

Thoughts on Prayer

By Hieromonk Peter (Seregin)

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FR. PETER

HIEROMONK PETER SEREGIN was born on August 21 (o.s.), 1895, in the village of Shuta, Penza province, Russia, in the family of pious peasants, Dmitry Florovich and Evdokia Petrovna Seregin. His parents cultivated love for God in their son from his early childhood. On weekends and feast days the family would always attend services at the local church of the Holy Trinity. Peter's father organized and led the church choir, and trained his son as well. The boy learned to read before beginning school, and his love for spiritual books remained with him all his life. Being the son of peasants, he also had to share in the hard physical labor of farming.

In 1919, with the blessing of his parish priest, Peter organized the "Society of Zealots for Orthodoxy," which had as its aims charitable work, education, and the physical improvement of the church. In 1921 he was tonsured as a reader and was also given the responsibility of replacing his reposed father as the director of his parish choir. Although he had desired the monastic life since his childhood and had made frequent pilgrimages to monasteries, nevertheless, in obedience to his parents, he married a young woman, Anastasia Fyodorovna, and was ordained to the diaconate in 1922.

In 1925 he was ordained to the priesthood. Not long afterwards he wrote in his diary: "Now I have entered upon a new, glorious, responsible path—the labor of the royal priesthood.... Oh, how endlessly



The Dormition Church of the Pyukhtitsa Convent, Estonia.

happy I am, having received this wondrous divine gift. It has been accomplished by His mercy! Now I feel even more strongly that I belong neither to the world nor to myself, but have been bought at a high price by my Lord. O Lord! Grant me to serve Thee in holiness and righteousness!"

The persecutions of the Soviet authorities did not pass by the Seregin family. In 1929 Fr. Peter was arrested for "disrupting collectivization." He was sentenced to three years' hard labor at the White Sea canal construction project.

At the beginning of World War II Fr. Peter was conscripted into the army, and served at the front until 1945. When asked if he had been involved in active fighting, he replied: "God was merciful; I wasn't. I

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worked in the kitchen, repaired boots, and was able to sew coats and pants. My main occupation was secretly performing my own work: I confessed and communed people." After the war he rejoined his family and served in Petrozavodsk.

In 1954, Fr. Peter was assigned to the Pyukhtitsa Convent of the Dormition of the Mother of God, located in Estonia.¹ The convent was in great need during the postwar years, and Fr. Peter had to undertake a tremendous amount of work to bring it into good physical condition. In obedience to the Church, he left his large family behind and settled in the convent in the autumn of 1954. There he served as the father confessor for the nuns of the convent, as well as for the multitudes of people who came from all over Russia and Estonia to be healed of the sicknesses of their souls and bodies. Fr. Peter was a man of ardent prayer, and there were numerous instances of healing that took place through his intercessions. The Lord also granted him the gift of clairvoyance, through which he was able to guide the souls who entrusted themselves to his care. He served at



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not long before his repose.

¹ The Pyukhtitsa Convent was founded in 1891 on the spot where an icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos had been found in the sixteenth century. St. John of Kronstadt blessed the beginning of the convent, and took an active part in its life, sending donations and new novices. The convent has never closed since its foundation, and since 1990 has had the status of a stavropegial monastery.—ED.

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Pyukhtitsa for sixteen years, until his retirement due to poor health in 1970.

Fr. Peter's family continued living in Petrozavodsk until the children were grown, and then Matushka Anastasia moved to Pyukhtitsa to be with Fr. Peter. After her repose Fr. Peter was able to realize his long-cherished dream, and was tonsured a monk, retaining his name, and so lived as a hieromonk for the last three years of his life. He reposed on August 2/15, 1982, at the age of eighty-seven. His funeral, which took place on the eve of the Feast of the Lord's Transfiguration, felt to those present more like a celebration than the burial of one dear to them. He lives on in the memory of the sisters of the convent and of the many spiritual children he had all over Estonia and Russia.

The thoughts that follow are excerpted from a recently published collection of his teachings, which he wrote in his journal during the course of his ministry.² The fruit of his own experience, they amply demonstrate the depth of his understanding of prayer and of the obstacles that prevent us from attaining it.

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Prayer is extinguished by judging, which is the fruit of haughtiness and the threshold of anger. It binds the heart and prevents prayer. Self-satisfaction and self-praise likewise extinguish prayer.

Prayer is extinguished by overeating, distraction in one's conduct, lasciviousness, the amassing of fleeting but frequent amusements, the pollution of the heart with non-spiritual pleasures, laziness and carelessness in prayer itself, negligence at the time of prayer, and in general, unconcern, foolish behavior, and judging.

Prayer is formed by the profound conviction that prayer is the life of the soul, and that without it the soul is dead; it is formed by careful

² *The Luminary of Pyukhtitsa: The Biography and Journal of Elder Peter (Seregin of Pyukhtitsa)* (St. Petersburg: Svetoslov, 1998) (in Russian).

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zeal for [the attainment of] unceasing prayer and by reverence toward it. Abstinence and sobriety of body (the elimination of any dissoluteness); stillness, with meekness in one's thoughts and conduct (which must lead one to humble-mindedness). Abstinence in speech.... Judging one's neighbor is inadmissible under any pretext, especially openly, in the presence of others (which verges on slander). Prayer dies away when one's inner temple is polluted and defiled, when there is no grace or reverence within it.

Superficiality and haste during prayer are very harmful and dangerous. Negligence removes the fear of God, without which prayer is impossible.

Negligence leads to the loss of prayer. Conventionality, drifting, automatism, and habitual carelessness are dangerous in prayer. Every phrase, every word of prayer must be profoundly vital for us; they must be pronounced with the utmost attentiveness, with the application of all the powers of our nature: with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, all our strength. Otherwise our appeal will not be complete, but will be a defective sacrifice of prayer, not having the fruit of salvation.

Sometimes it happens that a person stands at the time of his prayer rule and goes through the words of memorized prayers, while at the same time various extraneous thoughts about life's affairs and plans dig into his mind and recollections, and cares attract his heart (feelings), and instead of prayer, he turns out to be engaged in something not only empty but sinful. Of course, this is not prayer, but hypocritical idle talk before God. This occurs from a fainthearted, incomplete, insincere appeal to God. Standing at prayer, such a person has not parted from his passions and worldly vanity, and does not want to understand or bring to his consciousness what a great matter he has entered upon, and Whom he is addressing with his prayers. This happens when, before prayer, we did not have the total resoluteness to "lay aside all earthly cares";³ when the predilection for worldly and created things is

³ From the Cherubic Hymn during the Divine Liturgy.—ED.

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dearer to us than the Lord God and His Heavenly Kingdom, to which He is calling us; when we are slothful in the labor of piety and have let our hearts slide into easy and cheap pleasures; when we have approached prayer unprepared, light-mindedly, and negligently.

One must always prepare for prayer, if only briefly, but decisively, so that one's soul and heart are shaken to the core. Resoluteness in addressing God must be total. At the time of prayer we must, without wavering, leave the earth and turn with all our being to our loving Father, Who is in heaven (cf. Matt. 6:9). We must irrevocably leave the adulterous and sinful world, break our connection with it, and suppress our attractions to it (lusts). This is expressed well in the words of the priest's prayer at the Liturgy: "Unto Thee we offer our whole life and hope, O Master, Lover of mankind."⁴ We must put all the strength of our life into love and offer it as a poor gift to His measureless and inexpressible love for mankind.

When the mind is united with the heart in prayer, when it is vigilant and watches over the reverence and purity of the heart, the evil spirits cannot easily sow their pernicious tares in a man's heart or entice his mind away to soaring, sinful daydreams, for the mind is then praying together with [the heart]. Distraction is a sign of our laziness of soul and is the fruit of negligence.

Extraneous thoughts come at prayer for various reasons: either a person remembers something he liked, which once influenced his heart; or his heart is attracted by thoughts that are in accord with his state; or our [fallen] nature, unbridled by abstinence, draws his heart to sinful daydreams. In a word, the heart gathers vanity and iniquity into itself and gives birth to idle or sinful thoughts.

For prayer, and perhaps for good works as well, zealous concentration and constancy of soul are required.

Frequent distraction and carelessness in prayer, aside from the clear and serious sinfulness in these actions themselves, can also have seri-

⁴ From the priest's prayer during the litany after the Anaphora.—ED.

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ous consequences: the degeneration of the heart, that is, its inability to have profound, reverent experiences, and indulgence in its laziness. All of this can lead to a permanent and great cooling of the soul, and its mortification.

You have been deprived of prayer through negligence and carelessness, from which you have fallen into sin, which has killed your prayerful boldness before God. Remember the moment that prayer ceased, and what events, activities, and experiences there were at that time. Try to understand what in your conduct was especially offensive to God during that period: movements of anger, passions, remembrance of wrongs, offenses, or the movements of some other passions. Finding your sinful mistakes, repent of them and beg forgiveness (pray). Repent and deplore your laziness, carelessness, negligence, your impure conscience, and pray however you can.

If you still have no prayer, again examine yourself and try to recall what you have forgotten about your behavior, and again pray for understanding and help. If there is no prayer, repent for forgotten sins and unknown sins (committed in ignorance), and again pray however you can. Pester God—beg for prayer.

Sometimes it is difficult to pray because neither the character of our heart nor our personal desires and strivings are in agreement with the words of the prayers and the Holy Scripture. Beside this, the enemy also does not sleep, but like an evil bird of prey is always striving to take away the sacred words we hear and read (or not to allow them to reach our attention), offering us the pleasure of vain recollections, thoughts, and desires.

Love for one's neighbors is expressed in all works that are to the good of our neighbors, in works of mercy and love for them, and in prayer for them. In those very deeds of mercy and in prayer, the most heartfelt feeling of love is also restored. If we desire that the feeling of love and blessedness be in us uninterruptedly, and even eternally, then our good works according to faith must likewise be uninterrupted, and our prayer must be unceasing. Therefore we read and often speak about

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uninterrupted prayer. Sometimes we complain that constancy in prayer is disturbed by necessary concerns and conversations. But this happens only when we are absorbed by them to the point of self-forgetfulness and forgetfulness of God.

In our absorption, our predilections and passions manifest themselves. When we are carried away by something, we are already serving another god, and are not standing before the true God in our heart. All of our daily affairs can be and must be dedicated to God, for in them love for our neighbor in accordance with the commandment is almost always made manifest. If everything that each of us does for himself is carried out with a clean conscience, this will not separate us from God and prayer. Our conversations likewise distract us from the remembrance of God and from prayer by reason of our absentmindedness. If, though, when we are conversing with our neighbor, we see in him not an object of pleasant amusement or of displeasure, but the image of God, this will confer upon our conversation the necessary sobriety and temperance. If the one with whom we are speaking is of one Faith and one mind with us, this will serve for the strengthening of our faith, love, and prayer. If the one speaking with us turns out to be impoverished in faith, even then we must treat him as one who is in the image of God. In such a case our secret prayer is extremely necessary to us for the strengthening of faith in us, and in order to have a beneficial effect on the person we are speaking with. The essence of unceasing prayer during conversation consists in faith and love in the heart, which pours forth in the words of the conversation.

Distraction often burdens us during the fulfilling of our prayer rule, and efforts to make the mind concentrated have little or even no success. It is even more difficult to bring one's heart into accord with the content of the prayers. The whole trouble is in the sinful state of the heart. Common sense suggests to us that total attention to the words of the prayers is essential, but *out of the heart proceed evil thoughts* (and feelings) (Matt. 15:19), that is, sinful ones, in the form of desires that are incompatible with prayer, or sinful and vain recollections that cut

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off prayer. This proceeds from the fact that during the course of the day we devote too much attention and space in our heart to sinful and vain desires and aspirations. Prayer is restored in a sinful heart only when a man condemns the sin that is in him to the point of being disgusted by it, and has recourse to sincere repentance. Continual isolation of the mind and heart, which must exist for unceasing prayer, comes only with purity of heart or profound prayerful repentance for the sin that has been discovered in one's soul.

There is no prayer in one's soul because there is no desire in the heart to pray. And the desire to pray, the yearning for contact with God, is not there because the heart is attracted by something created, unworthy. By what? Investigate it yourself. Remember what the Lord said: *He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me* (Matt. 10:37), that is, he is not worthy of the presence of God. What have you made yourself "worthy" of? Is it the presence of the enemy through vanity or an attachment to something created? Wake up—without sincere prayer there is no life.

Intensified prayer and perfect prayer (that which a man is capable of on his own) occurs when the whole heart, the whole life of the one who is praying, is invested in it. Greater perfection comes from the operation of God's grace.

If distraction due to extraneous thoughts is noticed, strictly intensified attention to the words of the prayer is required, as well as a personal moral analysis of such thoughts, with the recollection of one's impurity and unworthiness. Total participation of the heart in prayer is possible if the Kingdom of God is chosen by the heart as the one and only treasure, and God as the only source of life. Distraction of thoughts sometimes comes from the heart's predilection to surrounding created objects, or from dissatisfaction, anger, and light-mindedness, when the attention is not directed by one's reason, and the mind is left as "a homeless child."

Unseen warfare consists in a Christian suppressing sinful inclina-

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tions in his soul and body by prayer and other grace-filled means: repentance, Communion, abstinence, and the rest.

Different sins act in different ways on man's heart. The sins of pride, haughtiness, dissatisfaction, anger, and those like them suppress and exclude prayer from the heart. The sins of voluptuousness, passion, and vainglory draw the mind and heart into sinful daydreams, and in this way also deprive the soul of prayer....

Descend with your attention into your heart and try to unceasingly stand before God there in prayer, without allowing predilections for created things and thoughts about vain worldly things to enter there. By "predilection" one may also understand the exposure of the heart's "taste" to any created thing which we like.

There is only truth when we see the wisdom and glory of God in the beauty and harmony of nature and we glorify God ourselves.

When walking or performing uncomplicated work, when the mind is free and the desire is there, one can consecrate one's every breath to the Lord with the prayer of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This short prayer can be conveniently combined with the rhythm of breathing: inhale with the first two phrases, and exhale with the third and fourth. The words are pronounced secretly, by the mind.

If you want to abide in unceasing joy, remember God continually, do not sin, and unceasingly pray to God with contrition.

A man can cleanse his heart from sins and passions with the sharpest and most powerful weapon of the name of Jesus and, cleaving to the heart with a reverent mind, can accomplish a ministry of brightness and life. If there is a sacrificial altar in his heart, [spiritual] gifts will be received there.

If sin and passion are disclosed and acknowledged as the unnatural and sick state of the soul, and if repentant grief is active in prayer, grace will heal the sinful wounds of the soul and heart through repentant prayer. If sin is acknowledged as a wound and the soul is repulsed by it, and if prayer leads a man away from sin and tears extinguish passion,

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then sin will become less solid in the soul, for the Holy Fathers say: Whatever the soul does not want is not stable in a man. The inflaming and intensification of the passions (carnal and spiritually prideful) under the pretext of prayerful activity is spiritual delusion. If the goal of the prayer of the mind in the heart is brokenness and lamentation over sins, only under these conditions of repentant brokenness and tears is prayer true and accessible to all. It will enlighten the conscience, strengthen the will for the fight against sin, and preserve a man in the state of fear of God and contrition.

Pray continually, as long as you have possession of your consciousness, aside from sleep. If you fulfill this, you will even pray subconsciously. Then you will pray (in your heart) even during sleep, that is, literally unceasingly. But first of all you must without fail observe the general rule of prayer, known to all: do not talk idly in a state of distraction, do not judge, do not become angry, do not have passions, etc. Prayer is sometimes formal: when a man prays consciously and with some participation of the heart, but without the fear of God and without pure spiritual love, that is, without reverence, when the heart does not belong entirely to God, due either to the emotional and carnal passions within it, or to anger and malice. The state of one's prayer is an indicator of the general state of the soul: whether it is healthy or unsound. If a man is pure and in the Lord, the Holy Spirit Himself will pray in him *with groanings which cannot be uttered* (Rom. 8:26). Our closeness (kinship) to God consists in His image in us and in our likeness to Him by our good works....

Two conditions are required for unceasing prayer: reverence and constancy.