehead on the ground, which is more penitential and is common during some Lenten prayers.

If you are connecting to an online service at your prayer corner, it would be best to stop household duties, and focus on the service. It would also be best to present yourself as if you were in church, with the same devotion, attention, and

attire that you would have in church. I often find that my attitude, behavior, and posture during online church services is improved when I am dressed up. If we dress casually, it is easy to act casually.

Praying with Young Children

When young children are involved, it can be difficult to set aside lengthy prayers, especially at bedtime when they may already be tired. Keeping children engaged and appreciative of prayer is fundamental to building their prayer life as they develop and grow. The ability of young children to be still and to focus is limited. Even now, I have a teenager and a pre-teen, and I have to adjust our evening prayers based on the kids' energy level, time of night, evening activity, homework, or any number of things.

For young kids, having multiple things in the icon corner can be beneficial. And since prayer is an action, there are many things that kids can interact with during prayer time. Home is a great place to teach metanias and prostrations. Icons can be at a height that is reachable to venerate. Battery powered candles can be held safely compared to having lit candles. (We used to “blow out” the battery powered candle, by unscrewing it slightly when the kids blew on it.) Incense, holy water and holy oil can be used. My kids have loved filling up the tiny holy water bottles and drinking from them at prayer time. If someone is hurt, holy oil can be used for anointing. Kids find it fun to have a “call to prayer” using bells or a semontron (or talanton), which is a wooden or metal board struck by a mallet and commonly used in a monastery to call the community for worship services. The only way we could get the kids to come for prayers for a while, was to ring a bell. After a visit to a monastery once, the nuns gave my kids a small talanton. They have loved

banging on that before prayers; and it also reminds them of the nuns and the monastery.

The prayer rule in our home has continued to grow over the years, but I continue to be flexible with our routine to keep the kids' interest. Besides praying before and after meals, we consistently pray together before going to bed. Most of the time, we say the set of "Evening Prayers" from *A Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians* (a pocket sized book that is found with a red or black cover), which has the same set of evening prayers from the 1-inch-thick red Service Book which is found in the pews at church. During Lent or Advent or Great Feasts, we usually add certain prayers or hymns to our rule.

When kids (and adults for that matter) say the same set of prayers for years, it is possible for it to get monotonous and to lose focus and be distracted from the meaning of the prayers. When I find my kids are losing focus, I change it up. Sometimes, we will just sing or chant hymns that night. Sometimes we may just say some of the pre-communion or post-communion prayers. Sometimes, we will just sing the troparion of the current feast. Sometimes we will just say some of the prayers, instead of all of them. Sometimes we will say them in the car on our way home if we are having a late night and need to go to bed as soon as we get home. At the very least, the consistent thing is that we gather for prayers together as a family. I believe that the most valuable lesson is to show my kids that prayer is essential to maintaining a relationship with God.

In closing, I will use one of my favorite prayers, from the Evening Prayers, which is also found liturgically during the services of The Hours:

“O Christ our God, who at all times and in every hour, in heaven and on earth, art worshiped and glorified; who art long-suffering, merciful and compassionate; who loves the just and shows mercy upon the sinner; who calls all to salvation through the promise of blessings to come; O Lord, in this hour, receive our supplications, and direct our lives according to thy commandments. Sanctify our souls, hallow our bodies, correct our thoughts, cleanse our minds; deliver us from all tribulation, evil, and distress. Encompass us with thy holy Angels, that guided and guarded by them, we may attain to the unity of the faith and to the knowledge of thine unapproachable glory, for thou art blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.”

¹ Psalm 50 in Orthodox prayer books, psalters, and bibles is equivalent to Psalm 51 in most common English language bibles, such as the KJV, RSV, and ESV: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness...”

On Becoming a Mother *by Abigail Holt*

It's never too late to be what you might have been.

—George Elliot

From an early age I knew that I wanted to have children. An image of motherhood that first filled my mind was mostly a pastel sort of hue: gentle and peaceful, but as reality has it now, the pallet is sharp and varied.

I once had the opportunity to speak with the abbot of an Orthodox monastery and relay some of my daily struggles and questions. He responded by telling me about the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. “The Catholics have one side, the Orthodox another, and then there are the Armenians and the Ethiopians. They have to share this sacred tomb of Christ. The Orthodox custodian cleans one side, and the Catholic custodian another—and sometimes they fight over who gets to sweep what dirt. And then there are Protestants who claim that the tomb of Christ is at an entirely different location and they have turned it into a peaceful park with lovely benches. It’s quiet there, and no one fights over who is to clean a pile of dirt. It’s quiet, but it’s not real. Truth and holiness are often messy.”

In high school one is often asked to choose a path and predict their future. For my Psychology class we were given an assignment to write about where we thought we’d be in ten years. I laid out two possible situations for myself: the first as a practicing psychologist and the second as a mother with a family. In my mind I suspended the thought of choice and time constraint and imagined equally spending all my time doing both—and succeeding well without sacrificing anything. I included a scrapbook portion, and drew pictures

of my possible self: Future me was thin, smiling, and contemplative.

Fast forward ten plus years and I am eight months pregnant walking my four- and two-year-old children to the beach. I see a group of teenage girls lounging by the shore. As I walk past, I notice the curious expression on their faces, staring a little longer than normal at my third-trimester beach bod. We were only a few feet away from each other, but I felt a giant chasm between us as I remembered my own teenage years and the ideas I used to have. “I won’t let myself go when I have kids. I’ll have it all.” I almost laugh out loud as I remember. What a difference from girlhood to motherhood, I now thought; and how much messier it looks in reality.

The path of motherhood has unmasked me in nearly every way, ways that I wouldn’t have wanted if I’d had a choice. My body has been stretched and changed in ways that I’m not totally comfortable with. Despite that, I still am able to tell myself that I’m an even-tempered person—that is, until I have a few sleepless nights and wake up with someone else’s bodily fluids on me and I find a temper I didn’t think I had. And messier still is the rearranging of my quiet time, what feels like the constant disruption of my prayer time, and the struggle to use what time I do have for spiritual growth. These things are a jagged truth that seemed to lay dormant in me until motherhood unearths them, revealing my flaws on every level.

But each struggle has its own paradox: While I never believed my body could go through so many changes, without motherhood I couldn’t have known how amazing it is to grow and nourish another human being. Additionally, I never imagined how much fluid a small child could produce (for real). But being the one they turn to in their (constant)

time of need is truly something of a privilege. My time for prayer is disorderly, but there is another layer: a spiritual urgency I never felt before having children. In short, I want to share eternity with them. These are the better parts of me that have been unmasked through motherhood.

The transformation of an idea to reality will always have its difficulties, and my journey in motherhood has certainly been a little gritty. I don't have all that I imagined in high school. In truth, I have much more.

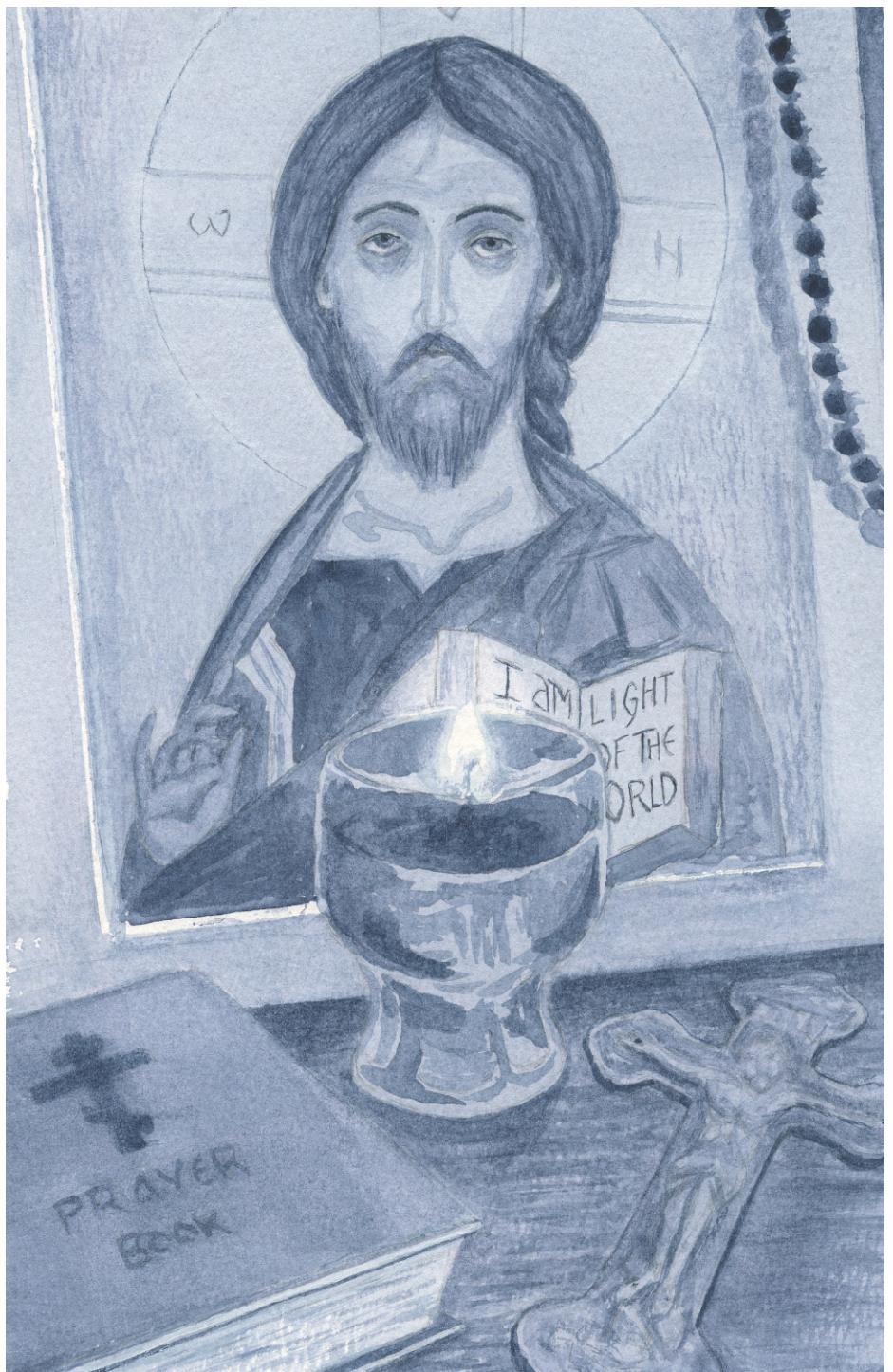
Praying With and For Your Children

by Lindsey Birdsall

If you're a busy parent, bustling from one daily task to the next, perhaps you've skipped ahead to this article, hoping that I might offer some quick tips for getting a squirmy child or a bored teenager to buckle down and pray. If this is the case, I'll admit that you will probably be disappointed. There are no shortcuts in family prayer. But if you're interested enough to stick around for a "long answer," I'd like to pass on some wisdom I've gained from Orthodox Christians who are much more knowledgeable and experienced than myself. The truth is that prayer can't be taught. It's caught.

Take, for instance, when a baby learns to speak. Parents generally do not teach the first words. (I did once have the comedic pleasure of witnessing a father, trying his darndest, for weeks on end, to train his baby to say "dada." It did not work.) Rather, the baby chooses his or her first words, based on what her daily environment is like, and what she needs.

Much like a child who learns a new language, a child who prays has been immersed in an environment where the people he knows and loves, especially the parents and any adults the child is attached to, are praying. The child's parents frequently acknowledge God as though He is real and present. (He is.) The adults who the child encounters acknowledge that they're broken and have need of Him. (They do.) They know, and behave as if though, they are not omnipotent. (They're not.) And as the child grows, the adults do not busy themselves eliminating age-appropriate challenges from the child's life, or creating a false paradise for them. Rather, they encourage their child to pray. They call upon God for His help and mercy in the midst of small



trials and great suffering. When their children are young, these parents walk close beside them, praying with them and for them, as they encounter and engage the world. As their children grow, they take a step back and allow their child to exercise their free will, just as God allows us to have free will. They watch and pray as their teenage or adult child chooses God for Himself, or even, more painfully, makes the mistake of rejecting Him. And all the while, Christian parents maintain the earnest hope that their child will recover with God's help. Sometimes maintaining this hope is painful, and yet, their candles are still burning and their door is still open.

The beautiful and hard truth about prayer is that it is the fruit of a loving relationship. It cannot be forced on our children, though we can and should invite God into our homes as often as we can remember. St. Porphyrios says, "Pray and then speak. That's what to do with your children. If you are constantly lecturing them, you'll become tiresome and when they grow up they'll feel a kind of oppression. Prefer prayer and speak to them through prayer. Speak to God and God will speak to their hearts."¹

This is the ideal for us parents. We can be motivated and humbled by this ideal, but most of us should take into account that we are still far from achieving it. What's more: children easily detect and reject all the hypocrisy and all the stress that results from parents holding themselves and their children to expectations that are unrealistically high, given the parents' own sins and lack of experience. Father Thomas Hopko, in his "55 Maxims for Christian Life" has said, "Pray as you can, not as you think you should." Why? Because prayer in our homes must be real, unhurried, unpretentious. Because prayer should occur daily, so we develop an authentic relationship with Christ, so that prayer becomes a natural part of our home life. The best way to make this

happen is to start small. Increase your prayer gradually as you mature. This is for our own sake, and also for the sake of our children. Remember, it is always better to pray something, however small, than not to pray at all. Do not be ashamed if giving your “best” to God ends up looking like a very small effort. The Lord loves and accepts your offering!

So, if I can’t make my child pray, what can I do? First, get to know your priest, and allow him to know you and your family. He is experienced in counseling families on such matters and will help you bridge any gaps between how you think your family should pray, and how you actually can. In general, it’s recommended that you create a sacred space for prayer to occur in your home, both at a specific location and a specific time. Your children can be required to attend family prayers, but don’t tempt a rebellion by making them stay for a very long time, especially if you are starting to build a new habit. If your desire to pray exceeds that of your children, develop a personal prayer rule that you will complete at a different time and consult your priest about it. In general, your own rules about prayer and fasting should be stricter than your child’s. However, young children can still be asked to respect family prayers by remaining at least mostly quiet and still for a time. As St. Porphyrios recommends, “You parents should pray silently to Christ with upraised arms and embrace your children mystically. When they misbehave you will take some disciplinary measures, but you will not coerce them. Above all you need to pray.”²

And yet, family prayer, even if it occurs consistently, as a rule, is still dynamic and personal. Try to bring your whole self to prayer. Take a moment to acknowledge any current hardships you’re experiencing, and ask God for healing. Remember friends who are sick and suffering. Ask your child who he or she would like to pray for. Keep holy water and

holy oil on hand to bless injuries. I always recommend blessing even the smallest “boo-boos,” even those which are invisible to everyone but your child. When a child is shown compassion, they will extend compassion to others and to themselves. Before long, they will be the one asking you to anoint their boo-boo! And don’t forget to ask forgiveness of one another daily. You can say a simple, “Forgive me a sinner,” before going to bed each night.

Finally, don’t fear the fact that your rule will look different in different seasons of life. Recently, I started feeling stressed because I realized we couldn’t keep up our regular family prayer rule on school mornings. Not long after, I learned that as a child, Mother Gabriella of Holy Dormition Monastery had a rule on school mornings which solely consisted of twelve prostrations and The Lord’s Prayer. And somehow prostrations seem to work just as well for active and excitable kids as they do for their sleepy parents.

My favorite part of our family prayers, which has evolved over the years, is a ritual that began when my son was a toddler. Praying with him at that age was naturally a little frustrating because he was so noisy, and I wanted us to end on a “high note,” so I added a dance and a song and a hug and a kiss to the end of our prayers. My son began to look forward to this, and the ritual stuck around. Now that he’s five, I lift him up over my head and spin him around a couple times as I sing, “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!” I’m quite breathless by the end, but I’ll keep it up as long as I can, I guess.

May God continue to bless and strengthen us all!

¹ “On the Upbringing of Children” in *Wounded by Love*, p. 203.

² Ibid., p. 198.

A Short Rule of Vigilance for Those Who Live in the World

The following chapter is taken from *The Field: Cultivating Salvation*, a collection of spiritual instructions on ‘cultivating the field of our hearts, with the aim of producing a harvest of virtues both pleasing to God and of benefit to all mankind,’ written by 19th century Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov. —Ed.

* * *

The essence of any striving toward the Lord is *attentiveness*. Without attentiveness, all our labors become fruitless, dead. He who desires to be saved must strive to maintain attentiveness to himself, not only in solitude but in the midst of distraction, into which circumstances sometimes hurl him against his will. May the fear of God outweigh all other feelings in the scales of his heart—then it will be easy to preserve attentiveness to oneself, both in the silence of the cell and in the midst of the surrounding noise of the world.

Temperance in eating, which lessens the fire in the blood, greatly aids watchfulness over oneself; while the warming of the blood that occurs either from overeating, from excessive physical movement, from the inflammation of anger, from intoxicating vanity, or from other reasons, gives birth to a multitude of thoughts and images, in other words—scattered thoughts. The Holy Fathers recommend that he who desires to be watchful over himself must first control his appetite temperately, steadily, and constantly to abstain from excessive eating.¹

When you wake, it is an image of the universal awakening of all people from the dead. Direct your thoughts to God, bring to God a sacrifice of the first thoughts of your mind

before it has had an opportunity to accept any worldly impressions. In silence, with extreme care, fulfill any of your bodily needs after rising, then read the usual prayer rule, paying attention not so much to the number of prayers as to the quality of the prayer; that is, take care that your prayer is done attentively, and as a result of this attentiveness, may your heart be blessed and enlivened by prayerful compunction and consolation. After your prayer rule, once again taking great pains to remain attentive, read the New Testament, especially the Gospels. During this reading, carefully notice all the commandments of Christ, so that you can direct your actions (both inner and external) according to them. The amount of reading can depend on the strength of the person as well as external circumstances. In the same way as excessive eating disrupts and weakens the digestion, the intemperate consumption of spiritual food weakens the mind and makes it look on the ascetic life with disgust, leading it to despair.²

The Holy Fathers recommend beginners to pray often, but not for long periods of time. When the mind becomes more spiritually mature and becomes stronger and firmer, then it will be capable of praying unceasingly. The following words of the Apostle Paul refer to those Christians who have already grown in Christ: “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”³

Such prayer is without passion or distraction or false exultation, and is appropriate for the grown man, but not yet for the child.

Having been enlightened through prayer and reading by the Sun of Truth, our Lord Jesus Christ, you may begin your daily work, keeping watch over yourself, that in all deeds and words, in your entire being, may the all-holy will of God (as

revealed and explained to man in the commandments of the Gospel) rule and act in you.

If you have any free minutes during the course of the day, use them to read some chosen prayers with attentiveness, or read selected passages from the Scriptures, and through them once again strengthen your spirit, which has become tired through constant activity in the busy world. If you cannot wrest even a few such moments for yourself, you should mourn for these free moments, as though you have lost a precious treasure. What you have lost today, you must not waste on the next because our heart easily gives in to lassitude and forgetfulness from which we can fall to dark inactivity, which is so disastrous to God's work, to the work of the salvation of mankind.

If you happen to do or say anything contrary to God's commandments, immediately treat the sin with repentance, and through genuine confession return to the path of God from which you have veered through the breaking of God's will. Do not waver from the path of God! Battle every sinful thought, imagination, or emotion with faith and the humility of the Gospel commands, saying together with the Patriarch Joseph: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"⁴

He who is watchful over himself must reject all flights of fancy in general, no matter how attractive or seemingly good they may seem. Any flight of fancy is a scattering of the mind outside truth, into the land of insubstantial shadows that flatter the mind and lie to it. Consequences of such distraction are the loss of attentiveness, the scattering of the mind, and hardness of the heart during prayer—that is, spiritual disorder.

In the evening, as you prepare for sleep, which is the death of the day that has passed, examine your actions

during the day. For him who leads a watchful, attentive life, such examinations of the self is not difficult because as a result of his watchfulness, his forgetfulness (so usual for a scatterbrained person) is destroyed. Thus, having remembered all the sins of the day done in deed, thought, word, or emotion, bring them to God with repentance and a firm intention to correct yourself. Then, after reading the prayer rule before sleep, finish the day that began with thoughts of God in the same way.

Where do the thoughts and emotions of a sleeping person go? What a mysterious state is sleep, during which the soul and body are alive, and yet not alive; outside the knowledge of their own life, as though they were already dead! Sleep is unknowable as death. During sleep, the soul rests, forgetting all the worst sorrows and pains of the world, in an image of the eternal rest. But the body! If it rises from sleep every day, then it will doubtlessly rise up from the dead as well!

As the great Agathon said: “It is impossible to progress in the virtues without intense watchfulness over yourself.”⁵

Amen.

¹ *The Philokalia*, pt. 2, chapters on St Philotheos of Sinai.

² Isaac the Syrian, Homily 71.

³ 1 Tim 2:8.

⁴ Gen 39:9.

⁵ St Agathon the Great, *Skete Paterikon*.

Worship in Quarantine: Barred Light *by Derek Matthew Holt*

Candles flick the flame's light
Upon the wall adorned
With haloed faces of
Luminaries, themselves adorned
With eyes afire and lips pursed
in comprehending silence, souls
Gone before us, pointing us the
Way into the heavenly space where
God's face alone adorns
Perception.

They regard churchly reminders
In a homely chapel:
The imaged walls,
The immolation of incense
Upon the ashen coal,
The coloring books and crayons,
The sleeping child upon the divan
And the divine liturgy at work
Out of place and time
Upon a screen drawing
Our gaze with song.

This space six feet from the wall
Where I stand in strained absorption, I see
The sun's light slants from barred door and
Barred window and mingles in smoke
And candle wax, replicating the screened image
Projecting in tandem with a new kind of prayer.

Typically, we bar screens like unwanted neighbors
We only allow trespass once a week—or twice
If we're tired—suspicious of their color and song,
But now we embrace the barred like wooden planks
On the undulating sea once Zeus has wrecked us and
The Sun God is piqued. The sea is open and seemingly
Endless are its streams and currents that take you where
You think you ought to be. Ulysses wanted to remain among
The sirens and stalled with Circe's fruit, and Calypso kept him
Warm and toothsome for seven years on the cusp of immortality,
Though his wife waited and aged.
But we are much like him; we are not
Where we ought to be.

We too sit upon the shores of distance and watch
The surf unfurl and abate. We thirst for what
We cannot drink and hunger for that we can't
Enjoy, the beachhead corralling us
To stay ashore for the sheer expanse
Of the sea and all its peril.

I say
Stand and cast your plea against
The tide. The ocean's song repeats
And lulls the child to sleep,
But men stand and long
With Penelope
Not to forget.



Sunday of a Blind Man *by Marta Irvine*

The golden winter light streams in through the tall stained glass windows, the lingering incense smoke playing beautifully through the beams. A door in the iconostasis opens, and two robed altar boys emerge, bearing tall candles, followed by the subdeacon with his tinkling censer swinging its sweet fragrance, enveloping us. Next comes the white-bearded priest, his satin vestments flowing down his back, the shining chalice held carefully in his hands. “The Lord God remember us all in his kingdom, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages,” he chants, his deep resonant voice filling the space. As the small group continues past us, we all turn our bodies to follow their procession throughout the nave. Behind us, I notice a tall, thin man, his pale face disfigured, dark glasses covering scarred, vacant eyes. His long limbs are folded into a kneeling position, his head held very still, his face expressionless, his ears seeming to guide his understanding of the place. As the group of moving figures come near him, I see the blind man stretch out a searching hand, slender fingers grasping air. With a practiced clasp, a young woman standing nearby takes hold of the blind man’s wrist, that she may guide the outstretched hand toward the priest’s trailing luminous vestments. His fingers gently touch the fabric, this icon of the robe of Christ, and hold it for an instant, as a look of peace washes over his upturned face.

* * *

This was one of my first experiences in an Orthodox Church —Sunday morning Liturgy in a small parish in rural Indiana. We were invited to stay for coffee hour, where we would sit and talk with that same blind man, Kevin. As with anyone who did not grow up in the Church, this early liturgical experience overwhelmed my senses and mind. The scene I saw play out before me that morning, of Kevin and the young woman, has never left me. In fact, I've returned to it again and again in the fifteen years since.

I have continued to find poetry in this tiny, magnificent moment. There are a number of elements present, but the one I've returned to the most is the necessity of our community to help us reach Jesus. We are not meant to travel alone. We are meant to bear one another's burdens, meant to grasp hands and to pull one another along. We are meant to work out our salvation together.

Sometimes we do the guiding:

“Come to the monastery with me, I'll drive.”
“I'll hold your fussy baby (so you can focus on the Communion prayers).”

“Will you join us in the Lenten Psalter group?”
Sometimes we are the ones receiving the guidance:
“We missed you Sunday at Liturgy.”
“I really think you'd enjoy the bookclub book this month.”

“I know this time of year is hard for you, I've been praying for you. And here is dinner.”

If we are to be the givers, we cannot force the receiver's hand to open. We must be sensitive, yet simultaneously confident in the help we offer. We say the prayers, we sow the seeds, we offer the help, then we wait, with purpose. If we are to be the receivers, we must be present. We must be willing to stretch out that hand so that it may be guided.

I pray that we might find the grace to be the guiding and the guided hands. Can we be aware enough to see the reaching hands? Can we be humble enough to stretch out a searching hand? Can we be the blind while also being the guide? May we see the need for each and may we have the courage to be both.

After a lifelong struggle with cancer, Kevin McCarty fell asleep in the Lord during Holy Week of 2008. His funeral was celebrated on Bright Monday, and his 40 Day Memorial fell providentially on the Sunday of the Blind Man. Lord, grant rest to your servant Kevin, and may his memory be eternal!

New Beginnings *by Brittany Barbara Pagel*

The smell of incense was so strong it burned my nose as we sat, taking up the whole front row of our tiny Greek church. Father John, dressed in his usual black robe, called me, my yiayia, and my populi to the back of the church where he was already towering over us. Everything was spinning as we stopped, just steps before running into him. The creamy, tan tile floors were cold and hard against my bare feet as we repeated our prayers, beginning the ceremony. We were all three a nervous wreck. Am I following the right path? Am I ready for a commitment as strong as being baptized? Before I knew it, we turned around to look at our crowd of familiar, smiling faces, and just like that, a wave of relief and certainty hit me. I walked down the aisle with my yiayia and populi on either side of me; and with Father leading the way, I knew that this was exactly where I was meant to be.

When I was younger, I moved around with my biological mom, home to home, schools to school, church to church. Even though I lived with her, I was never able to have a bond with her that I suppose a mother and daughter should have. I was never able to make any friends and I was almost always alone. When I was 14, I moved for the last time. Now I was living with my dad and new mom who were both Greek Orthodox Christians attending church regularly. When I first stepped into that tiny building, I was immediately hit with warmth and guidance. The feeling was so surreal it was almost incomprehensible. People came up to me and hugged me like they already knew who I was. They welcomed me with open arms not asking where I came from, not caring who I had been or what I had done. Their love for a stranger like me was unfathomable. All my life I had been looking for this, for a family, and as I stood there, repeating the prayers,

having oils and water poured on my head, and coming back out dressed in my white, lacey dress, I knew that I had finally found what I had been looking for. Not just a building full of familiar, smiling faces, but a place where I could love and be loved. A family. A home.

Over the next two years I began to grow in confidence and faith, and circumstances eventually had us visiting another Orthodox church as a possible new home parish. We were mesmerized when we walked into the huge, beautiful tan building with a blue, round roof with white stars.

Immediately we were overwhelmed with the smell of ‘Old Church’ and frankincense and the elegant sounds of an alluringly harmonized choir of angels. Again, we sat in the back but not without several ‘hello’s’ and a bear hug from a smiling, curly-haired stranger. St. Michaels was different, but in a highly good way. The two-hour service passed by in five minutes, and as we went up to kiss the shiny, golden cross, we were asked by several new faces if we were staying for coffee hour. Before we could answer, we were politely guided in the direction of the smaller, yet still large, parish hall. Before then, I never thought that any place or group of people could be as welcoming and loving as the Greek church, but when we walked into the parish hall I was instantly proven wrong as we were swarmed by “Hi’s” and “How are you’s”. A girl with a sunny smile invited me over to the “Teen’s Table.” That’s when I got a familiar feeling of happiness and love. I had found my new home.

To this day, I am not the same person as I was before. None of us are. We have friends and family all around us who love us and whom we appreciate very much. That curly-haired stranger became not only my youngest sister’s godmother, but a very close family friend. The girl with the sunny smile became more than just my best friend. She

became my sister at heart. My family and I have also become more active in the church. We attend Sunday School and Divine Liturgy regularly and have become more active Christians at home. We try to say morning prayers and evening prayers every day and we make sure we pray before dinner every night. Mom and dad help run the Food Pantry at our church on the first Saturday of every month.

Sometimes I get to come and help, but usually I stay home and watch the kids for them, which is still helping in a way. We have also become more open about our religion to others. We get a lot of questions about what we believe and why we believe it from our friends or people around us who aren't Orthodox. Instead of getting offended, we stay calm and gladly answer any questions thrown at us in hopes that they will become interested and will want to check out Orthodoxy themselves.

When I was younger, I had the habit of not being able to fall asleep without praying, but as I got older, I slowly fell out of this. Now, I catch myself not only praying before I go to sleep, but before I eat every meal, before I travel, before I go to school, before I take tests, or basically before I do anything. I've grown close enough to God to where I have a sense of comfort with myself. I used to not like the way I was. I used to always think I was too different, or that no one liked me, or that I needed to be like everyone else for me to be accepted. Yes, I still have my insecurities; however, I know now that it isn't other people's approval, but God's approval that I need. I used to focus only on the negatives, and I woke up with a pessimistic attitude. Every day, I wake up knowing that it's going to be a good day. I thank God for family, life, and new beginnings.

Why just okay is not okay in our relationship with God

by Lydia Super

There is an AT&T commercial that claims, *Just okay is not okay*. I think that can equally be said (if not more) about our relationship with God. He is our Creator; He made us “more than okay.” He expects us (or at least hopes us) to be like His Son, Jesus. Jesus is perfect, which means God wants us to be perfect too.

God may chastise us when we go astray, but that’s not why we should be more than “just okay” in our relationship with Him. God loves us, so we should love Him. PERIOD. As 1 John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us.” God sent His only Son—His ONLY Son—to die. Not to peacefully fall down dead in His home, but to be tortured, humiliated, and crucified on a cross. That’s how much He loves us.

Willing to send his only Son to be crucified for our salvation. Wow. He’s a super awesome Father! He’s the One True Father and He places wise ~~old~~ parents over us young-ens. He *loves* us, and I think it’s sad when He loves us so much and sometimes we act like we hate Him. We act like we hate Him when we blame God when bad things happen, or when we think if things are pretty good, they’re good enough for God. But with God, just okay is not okay. He wants our best in loving Him and our neighbor.



Tears by Theron Mathis

The little peach teased.

“I’m so sweet!”

A green apple shouted, “Feel my sour crunch!”

The pecan, shaking his mistletoe, growled, “My meaty offering will warm any empty belly.”

Laughter and giggles grew as branches creaked and swayed at the lumbering oak. Gray wispy moss adorned this lonely fellow. He prayed as his heavy branches bowed low. “Don’t let the wind break me. Bless me with a child to climb my crooked limbs. Let him look above my jesters and dream.”

Children came and went. But the sweetness and fullness of the others tempted their little hearts. They ran away laughing with juice dripping from their chins and pockets full of soft shell nuts.

Their hearts were true and stamped the judgment of every tree on his saddened heart.

A flanneled man with a wispy beard came lumbering his way. His strong arms brushed the ground, snatching soft fruit from the leaves. He lifted it to his mouth and bit. A scowl rolled over his craggy face spraying pulp and the tree laughed.

The man dropped a chunk of greasy metal at this feet then knocked with strength on the trunk. He stepped on a branch and ascended toward the sky. Standing above the woods, wind blowing in his beard, a deep groan rose from his belly turning into a deeper sigh. A hot tear fell from his eye.

Slowly he descended back to the earth. Wiping his brow and eyes, he grabbed the greasy implement and yanked it to life. A deafening roar came forth. A deep tremble rose from

the heart of the tree. The man held tight to his tool with authority.

The ancient oak wanted to scream as metal severed his limbs. He was too old to cry. The decades had drained him dry. With the final branch cut, the last gasp of hope dropped to the earth.

The man stood back then struck the fatal blow. The ancient one fell while the woodsman hung his head.

A rusted old massive truck lifted the oak's body onto its dirty back. As the truck paraded through the wood, the others with their sweet meat tried to tease one last time but fear sealed up their jests.

His body was taken to a monster of spinning metal and grease. The mouth of this beast gnawed away his flesh and sprayed his pulp on the sandy floor. A once-majestic oak reduced to small thin slats of memory.

Other men came and took away his broken body. They bent and shaped each piece of him then bound them with strips of metal. His body had been reduced, then chained with iron fetters. They rolled his captive frame to face his greatest fear. A metal beast blew hot orange breath inside his new form. Any tears hidden in his old wood escaped from the heat toward the heavens as his fleshly white innards charred with acrid blackness.

He smoked with sadness.

Joyful little men smiled at him. The smiles hurt. They lifted his burnt imprisoned body. To add insult to his caged frame they bored a deep hole through his side. A wonderful mist sprayed over him with memories of summer days. For the briefest moment, a reverie of hope and olden times captured him. Then like a torrent of hard spring rain, the liquid poured into his side. He welcomed the flood. It promised to cool his burnt shell. Like the suddenness of

summer lighting, pain struck over ever raw inch of his soul. The liquid felt like never-ending fire penetrating every pore in his flesh.

The men rolled him into darkness to suffer alone. Hour upon hour he cursed the bearded man in the woods. The warm hands of the woodsmen promised love and hope. Yet, the tears the man shed in his canopy had dripped with the knowledge of this day of horror.

Hours turned to days and then years, the burning eventually subsiding as loneliness set into his bones. No more birds to sing in his branches. No more small creatures hiding in his body. No more sun warming each leaf and limb. No more children playing underneath his shade.

And he wept.

Tears surprised him. Ages ago he thought the last drop of moisture had left him. But the loneliness and abandonment and the hopelessness rushed at him. The memories of his life—each springtime and fall—the singing birds and their newborn chicks—the grazing deer with spotted fawns suckling beneath their mothers—the silly squirrels and curious raccoons nosing through fallen foliage. Even memories of the peach, the apple, and pecan made him smile. Their jest had hurt his heart and sunk into the deepest core of his soul. Now sweetness flowed.

And he wept.

Those tears turned from bitter despair to tears of joy and gratitude. Every new memory released a sweet offering. The liquid that once burned his wounds began to swell with his tears.

Year after year his tears flowed until the liquid buried inside him contained all the sweetness of his life. He laughed at the peach, the apple, and pecan. They never knew what was buried deep in his belly.

His reverie broke when careful hands began rocking his frame. The hole bored in his side was opened again. The tree let out a laugh, and the man peering over the hole smiled in return. A small cylinder pulled out drops of his tears. The man lifted the liquid to his lips and joy ran over his face. He divided him up in containers of glass to share this happiness with the world.

Then late one night a man and his wife sat together. Trouble passed between them. Life had cut and burned and teased them. Joy was exhausted. They stared into a crackling fire together.

The man stood and grabbed the glass container in defeat. He poured himself a glass to share with his bride of many years. Walking slowly back to his well-worn chair, he held her hand and offered up those tears in the glass.

She smelled the sweetness, took a sip, and offered it back to him. He lifted it to his lips and drank. Warmth filled his tired body and joy rushed into his heart. He smiled at her with the sweetness of hope and she squeezed his hand in return.



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