

The Lord's Prayer Interpreted according to Saint Maximos the Confessor

By Protobresbyter Theodoros Zisis

1. The superiority of Saint Maximos' interpretation.

In the well known collection of spiritual and neptic writings, the Philokalia, Saint Nikodemos of the Hagiorite has shown a notable preference for the writings of Saint Maximos the Confessor in comparison with other works of ancient and eminent teachers and saints.[1] Absent are the writings of the great theologians of the 4th and 5th centuries, even those known for their mystical character such as those of Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Saint Gregory the Theologian. This preference is also manifested from the perspective of length in comparison with the whole collection of writings included in the five volumes of the Philokalia.[2]

...Saint Nikodemos places a small work entitled On the Lord's Prayer. The inclusion of this little work in the Philokalia stems from its deep neptic and spiritual character, as well as the unique and interesting way in which Saint Maximos interprets the Lord's Prayer, the prayer which the Lord Himself taught the Apostles in the Sermon on the Mount.[4]

...This magnificent and useful spiritual work we will present here in brief. ...

Above all else God desires the theosis of human nature, for which the ineffable condescension of the Only-begotten Son—the Incarnation—took place. The power of the Lord's Prayer, the mastery of its hidden and mystical aim, effectively brings about this end. Saint Maximos believes that, in the words of the "Our Father", we ask that God grant us the blessings which arose from the work of the Incarnation of the Divine Word. In it we are not asking for simple everyday things, but for the fullness, the entirety, of the blessings of salvation. "The prayer includes petitions for everything that the divine Logos effected through his self-emptying in the incarnation." [9] From amongst these immeasurable blessings—immeasurable in multitude and magnitude—the Lord's Prayer mystically sets forth seven of more general significance. These seven, which set out the aims of the prayer, are; 1) Theology, 2) Adoption, 3) Equality in honour with the Angels, 4) Sharing in Eternal Life, 5) The Restoration of Nature to its Natural State, 6) The Abolition of the Law of Sin, and 7) The Overthrowing of the Tyranny of the Evil One.

2. Theology and Adoption.

...In the prayer's first phrase, "Our Father, Who art in the heavens, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come", he sees the first two blessings presented; Theology and Adoption. Here, "theology" means, in a literal sense, Triadology, in other words, the teaching concerning the Holy Trinity, "that from this beginning we may be taught to revere, invoke, and worship the Trinity in unity." [10] The Holy Trinity is indeed proclaimed because although the Father alone is mentioned, mystically and analogically the other two are implied in the words "name" and "kingdom", "For the name of God the Father exists in substantial form in the Only-begotten Son. Again, the Kingdom of God exists in substantial form as the Holy Spirit." [11]

...After the proclamation of the Holy Trinity, the prayer declares the grace of adoption in that we are found worthy to call God “Father”. God is, according to nature, “Creator” however according to grace is our Father. This understanding of paternity, in which it is said that God is properly called “Creator” on account of His creating us but “Father” by Grace, is worthy of remark. We are all, then, children of God. We have the grace of adoption and call him “Father”, not because He created us, but because he has given us rebirth and regeneration by the saving work of His Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Through His labour we possess this adoption by grace. This spiritual adoption demands that we try to preserve in our life the characteristics of our Divine birth by grace. In our action, and not only in our words, we are to “hallow” His name, and thus be proven to be true children of God, glorifying Him, “who is by nature Son of the Father”, in all that we think and do.[12] The name of the Father is hallowed when we mortify the material desires and are purified of the corrupting passions, as “sanctification is the complete mortification and cessation of desire in the senses.”[13] In this condition, manifestations of anger because anger is, by nature, kindled by sinful desire. When we mortify these desires, then the mania of anger ceases.

... “It is fitting that, anger and desire repudiated, we should next invoke the rule of the kingdom of God the Father with the words “Thy Kingdom come”, that is “May the Holy Spirit come”; for having put away these things, we are now made into a temple of God through the Holy Spirit by the teaching and practice of gentleness.”[14]

Christ’s calling of the meek and humble, and the assurance that these will inherit the earth, is realized in the perfection of the spiritual life.[15] Saint Maximos says the we must spiritually understand “earth” to mean, “the resolution and strength of the inner stability, immovably rooted in goodness, that is possessed by gentle people,” which, accompanied by indelible joy, resembles the state of the angels.[16] When the soul is reformed into the divine likeness and becomes a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, then vices are made to vanish and virtues blossom forth in their place. In this state we experience a continual nativity and incarnation of Christ—a mystical Christmas. “Christ always desires to be born in a mystical way, becoming incarnate in those who attain salvation.”[18]

3. Imitation of the Angels.

We now move on to the next phrase of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. In this phrase Saint Maximos sees man becoming equal in honour to the angels, as asking for equality with the rational beings. In the fulfilment of God’s will on earth as it occurs in heaven, man imitates the angels. In the angels there exist no sinful desires, which paralyze the spiritual faculties with pleasure, nor anger, which is fiercely directed against brothers. We find only the natural leading of rational beings toward God and nothing else.

Saint Maximos gives two meanings to the phrase “Give us this day our daily bread”; one anagogical, the other literal. In the anagogical interpretation, the spiritual interpretation, our daily bread is divine food. It is the food of the bread of life and of consciousness which the first man forfeited as a consequence of sin. If man had tasted this bread of

divine consciousness, the death that comes through sin would not have appealed to him. Saint Maximos prefers this interpretation to the literal one because Christ Himself taught the disciples that they ought not to be occupied with perishable bread, with concerns for what they will eat, what they will drink and what they will wear rather they ought, above all else, seek the Kingdom of God.[19] Obviously, Christ would not teach his disciples to ask something in the prayer which he had commanded them not to seek. Obviously, Christ would not teach them in the prayer what he commanded them not to seek. If, however, Christ taught us to ask for every-day, transient bread, we must not overstep the temporal boundary which the prayer puts in place. We must not stock up on many years worth of goods but rather ask only for our daily bread, free from other concerns, so as to demonstrate that we do not prepare for life but death, "that as Christian philosophers we make life a rehearsal for ideal for death." [20] The spiritual life alone must be our focus, for the attainment of which we must use this present life "not just to live but to live for God," [21] confining our petition to the provision of bread for just one day, not extending it to a second. It is clear from this, then, that Saint Maximos understands the fourth of the seven blessings to be participation in the bread of life and incorruptibility.

According to the anagogical interpretation the petitioner asks God for the bread of wisdom, which we were deprived of by the transgression of the first-created man. In relation with this, Saint Maximos uses a familiar pair - pleasure and pain. He develops these particularly in the chapters, development which he assumes here. He writes that we ask spiritual bread from God in our prayer because we know that only one true pleasure exists. This pleasure is the attainment of divine blessings which God, by nature, bestows, but man safeguards according to his will and intention. On the other hand, the sole true pain is the loss of divine blessings; a loss prompted by the Devil but only made actual by man on account of his of his laziness through which he renounces the Divine.

4. The Restoration of Nature: Abolition of the Law of Sin and the Overthrowing of the Evil One.

The next phrase of the Lord's Prayer is as follows: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." In this petition, it seems that man presents himself to God as an example of virtue, exhorting God to imitate his behaviour. "A person of this kind makes himself a pattern of virtue for God, if it may be put in this way". [22] Forgiveness of the sins of others not only contributes to the remission of our own sins by God, but principally to the evading of divisions and schisms, and the restoration of human nature which in this state, when it does not rebel and divide, accepts the divine condescension. God taught us to seek forgiveness, not so that He might learn what is right from us, but to purify us from the passions and to demonstrate that our disposition is vital to achieving the brotherly relationship among men under grace. In this petition for absolution, Saint Maximos sees the attainment of the fifth blessing; the restoration of nature culminating in the unity and harmony of all men.

The final petition phrase, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One", contains as its request the attainment of the final two blessings of the seven: the

abolition of the law of sin and the overthrowing of the tyranny of the Devil. Temptation is the law of sin, something unknown to creation initially. The Devil, through whom temptation came to human nature, was not evil. Temptation is understood as the voluntary predilection of the soul towards the passions, while evil is the implementation in practice of this impassioned predilection. Forgiving the sins of other men and the setting aside every dislike and hatred is of great importance so that God might immediately hear our prayer and send a double grace and reward. The forgiveness of sins is not only protection and deliverance from sin, but also from the future attacks of the Devil. The past and the future are both dependent on present absolution.

5. Pleasurable and Painful Temptation.

Summarizing what he has previously said in reverse order, Saint Maximos writes that, in order to be free from the Devil and to flee temptation, we must forgive the sins of others. In this struggle to expel the passions we have Christ as our ally, who with love unites and restores nature and moves us to love the bread of life. In living according to the Divine Will we are made like unto the angels, and then with the participation by the grace of the Holy Spirit He makes us “commune with the Divine nature”, He makes us children of God who are clothed by the worker of Grace, Christ, “From Him, through Him and in Him we have and always will have our being, our movement and our life.”[23] The mystery of theosis is the aim of the Lord’s Prayer, which presents to us, from the lowest semblance of faith in the Incarnate Lord, the path to the grace of adoption. We ought to show by our works that that the prayer is realized in us; not to preach that God is “Father” and yet allow it to appear by our passions and vices that the father of our life is the Devil. God, on the one hand, is the giver of life, while the Devil, on the other hand, is the purveyor of death through the various temptations that he prompts.

Finishing, Saint Maximos clarifies that there exists two types of temptations; the pleasurable and the painful. The pleasurable temptations are voluntary and freely chosen and are the root of sin. From this form of temptation, we ask God to deliver us saying, “Lead us not into temptation”. Conversely, the painful temptations—pain in other words—are chastisement for sin. By the difficulty caused involuntary suffering, God chastens and corrects the sin-loving disposition. If one endures these painful, involuntary, temptations he is lauded by the Apostle James, who advises us to be glad when tempted by various temptations.[24] The Devil uses both forms of temptations with much villainy. He uses pleasurable temptations to pry the soul away from the love of God by pleasure, but the painful temptations he uses to devastate man through pain and suffering, pushing him to blasphemy and accusation of God. We, however, who know the methods of the Devil and his evil thoughts; we must retreat from the pleasurable temptations so as not to be separated from the love of God, but the painful temptations, the manifold trials which come to us by God’s permission, we must endure with courage showing that we prefer the Creator to creation.

We conclude our presentation of this luminous little work of interpretation, On the Lord’s Prayer, with the final prayer of Saint Maximos: “May all of us who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ be delivered from the present delights and the future afflictions of the evil one by participating in the reality of the blessings held in store and already

revealed to us in Christ our Lord Himself, who alone with the Father and the Holy Spirit is praised by all creation.”[25]

Endnotes

T.N. means Translator Note.

1. [T.N.] The Philokalia is a collection of texts on the spiritual life, ranging from the 4th to the 14th centuries, edited and partially compiled by Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite. For its history, see Louth, Andrew. ‘The Theology of the Philokalia’ in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West*. Ed. John Behr (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).
2. [T.N.] Though the work consists of five volumes, only the first four have been translated into English.
3. [T.N.] The writings of Saints Kallistos and Ignatios will, presumably, be found in the fifth volume of the English translation, having not appeared in any of the previous volumes.
4. [T.N.] See Matthew 5-7.
5. [T.N.] A common genre of writing within the Patristic tradition, a ‘Century’ is a collection of 100 short chapters or reflections on a given subject. Saint Maximos’ longer works in the Philokalia follow this pattern.
6. [T.N.] Sadly, the translators of the English Philokalia chose not to include Saint Nikodemos’ introduction or notes in their edition. For a description of other editorial changes made to the text see, Palmer, G.H.E., Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware. ‘Introduction’ in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. 4 vols. trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979.) 11-18.
7. On the Lord’s Prayer. 285.
8. On the Lord’s Prayer. 286.
9. On the Lord’s Prayer. 286.
10. On the Lord’s Prayer. 290.
11. On the Lord’s Prayer. 290.
12. On the Lord’s Prayer. 291.
13. On the Lord’s Prayer. 291.
14. On the Lord’s Prayer. 291 – 292.
15. [T.N.] See Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”
16. On the Lord’s Prayer. 292.
17. On the Lord’s Prayer. 293.
18. On the Lord’s Prayer. 294.
19. [T.N.] See Luke 12:29-31.
20. On the Lord’s Prayer. 300.
21. On the Lord’s Prayer. 300.
22. On the Lord’s Prayer. 301
23. On the Lord’s Prayer. 304.
24. [T.N.] See James 1:2 -3 ‘My brethren, deem it all joy whenever ye fall into diverse temptations, knowing that the testing of your faith worketh out patience.’
25. On the Lord’s Prayer. 305.

From a forthcoming book of articles by Fr. Theodore Zisis, who has kindly granted the OCIC permission to post this pre-publication text. The final version will likely contain minor changes. Translated by John Palmer. Originally from Ζήσης, Θεόδωρος. <<Η Κυριακή Προσευχή ερμηνευόμενη από τον Αγίο Μάξιμο τον Ομολογητή>> Ηθικά Κεφάλαια. (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις Βρυέννιος, 2002). 283-292. Posted March 24, 2009.

Source: <http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/the-lords-prayer-interpreted-according-to-saint-maximos-the-confessor.aspx>