

## **Culture of Prayer**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Does prayer have a culture? The answer is yes. A person's mentality, shaped by convictions, principles and values, determines how he approaches life. Every human being, consciously or unconsciously, adopts a certain style, outlook, thought process and behavior in managing his affairs. These, taken together, constitute his unique culture which pigments his entire life. The prayerful person, for example, carries his joy and sadness, his pain, health and suffering, his strengths and weaknesses, his environment and society, and everything else that pertains to him, and presents them all to God before anyone else. Then he is inspired to act, relying on the help and grace of his Lord.

As for people who do not pray, they remain in the realm of questioning, doubt, scrutiny, and confusion. Their point of reference is limited to themselves or their closest associates who may also be their own points of reference. Those who choose God to be their reference have a culture different from those who live without God.

Man is ecstatic about himself; his ego is very inflated, especially in this era. Therefore, he needs humility to enter into the life of prayer. If his prayer is sincere, he will feel his smallness before the awe and greatness of God and will become humble, just like the tax collector (Luke 18:10-14).

As for those who do not know how to pray like the tax collector, their inner pride will consume them just like the Pharisee. If you are humble, you will realize prayer's importance to you, acquire its spirit, and consequently live and embody love. Then, you will seek more time for prayer, because for you it is a matter of life. In this sense, Saint John Chrysostom said: "If you do not pray but during the time you allot for prayer, then you do not pray at all." That is, if you limit your prayer to specific scheduled times, and prayer is not your permanent state, then you are still within the scope of duty; you have not yet extended beyond it to the scope of love. Then you become as the Psalm (108:4) says: "I am in prayer."

A person realizes his helplessness amid pain and adversity, so he turns to God and prays for himself and others. If he has reached – or is on his way to reaching – the point where prayer becomes truly his culture, then daily he will offer to God all those who are suffering under the burden of various afflictions, especially when he suffers their agony along with them. However, those who do not experience prayer

as an oasis of safety wonder about the cause of pain, doubt divine providence, and flounder in grumbling, complaining, and regret. This is the human condition in wars, in particular. They shout: Where is God? Why doesn't He do this and that? Man expects miracles from God. Under the weight of pain and fear, he wants quick and uncostly solutions. He expects salvation, safety, relief, and solace.

In the face of today's global, economic, moral, political and media confusion, many constantly ask questions such as: Why is this happening? What is the way out? Every person makes requests of God on his own behalf, yet very few will make them on behalf of others. Why? Because we are not accustomed to mentioning our neighbors in our prayers on a regular and committed basis. Believers are tempted to adopt their thoughts and dialog to worldly logic. If they happen to mention God, remembrance of Him often remains limited to empty words, or an outlet for anxiety, anger or despair. However, as long as prayer does not come from a heart that anguishes for others the same as it does for itself, it will not turn into action, nor will it be true prayer, but rather individualistic, self-centered words.

Many view that they have nothing that contributes to mitigating disasters, because their focus begins on their own abilities, strengths and possessions. They are the starting point, not God. God's people know that they have so much to offer, not because they possess a lot, but rather because God's grace fills their big, loving and God-like hearts.

As believers, you should feel rich in spirit, and with your love, you can embrace the entire universe. Prayers will strengthen you when you persist daily on presenting to God those who are suffering, mentioning them by name. Through divine grace, you will experience more love for them and true forgiveness for those who offend you. You will also find realistic ways to help alleviate their pain.

If I opened my palms before God, I may have nothing but dust, but I believe that God is able to turn it into gold. One of the Arabic Christmas songs says: "Kings poured out all their borrowed money before your cradle, and I spread out my palms filled with dust, filled with heaps of sin and shame. I placed them at your feet, and I stood. Here are my hands empty, my waiting Lord." So, open your hands so that He may fill them with His gifts.

Commit yourself to mentioning others by name in your daily prayers. Train yourself to remember those you met during the day and mention them by name before the Lord in your evening prayers. Concentrate on mentioning people who suffer from

all sorts of problems: war, flood, earthquake, volcano, spiritual loss, moral collapse, deviation, family problems, health issues, etc. You will see that you will embrace the universe with your spirit, just as your Christ embraced it before you. Pray with sincere tears, and God will reveal to you the benefits of your prayer. Let prayer change you. If, after years of praying, you remain the same as you were before, then you should realize that prayer has not yet become your culture.

Gather as a Christian community with your brothers and sisters to pray for the peace of the world and for the souls who inhabit it. Offer along with them supplications for specific problems. Hold vigils in parishes and say The Jesus Prayer. Let the faithful encourage priests and vice versa to call for intensified prayers on days of hardship. Let everyone, with one heart and one mind, pray with their prayer ropes, invoking God's mercy for the world. The disciples of Saint Silouan the Athonite pray, collectively, in their monastery in Great Britain, to this day: "O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and have mercy on your world."

When I was a priest, I used to, along with some brothers, open the parish church every evening to hold evening prayers. There was not a day when the church was vacant of parishioners, even on days when I had to travel or be absent. Sometimes the church would almost be full. People are in need for a prayer climate; this is the Church's duty, both clergy and believers, to provide. Let us create an atmosphere of prayer and celebrate the splendor of our liturgical services. Let us be present in our prayers to the world and to all those who suffer. Why don't we turn our homes into churches?

Saint Silouan the Athonite once was told that the monks were troubled by the communist persecution of the Church. He replied: "I, too, was very troubled at first about what was happening. But after much prayer and supplication, this thought came to me: God loves everyone beyond description. He is the ruler of times, events, everything and everyone. He allowed this persecution for the good of the future. I cannot understand this, nor can I stop it. I have nothing but prayer and love." He advised his brethren to have the same.

This is the culture of prayer!