

Глава 11, ст. 1–10

Explaining the significance of the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem¹ as described by the Evangelist Matthew (Mt. 21:1-10), St. John Chrysostom said that the donkey which was yoked, brought by the disciples to their Lord together with its colt, was a symbol for the Jewish people.² The Lord did not choose to mount it, making it clear that the chosen people were cast out for their disbelief, and the Kingdom of God was taken from them and given to a nation bringing forth fruits (Mt. 21:43). According to St. John Chrysostom, the donkey's young colt on which man had never sat meant all those new nations from among the Gentiles who were little-known in the Old Testament history, which initially constituted the young Church of Christ and accepted the easy yoke of the Gospels. The clothes which the Apostles placed on the colt meant His teaching. Thus, the whole event marked the radical turning point in the plan of God's Divine economy for the salvation of man, when the exceptional, leading role which the people of Israel had in the Old Testament passed on from them to other nations. By mounting the colt, the Lord showed that He took these nations under His leadership.

This is the interpretation of the event given by St. John Chrysostom. The new Church, which included young nations from among the Gentiles, received the right of citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Until then, the Lord held the view that the children should *first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs* (Mk. 7:27). Since the family of nations from among the Gentiles who made up the New Testament Church also includes the Russian people who adopted Christianity later than others, it is clear what great significance the Lord's Entry into Jerusalem has for us, Russians.

Yet leaving aside the symbolism of the event, it must be said that it has great significance even in a simple, historical sense. This was the highest point of glory to which the life of the Savior rose, before the bloody conclusion immediately afterwards. Never before had the star of the earthly greatness of the humble Prophet from Galilee shone so brightly! Never before had His name been pronounced with such enthusiasm and hope by thousands of mouths. Never before had He been surrounded by such a large crowd ready to bow down before Him and follow His bidding, whatever He desired... All of Jerusalem was moved (Mt. 21:10).

The Lord did not shy away from glory this time and from the tumultuous expression of admiration and reverence. He usually avoided commotion and people's talk and never sought the honour and homage of people since it was completely unnecessary for His work. Yet this time

¹ Palm Sunday

² See Saint Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, in a Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Michigan, USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), Volume X, p. 406.

He did not stop the jubilant exclamations, and when the enraged Pharisees demanded that He rebuke the disciples for their song of praise, the Lord answered: *I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out* (Lk. 19:40).

It is clear that He had some special purpose of His own, which was why He allowed this triumphal procession, and it is impossible to regard it only as an accidental manifestation of popular sentiment which had built up and was coming out.

We can guess this purpose from the words of the Savior, which at that moment He addressed to Jerusalem and which have been preserved by the Evangelist Luke.

Beholding the city, He wept over it and said: *If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation* (Lk. 19:42-44).

The triumphant entry of the Lord into Jerusalem was the last warning to the unrighteous city. How many times did the Lord preach on its streets and in its Temple! How many times did the dwellers of Jerusalem witness the extraordinary power of His miracle-working, but their hard hearts did not succumb to the appeal of His captivating speeches, neither did they bow down with reverent disconcertion before His might, nor recognize Him as the Messiah. Now, entering the city with glory, surrounded by the jubilant crowd, the Lord again wanted to draw the attention of its inhabitants to Himself, to clear their eyes which in seeing did not see, to remind them of the well-known prophecy of the Prophet Zechariah: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass* (Zech. 9:9).

Alas! All was in vain! This time again, Jerusalem did not know the time of its visitation, did not know the things which belonged to its peace!

Their recalcitrant hearts were not softened, and the dwellers of Jerusalem were the first to take part in the most terrible crime ever committed in the history of the world – in the crucifixion of the Lord.

The warning was not understood and did not affect them, and in time the terrible prophecy of the Savior was fulfilled: the city was leveled to its foundations.

On the other hand, there was one more aspect of the triumphant entry of the Lord into Jerusalem, undoubtedly not accidental, pointing to the special purpose of this event.

The Lord entered the city surrounded by a multitude of people, amidst joyful exclamations and shared enthusiasm. The road in front of Him was lined with clothes; palm branches were thrown under the feet of the donkey. Exclamations of joy and delight came from all sides: *Hosanna; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!* (verse 9). All this was so reminiscent of a triumphal procession and yet so different from the usual triumph of military leaders and great conquerors.

When a Roman commander would return to the eternal city after defeating an enemy, he would usually come in a gilded chariot drawn by four thoroughbred horses; a statue of victory held a golden wreath over his head; the music of the regiments returning with him thundered on all sides; before him were led crowds of prisoners and spoils of war.

How little did the humble and meek Savior resemble the proud figure of a Roman emperor, as He rode a small donkey which ambled along the stone slabs of the Jerusalem pavement and which was strangely disharmonious with the halo of glory that surrounded the Great Prophet at that moment. As a rule, it was peasants who rode donkeys to the city and to the market, and, of course, the Lord intentionally ordered His disciples to bring Him a donkey for His triumphant entry.

Riding on a donkey, wearing a simple tunic and cloak, without shiny military armor, without a victorious wreath on his head, the Savior seemed to be the embodiment of peace and meekness. There was nothing militant in this sight, nothing that even remotely resembled the military triumphs of the Roman combat leaders. It was perfectly clear to every unprejudiced eye that this Prophet from Galilee would never be that brilliant and powerful conqueror which the imagination of the Jews pictured the future Messiah to be. Undoubtedly, the Lord wanted to evoke that same thought. His procession was full of glory and majesty. Yet it was the brilliance of moral greatness and not of earthly, vain splendor. All His life the Lord struggled with this prejudice firmly rooted in the minds of the people and even His own disciples, who imagined the Messiah to be nothing other than an earthly king like Solomon or David, but more brilliant and powerful. Now He again gave His followers a clear lesson that His Kingdom was not a kingdom of outward splendor like all kingdoms of this world, but a purely spiritual Kingdom, great in its inner beauty and holiness.

Unfortunately, even then the crowd did not understand this lesson and, blinded by the prejudices of ethnic pride, it was ready to see the future glorious king in the humble Rabbi of Nazareth riding on a donkey, unaware of all inconsistency of their expectations with His outer appearance. The crowd was already willing to proclaim Him as king and, assuming that their

long-held hopes were finally coming true, cried like madmen: *Blessed be the kingdom of our father David, that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest!* (verse 10).

But the face of the Savior was sad and there were tears in His eyes. He was completely alone in His thoughts. Nobody in the crowd understood Him. Even His closest disciples, carried away by the shared enthusiasm, did not understand Him. Everyone expected from Him that He would proclaim Himself king, become the head of the Israel regiments and lead them on the glorious path of victories to overthrow the hateful Roman yoke, for independence, for power. Yet He knew that they expected this from Him in vain, that He could not give it to them, that He did not come for this, that this was the same temptation with which the devil had tried to deceive Him at the beginning of His ministry, that if the crowd knew this and had not been deceived in its vain hopes, it would have been more moderate in manifesting its enthusiasm. He knew that in a few days this very crowd would turn away from Him as from a deceiver, because He did not live up to their expectations, and although He did not promise them anything and even tried more than once to dispel these expectations by proving the vanity of their hopes, they would nevertheless hate Him for their disappointment, and the same people who were now shouting with such delight, “Hosanna!” in a few days would exclaim in fury: “Crucify Him!”

This is why the face of the Lord Jesus Christ was sad.

What a drastic change indeed! Here they were, people who were ready, it seemed, to give their lives for their beloved Prophet... Their voices were hoarse from cries of jubilation; their eyes glowed with delight; thousands of palm branches swayed in their hands, rising and falling like a forest in a storm; the colored clothes fluttered making bright patches of color in the air... This passionate, excited eastern crowd had found its hero...! A few days later, the picture changed dramatically: the same faces were embittered; their eyes burned with hatred; thousands of hands with clenched fists were raised threateningly; curses and blasphemy were on their lips... And the same calm Savior, great in His meekness, whose heart met both their delight and their hatred only with sorrow and compassion, was before them.

The crowd is fickle, and many of the people who undoubtedly once were listeners and disciples of the Lord, who enthusiastically hearkened unto Him and were ready to follow Him in every place, betrayed Him and lost the crown of eternal bliss. They lacked constancy.

This is a great lesson for us, especially for beginners on the path of the Christian life. Lack of constancy seems to be one of the deadly sins of the Russian character. We are easily carried away by any novelty; with enthusiasm we rush towards each new thing especially if it has the stamp of ideological content, but these infatuations cool down as quickly as they appear. The first obstacles we meet cool our ardour, exertion of will soon tires us, and seeing the long

path with an endless number of difficulties, we are overcome by despondency. Without even trying to fight, we hopelessly give up.

This lack of constancy is especially perilous in the spiritual life. How many young people were lost to Christ due to a lack of forbearance! At first, when, in the twilight of narrow-minded religious ignorance, the light of the Gospels' truth blindingly brightly flashes before them, they cannot resist, for truth which is realized cannot be resisted. With enthusiasm they give themselves over to a new life where everything is so joyful, is felt so deeply, and says so much to the heart. At first, they have so much zeal, which almost always becomes an urge for asceticism. Ordinary forms of serving God, which do not require much effort, seem too weak and don't lead to the goal fast enough, and they usually willfully burden themselves with endless rules of fasting, prayer, prostrations, and other feats of the ascetic life. Alas! The more they take upon themselves, the sooner they become tired; the stronger the enthusiasm of the first urge, the sooner a lack of constancy reveals itself. A few months later only inertia keeps them going; they feel somewhat confused, as if the results of their zealousness do not meet their expectations, and the coldness of their first disappointment and uncertainty already creeps into their soul. Little by little, their first fateful doubt as to whether the chosen path is right starts to grow. Feeling rightful in their zealousness, they try to explain their failure and dissatisfaction as not being the result of a lack of knowledge of how to do things, but as being for objective reasons, and they begin to feel deceived. This is already a step towards disbelief, and going further along this path, without either the strength or ability to fight the whispers of the tempter, they finally completely renounce the path of the spiritual life and suddenly go over to the camp of the enemies of the Gospel. And sometimes for a person this is worse than the former ignorance.

The details of this process may not always be the same, but be that as it may, this inconstancy, this inability to restrain one's impatience and this sad susceptibility to quickly succumb to the spirit of disappointment and despondency, carry away many victims, especially among young people. If only it were possible to cast a mystical glance over the world's field of spiritual struggle, it would appear as a cemetery covered with corpses of unripened hopes and untimely lost pursuits.

Meanwhile, persistence to the end, to death, is necessary. It is not enough to simply embark on a Christian path; one must reach the goal. If the Christian life can be compared, as the Apostle Paul suggested, to running in a race, where we all are participants in the competition, it is clear that only those who reach the final post will receive the prize (I Cor. 9:24). An athlete who stops running halfway crosses himself out of the list of contenders for a victorious crown,

and no matter how fast he ran the first half of the way, it will not bring him any benefit; his work is lost.

But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die (Ez. 18:24). Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life (Rev. 2:10) — this is the basic rule of the spiritual life.

How can one attain this?

We will not speak here about perseverance in the attainments of the spiritual life—about prolonged exertion of will and persistent activity in overcoming difficulties encountered. We have already discussed this in one of our previous homilies. Here we only speak about constancy, that is, the ability to keep the goal and main direction of life unchanged until the very end.

It goes without saying that it is impossible to give an exhaustive answer to this question, for everything here ultimately depends upon the will of God. The Lord is able to save a person in the most hopeless circumstances. But still, it is possible to point out a number of obstacles or false steps which, causing disappointment or despondency, most of all hinder the constancy of the spiritual life and which therefore must be carefully avoided!

The most common obstacle in this regard is the false direction of one's main aspirations at the very beginning of the spiritual life. Why did the crowd, ready to almost deify the Lord, betray Him so quickly? We have already seen that the main reason for their disappointment was that the Savior was expected to give them what He could not. The crowd wanted to impose their will and their hopes on Him and became angry when He did not submit to this and went His own way. The loud ovation with which the crowd greeted the Lord expressed not love for Him personally and not fascination by His teaching, but hope that He would fulfill their dreams and desires. At that moment, the gleeful crowd followed the Savior not because they valued the image of the highest spiritual perfection in Him and recognized the profound truth of His speeches, but because they expected Him to satisfy their ethnic pride, and when they saw that they had been deceived in their expectations, there inevitably had to be a reaction.

This is also the case in the spiritual life. Entering on the religious path in the beginning, people often set their own goals without asking themselves at all what God wants from them. Some think that their material well-being will avail from the protection of God, and therefore its growth will be more successful. Others dream of fame, honor, and influence as religious figures. Still others look to religion as a career path. Very many, perhaps, do not approach religion with

such crude material calculations, but they want to quickly achieve holiness and even receive the gift of miracle-working. In all these cases, religion is not a goal in and of itself, but only a means to achieve completely extraneous, almost always selfish objectives. Here a person does not seek the joy of bowing before the majesty of God with reverence and love, but, strictly speaking, allocates a subordinate, unworthy role to the Almighty Creator of the world, demanding only speedy fulfillment of his desires from Him.

It can be said with certainty that anyone who embarks on the path of the religious life with such a preconceived goal will never get anything, will not reach anything, and will be forced to abandon this path sooner or later, only wasting time and efforts. Moreover, disappointment will even cause enmity towards God in him and thus will put him in a worse position in the matter of his salvation than the position he was in before, prior to starting religious endeavours.

One bishop thus wrote about this: “I have known many young people who perished this way. I remember one talented young man who was carried away by the dream of becoming a bishop. He began to pray endlessly, standing for whole long nights with his prayer rule, imposed a severe fast on himself, but since he was only eighteen years old, he soon realized that he would have to endure such feats for too long before he would receive a bishop’s ordination according to the canonical regulations. His zeal lasted for exactly half a year and then he began to lead a dissipated life and soon sank to the bottom of debauchery. I also knew another young man who imposed the feat of being a fool for Christ upon himself. But it was just a childish hobby. He simply liked those extravagant tricks and absurd, ridiculous antics which he could perform under the guise of foolishness for Christ and which attracted the naive attention of simple-minded pilgrims to him. It simply touched the vein of a comedian and actor. After two years, however, he became tired of it and began to drink. I also remember another girl from among the common people, who almost starved herself to death during a feat of prayer, reciting the Psalter day and night, and making prostrations. She went this way and that in search of feats: she sometimes huddled in a damp basement under the church, announcing herself to be in seclusion, and eating only bread and water, sometimes acted as a fool for Christ and did not eat anything for weeks, or imposed heavy chains upon herself.. And all this was done according to her own will, contrary to the advice of experienced elders. On the one hand, it was done to show off in front of the crowd, which was thrilled by her exploits; on the other hand, she was tormented by a conceited thirst for holiness, a desire to be higher and better than others, and a secret dream of receiving the gift of clairvoyance or healing for her labors, again for the same purpose of astonishing her admirers. She ended up going insane.”

In the endeavours of the Christian life, one can endure until the end only if a person does not seek any goals on the side, but finds his greatest happiness in religion itself, in love for God, and in unity with Him. Those incredible, in our view, endeavours, labours, and hardships which the ancient desert-dwellers and martyrs of Christianity endured, could not have been sustained if in them they did not find for themselves a source of bliss.

No matter which of the great luminaries of Christianity we examine, we will invariably find that their constancy and firmness in serving God resulted from their deep love for God the Creator and for the pure truth of the Gospels, free from any personal, selfish motives.

Let us set before us the image of the great fighter for Orthodoxy against the Arian heresy St. Athanasius, who devoted his whole life to this struggle and held his ground to the end.

While still a very young man, twenty nine years old, in the rank of a deacon in the Church of Alexandria, he accompanied his bishop to the Council of Nicaea. At the Council, he came forward as a convinced and eloquent opponent of Arius who taught that the Son of God had only a created nature. The arguments of Athanasius together with his knowledge and understanding of the sacred texts prevailed, and Arianism was condemned. Yet the fight had only just begun. Defeated on theological grounds, the Arians embarked on a path of clandestine scheming and political intrigues. They obtained from the Emperor Constantine a decree to accept them as being in communion with the Orthodox Church in the name of peace within the Church. Athanasius, who had already become the Bishop of Alexandria by this time, did not obey the decree, considering it canonically incorrect, and was immediately exiled by the Emperor to France. This was his first exile. Under the sons of Constantine, he returned to his diocese. But Gregory who was an Arian had already been appointed to the Alexandrian see and entered the city with a military detachment. Athanasius was forced to flee to Rome. Shortly afterwards, Athanasius was restored in Alexandria, and he continued to incite the hatred of the Arians by his powerful defense of Orthodoxy. Orders were made to remove Athanasius by force, and he barely escaped death. Athanasius fled to the Egyptian deserts where he was lovingly received by the Scetis monks. A reward was announced for his capture, and from his seclusion he sent pastoral letters everywhere, defending the divinity of the Lord. From Egypt he again returned to Alexandria, to the great joy of the faithful sons of the Orthodox Church, but under Julian the Apostate a new edict was issued to persecute Athanasius wherever possible. "Do not become dismayed, children," said the saint leaving for exile again. "This is only a little cloud ... It will soon pass!" Indeed, Julian was soon killed and Athanasius returned. However, under the Emperor Valens, he again had to flee. Only the last years of his life passed relatively calmly, but how much he had to endure! And nothing could crush his constancy and unwavering devotion to

Orthodoxy. This man loved God and the truth with all his soul and he served them selflessly. This was the secret of his strength and loyalty.

Another indispensable condition for constancy in the Christian life is firm faith in the power and ultimate triumph of goodness both in private and in public life.

Without believing in the victory of goodness, one cannot take a single step in the spiritual life and good deeds in any form become aimless and meaningless. This does not mean, of course, that we should expect this victory during our lifetime. No, it may occur in the distant future, but one can firmly adhere to the path which one has chosen and, if necessary sacrifice oneself, only when there is unshakable confidence in the ultimate success of one's activities.

And what about all the prophets of the Old Testament, of whom only a few died of natural causes? Does not an ardent belief in goodness and its final victory sound in their passionate, accusatory speeches? And did not love for the truth make them neglect all dangers and go almost to certain death at the hands of their angry compatriots whom they reproached?

But how can one have confidence in the triumph of goodness, if life gives so many examples of the opposite, with the victory of evil over good?

There are two types of forces in the world – positive and creative; and negative and destructive. Destructive forces are distinguished by their tempestuous, spectacular nature, and therefore their action is especially noticeable and produces a strong impression of elemental power and invincibility. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms, typhoons, tornadoes – all these formidable natural phenomena strike the viewer with their fabulous power. Yet in fact this impression is, as a rule, exaggerated, and when the thunderstorm has passed, it almost always turns out that the results of its destructive action are not as great as its noisy effect might suggest. In addition, all destructive forces act for a short time, and the balance of nature, disturbed by them, is soon restored. Along with these destructive forces, there are positive, creative forces. They are quiet, silent, almost imperceptible, but irresistible in their action. All the greatest forces of nature – the force of gravity, force of solar heat and light, force of organic growth, etc. – act silently, without visible, sudden effects, but continuously, steadily, and invincibly. In collisions with destructive forces, the advantage in the overall course of life always remains with these. Volcanic eruptions can throw stones and ash to great heights, but in the end they all fall down again, defeated by the gravity of the earth.

The same thing occurs in the spiritual world. Here as well, the destructive forces are more tempestuous and spectacular in their manifestations, and sometimes it seems that they will defeat good. But this predominance is only temporary, and the quiet, calm forces of goodness in the life of the world — meekness, humility, love, patience, acting inconspicuously, but continuously and

reliably — in the end will nevertheless prove victorious. That is why such quiet forces are valued in Christianity as the greatest virtues, for they lead to the victory of the Christian ideal of goodness.

Two more pieces of advice for preserving constancy on the Christian path in life.

Save your strength or rather, use it wisely. You should not overload and overburden yourself with unbearable feats, for you will not withstand this strain over the long course of life. However, on the other hand, you should not weaken the intensity of the spiritual life too much, for the inevitable result of this will always be laziness, apathy, and a gradual decline in spiritual strength. One has to find the middle path, or, as the Holy Fathers say, follow the royal path. The feeling of a certain tension of the will should always be perceived, but this should not be accompanied by an exhaustion of spiritual strength. And in order to find this middle or royal path, one needs to have the virtue which in asceticism is called discernment.

Finally, no matter what happens to you, no matter which dangers you may encounter on your path, no matter what moral falls you may have to endure, do not let go of the robe of Christ, keep heading steadily in one direction, keep on the path of following Christ. Falls are inevitable, but it is important for a person not to let go of the robe of the Lord, not to lose contact with Him, for in this case everything can be remedied.

Be like a child who clings tenaciously to his mother's dress. Even though you may have stumbled, fallen, become dirty in the mud of sin and worldly pond scum — there is still no inevitable death in this... Get up and move on, perhaps with tears, with deep regret about the fall, but do not let go of the robe of Christ!

Chapter 11, verses 11–14, 20–26

The Gospel story of the fig tree which was cursed by the Lord and dried up, often arouses the bewilderment of readers: what does this mean? What was the fault of the ill-fated tree which did not bear fruit? What explains this severe judgment on the part of the ever meek and merciful Savior?

Usually the interpreters of the Gospel understand the fig tree as the Jewish people and give an allegorical meaning to the entire event. By the curse of the fig tree, the Lord foretold the future fate of Israel. Hypocritical, pious only in outward appearance, proud of their legalistic righteousness and exact observance of the external ritualistic prescriptions of religion, the Jewish people had not brought the fruits of a burning spirit and a truly righteous life for a long time. Their piety was only for show, and in this respect it really was very reminiscent of the Gospel fig tree covered with lush green foliage and bearing no fruit. The curse of the fig tree marked God's

final rejection of the people of Israel and their spiritual death. Thus, in this episode, we see the continuation of the same attitude of the Lord, when, during the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, He looked at the holy city with great sadness, foreseeing its fall and prophesying of it. The curse of the fig tree was the same prophecy, but expressed in deed.

In addition, the formidable, punitive power of the Lord was manifested for the first time in this instance. Until then, He appeared before us exclusively as a meek, loving Shepherd full of infinite mercy and forgiveness. But it was necessary to show people that in His hands lies the power to punish and that His judgment can be not only lenient, but also strict and just. This should be remembered by those who console themselves too much with the hope of divine all-forgiveness, not caring about their own correction and not making any effort to earn this forgiveness. When a person does not bear the fruits of repentance and of a Christian life, like the withered fig tree, his condemnation is inevitable, and his exaggerated, unfounded hopes for the mercy of God are nothing but false aspiration.

But the most valuable place for us in this Gospel passage is where the Lord speaks about prayer and points to the conditions for its effectiveness.

What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them. And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any; that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses (verses 24–26).

It is extremely important for every believer to understand the full power and importance of prayer and to learn how to pray in such a way as to be heard, for a direct connection of the human soul with God becomes established only through prayer, and only through this prayerful connection can a person receive from God all the grace-filled means and strength necessary for salvation. A person cannot become reborn and renewed on the basis of his own weak power.

“Prayer,” says Fr. John of Kronstadt, “is a golden link connecting the Christian man, the wanderer and the stranger upon earth, with the spiritual world... and, above all, with God the Source of life. The soul came forth from God, and to God may it ever ascend through prayer.”³

“It is only when we pray fervently, only then that we feel calm, warm, at ease, and bright in soul, because then we are with God and in God; but as soon as we cease thus praying, then temptations and various troubles begin. O, most blessed time of prayer!”⁴

³ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, trans. E.E. Goulaeff, Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, 1984, p. 80.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 206.

Since the Lord is the only source of all good things, by uniting with Him in prayer we receive all good things from Him.

“Through the prayer of faith we can obtain from the All-merciful and All-bestowing God all spiritual and indispensable earthly blessings besides, if only the prayer is fervent and the desire to obtain these blessings sincere. And what prayers the Church puts into our mouths! Such, that by means of them we can easily incline the Lord to be merciful to us and to bestow upon us every good gift.⁵”

“Fervent, tearful prayer not only cleanses from sins, but also cures bodily infirmities and maladies; it renews the whole of a man’s being, and makes him, so to say, born again (I speak from experience). O what a priceless gift prayer is!⁶”

“Prayer refreshes and enlivens the soul, like outer air refreshes the body. When praying we feel braver and brighter, similarly as we feel physically and spiritually braver and fresher while walking in the fresh air.⁷”

Prayer is the essential food for the soul.

“Why is it necessary to pray at home and go to church to attend Divine service? And why is it necessary for you to eat and drink, and walk in the fresh air every day, or to work every day? In order to support the life of the body, and strengthen it. It is also absolutely necessary to pray in order to support and stimulate the life of the soul, to strengthen the soul, which is sick with sins, to cleanse it, just as you employ certain kinds of food and drink to cleanse the body from injurious humours, or impurities. If, therefore, you do not pray, then you behave most unwisely, and unadvisedly....⁸”

“Men have fallen into unbelief because they have either completely lost the spirit of prayer, or never had it at all, nor have it now—in short, because they do not pray. The prince of this world has full scope for action in the hearts of such men; he becomes their master. They have not asked and do not ask God’s grace in prayer (for God’s gifts are only given to those who ask and seek), and thus their hearts, corrupt by nature, become dried up without the vivifying dew of the Holy Ghost, and at last from their extreme dryness they take fire, and blaze with the infernal flame of unbelief and various passions, and the Devil only knows how to inflame the passions that keep up this terrible fire, and triumphs at the sight of the ruin of the unfortunate

⁵ Ibid, p. 149.

⁶ Ibid, p. 148.

⁷ Ibid, p. 503.

⁸ Ibid, p. 321.

souls that were redeemed by the blood of Him who has trampled the power of Satan under foot.⁹”

Of course, the prayer of different people can be significantly varied in quality and effectiveness. There is, of course, a tremendous difference between the prayer of a schoolboy asking for a successful outcome on an exam and the prayer of a desert dweller caught in the elation of mysterious contemplation and not noticing anything which surrounds him. Great ascetics, above all, were distinguished by the spirit of fervent, fiery prayer which was constantly in them due to their inherent feeling of dependence on the will of God. However, this gift of prayer, like everything else in the spiritual life, did not come to them in an instant, but after prolonged efforts. Undoubtedly, the prayer of our shepherds or men of fervent prayer like, for example, St. Sergius or Fr. John of Kronstadt, at different periods of their lives was not the same in its power, and the prayer of childhood years with all its sincerity and purity did not have the same effectiveness as in the period of maturity when their spirit was already strengthened in the endeavour of prayer.

What conclusion can be made from this?

The conclusion is that prayer must be trained and prayer can be learned.

“Learn to pray,” says Fr. John, “force yourself to prayer. In the beginning it will be difficult; but afterwards the more you force yourself, the easier it will be for you to pray. But in the beginning it is always necessary to force oneself.¹⁰”

What should one attain in prayer? What kind of prayer should one strive for, and what signs can we use to evaluate success achieved in this regard?

“We should not only pray,” says St. John Chrysostom, “but also pray in such a way as to be heard.” This is the answer of the saint to the question posed.

When our prayer is heard, when the Lord hearkens to our petitions and fulfills them, this is the most important and, perhaps, the only sign of true prayer.

This success of our prayer being heard can manifest itself in two ways: in our inner feeling subjectively, as they say, and objectively, when our petitions are fulfilled in the realm of external facts.

The inner fruits of true prayer which has been heard, as depicted by Fr. John of Kronstadt are as such: “Sometimes...powerless, cold, unfruitful is our soul, like some heathen, unfruitful temple; but as soon as we make an effort, and force our heart to sincere prayer to God, turn our thoughts and heart towards Him with living faith, our soul immediately becomes vivified, warm,

⁹ Ibid, p. 24.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 503.

and fruitful. What sudden tranquility, what lightness, what emotion, what inward holy fire, what tears for our sins, what a sincere feeling of sorrow that by them we have displeased the Most-merciful Master; what light in the heart and mind, what an abundant stream of living water is diffused in the heart, flowing freely from the tongue, or from the pen and pencil, if we are writing, upon the paper! The wilderness of the soul blossoms like a lily¹¹ at the coming of the Lord into the heart.¹²”

Unfortunately, the subjective definition of the success of prayer is not always correct, because inexperienced people often mistake simple nervous excitement and fits of sentimental tearfulness for the blessed inner fruits of prayer.

It is much more correct and unmistakable to evaluate the successfulness of prayer by its outward results.

We may find the following episode in the Book of Exodus.

During the battle between the Israelites and Amalekites, Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. *And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed, But Moses hands were heavy; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua discomfited¹³ Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Ex. 17:11–13).*

Here, from the victory of the Israelites over the Amalekites, it can be said with undoubted certainty that the prayer of Moses was heard by God.

The Lord promises the same thing to each one who prays in faith: *I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them* (verse 24).

This promise of the Lord is being fulfilled in our days. We know the successfulness and almost miraculous power of petitions by the great man of prayer of the Russian land, Fr. John of Kronstadt. We know hundreds of cases of healing of the most chronic and incurable diseases through his prayers. Apparently, the Lord rarely refuses the prayers of His chosen one.

Here is one such healing in his own words: “A certain person who was sick unto death from inflammation of the bowels for nine days, without having obtained the slightest relief from medical aid, as soon as he had communicated of the Holy Sacrament, upon the morning of the

¹¹ Cf. Is. 35:1. Here St. John of Kronstadt, in the Russian original, directly quotes the book of Isaiah: “the ‘wilderness’ of the soul blossoms ‘as the rose.’”

¹² Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 103.

¹³ defeated

ninth day, regained his health, and rose from his bed of sickness in the evening of the same day. He received the Holy Communion with firm faith. I prayed to the Lord to cure him. ‘Lord, said I, ‘heal Thy servant of his sickness. He is worthy, therefore grant him this. He loves Thy priests, and sends them his gifts.’ I also prayed for him in church before the altar of the Lord, at the Liturgy, during the prayer: ‘Thou Who hast given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplication unto Three,’ and before the Holy Mysteries themselves. I prayed in the following words: ‘Lord, our life! It is as easy for Thee to cure every malady as it is for me to think of healing. It is as easy for Thee to raise every man from the dead as it is for me to think of the possibility of the resurrection from the dead. Cure, then, Thy servant Basil of his cruel malady, and do not let him die; do not let his wife and children be given up to weeping.’ And the Lord graciously heard, and had mercy upon him, although he was within a hair’s breadth of death. Glory to Thine omnipotence and mercy, that Thou, Lord, hast vouchsafed to hear me!”¹⁴

What is needed so that prayer would have power and be heard by the Lord? What qualities should it have?

The Lord definitely says that first of all, faith is necessary for success in prayer. *Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith* (verse 22-23).

It is strange for us now to read these words of the Savior – to such an extent His words seem impossible to us. So weak is our faith, and so little do we expect from it! And in the meantime, undoubtedly, these words of the Lord should be understood in their full and literal sense. Prayer combined with deep faith really does work wonders.

What must this faith consist of and what other qualities must prayer have in order to be heard? Let us leave this to the recognized authority in the field of prayer, Fr. John of Kronstadt, for his testimony is based on personal experience and is verified by the pastoral practice of his entire life wholly dedicated to God.

First of all, during prayer, you need to clearly envision the greatness of God, so your trembling soul would be fully imbued with a feeling of the greatest reverence for God.

“When you pray to the Lord, represent to yourself vividly to whom you are praying. You are praying to the unoriginated, endless King of all creatures, to the All-Holy, All-merciful, Almighty, Most-wise, Omnipresent, All-righteous God, Whom millions of millions of angels of

¹⁴ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 201.

various orders revere, Whom the armies of martyrs, the companies of prophets and apostles, the assemblies of prelates, venerable and righteous men praise.”¹⁵

“When praying, we must represent to ourselves the whole of creation as nothing before God, and God alone as everything, containing everything as a drop of water, existing, moving in everything, and vivifying everything.”¹⁶

“Someone, when, during prayer, he became languid and feeble in mind and body, and longed to sleep, roused himself by the following inward question: With Whom art thou conversing, my soul? And after this, by vividly representing the Lord before him, he began to pray with great feeling and tears; his blunted attention was sharpened, his mind and heart were enlightened, and he himself wholly revived. This shows what it is to represent the Lord God vividly to ourselves, and to walk in His presence! If – he went on to say – my soul, thou darest not converse languidly and carelessly with men above thyself in station, in order not to offend them, then how darest thou converse languidly and carelessly with the Lord?”¹⁷

“When you call in prayer upon the Lord God in Three Persons, remember that you are calling upon the unoriginate Father of all creatures, angels, and men; that all the heavenly Powers are in wonderment at you as you call upon Him, and look lovingly upon you that you are able to call with faith, love, and becoming reverence upon our and their common Father, the Almighty, Creator and Lord, Whom they love boundlessly, Whom they reverence deeply. O, what great happiness and blessedness, what an honour, how sublime a thing it is to be able to call upon the eternal Father! Value continually and unchangeably this highest happiness, this blessedness which the infinite mercy of God has reserved to you, and do not forget it during the time of your prayer. God hears you, God’s saints and angels hear you.”¹⁸

“Remember...that God the Trinity looks upon you with eyes brighter than the sun... Always pray with a fervent heart; and to attain to this, never eat and drink excessively. Remember with Whom you are conversing. Men very often forget with Whom they are conversing during prayer, Who are the witnesses of their prayer. They forget that they are conversing with the Vigilant and the All-seeing God; that all the Heavenly Powers and the saints of God are listening to their converse.”¹⁹

“When you pray to God—you converse with Him face to face; therefore, converse with Him as with a king, face to face...and do not, on any account, at that time, allow your heart to be

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 248.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 80.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 150.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 231-2

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 238.

occupied by and attached to anything irrelevant, for say: Would you, when speaking with a king or queen, be occupied at that time with anything irrelevant or unimportant; would you, for instance, at such a time, look out of the window and watch the passers-by, or would you look at the objects in the room, and so on? Would not this be the greatest offence to the royal majesty? How dare we, then, do so, and much worse when we converse with the Lord?”²⁰

You should vividly imagine before yourself God and His closeness.

“The chief thing in prayer for which we must care above all is – lively, clear-sighted faith in the Lord: represent Him vividly before yourself and within you – then ask of Jesus Christ in the Holy Ghost whatever you desire and you will obtain it. Ask simply, without the slightest doubt – then your God will be everything to you, accomplishing in an instant great and wonderful acts, as the sign of the cross, accomplishes great wonders.”²¹

Remember that the Lord hears your every word and can fulfill every petition.

“During prayer it is necessary to have such faith, that there should not even for a single moment be any secret doubt, or any secret thought in the heart, that God does not hear us, and it is necessary, furthermore, that our soul should represent God before itself during the whole time of our prayer and converse with Him, as with a King.”²²

“When praying, always remember that you are conversing with God, the Father of bounties and of every consolation, unchangeable, never wearied by our requests; with the Father Who is ever infinitely merciful, wise, all-powerful; for Whom, by His infinite mercy, wisdom, and omnipotence, it is as easy always to fulfil your requests as it is for you to think of them, to desire them; as easy as it is for you to pronounce the words of these requests, and even infinitely easier. Remember this, and never despond during prayer.”²³

“If you wish to ask of God in prayer any blessing for yourself, then before praying prepare yourself for undoubting and firm faith, and take in good time means against doubt and unbelief. For it will go ill with you if during the prayer itself your heart wavers in its faith and does not stand firm in it; then do not even expect to obtain of the Lord what you have prayed for doubtfully, for in so doing you have offended the Lord, and God does not bestow His gifts upon a reviler. *And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive* said the Lord (Mt. 21:22). This means, that if you doubt and do not believe, you shall not receive. *If ye have faith, and doubt not*, said He also, ye shall have power to move mountains (Mt. 21:21). Therefore, if you doubt and do not believe, you shall not have power to do so. *Let him ask in*

²⁰ Ibid, p. 422.

²¹ Ibid, p. 176.

²² Ibid, p. 460.

²³ Ibid, p. 511.

faith, nothing wavering..., says the Apostle James, *for let not that man²⁴ think he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways* (James 1:6-8). The heart that doubts that God can grant what it asks for is punished for this doubt: it is painfully oppressed and contracted by doubt. Do not anger Almighty God even by a shade of doubt – especially you, who have already experienced many and many times, the omnipotence of God. Doubt is a blasphemy against God, an insolent lie of the heart or of the lying spirit that nestles in the heart, against the spirit of truth. Fear it as you would fear a venomous serpent, or no – what I would rather say, is, despise it, do not take the slightest heed of it. Remember that God, during your prayer, is waiting for your affirmative answer to the question which He is inwardly asking you: *Believe ye that I am able to do this?* To which question you must from the depth of your heart reply, *Lord, I believe* (Mk. 9:24). And then it will be according to your faith.²⁵ Let the following considerations also help you in your doubt or unbelief: I ask of God, firstly, that which already exists, and nothing merely imaginary nor a fanciful good, and everything that exists receives its being from God: because *without Him was not any thing made that was made* (Jn. 1:3), and therefore, nothing that happens can happen without Him, and everything has either received its being from Him, or happens by His will or His permission, by means of powers and faculties given by Him to His creatures—and in everything that exists or is still happening, God is an all-powerful Master. Besides this, He *calleth those things which be not as though they were* (Rom. 4:17). Therefore, had I even asked for that which does not exist, He could give it to me by creating it. Secondly, I ask of God what is possible, because what is impossible for us is possible for God; and there cannot be any difficulty even in this respect, because God can do for me even that which is impossible in my own opinion.”²⁶

"In order that you should have steadfast assurance during prayer, of receiving every spiritual blessing from the Lord, believe that by uniting yourself unto the Lord during your prayer you become one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17), and that God is most gracious, almighty, and most wise. He is all-perfect perfection, therefore you, too, according to your receptivity, according to your faith and love, will become a partaker of His Divine perfections. In the union of your soul with God, do not consider anything impossible or difficult of fulfillment, *for with God all things are possible* (Mk. 10:27).”²⁷

²⁴ That is, one who doubts.

²⁵ This sentence was not translated by Goulaeff.

²⁶ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 8-9.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 362.

“When you pray to the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost – to the one God in the Trinity – do not seek Him outside yourself, but contemplate Him within, as dwelling in you, entirely penetrating and knowing you.”²⁸

It is necessary, further, to believe in the power of the words of prayer.

“When you pray for anything, either to the Lord or to the most pure Mother of God, or to the angels and saints...then consider the words, expressing your petitions, your needs, as the very things, the very matter, for which you ask the Lord, and believe that you have already a sure pledge of receiving the objects of your prayer, in the very words by which these objects are designated. For instance: when you pray for health for yourself or for someone else, look upon the word health as the very thing itself, as the very deed; believe that you already have it by the mercy and omnipotence of God, for the word itself, the name, may in an instant become deed with the Lord, and you will unfailingly receive that which you ask for in return for your unshaken faith....*What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them* (Mk. 11:24).”²⁹

“When praying, we must believe in the power of the words of the prayer, in such a manner as not to separate the words from the deeds they express; we must believe that the deeds follow the words, as the shadow follows the body, for the word and the deed of the Lord are indivisible...And you must likewise believe that that which you say in the prayer, for which you have asked, will be done.”³⁰

“When praying, endeavour by every means to feel in your heart the truth and the power of the words of the prayer; feed yourself upon them as upon an imperishable food; water your heart with them as with a dew; and warm yourself by them as by means of a beneficial fire.”³¹

“When praying, pay steadfast attention to the words of the prayer, feeling them in your heart. Do not withdraw your mind from them to any other thoughts.”³²

One needs to be conscious of the necessity of what is asked for.

“During prayer, it is necessary, in the first place, that the object of the prayer should be definitely expressed, or at least, that there should be a clear sense of it and desire for it in the heart,” that is, you must feel sincerely the need of what you are praying for. “In the second place, it is necessary that this desire should be expressed with feeling and lively trust in the mercy of

²⁸ Ibid, p. 440.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 438.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 125.

³¹ Ibid, p. 204.

³² Ibid, p. 176.

the Lord or in that of the Mother of God” or of the saints called upon. “In the third place, there must be a firm intention not to sin in future, and to fulfil God’s will in everything.”³³

“He who prays must hunger after, must ardently desire those blessings—especially the spiritual ones—the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing, the sanctification, the strengthening in virtue, for which he prays, otherwise, it will be a useless waste of words. The same applies to thanking and praising the Lord; hunger and thirst to constantly thank and praise the Lord, for everything comes from Him, everything is the gift of His goodness and mercy.”³⁴

In addition to faith and consciousness of the necessity of what asked for, prayer must be combined with a deep feeling of love for God, humility, contrition for sins, and come from the heart.

“When praying, strive, above all things, after fervour of spirit, after fervent, sincere repentance for your sins.”³⁵

“Remember that the Lord will give you according to your heart....Whatever the heart is, such will be the gift. If you pray with faith, sincerely, with all your heart, not hypocritically, then a gift will be given you by the Lord in accordance with your faith, in accordance with the degree of the fervour of your heart. And, on the contrary, the colder your heart is, the more incredulous and hypocritical it is, the more useless will be your prayer; not only this, the more it will anger the Lord, Who is a Spirit, and seeks to be worshipped in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn. 4:23-24).”³⁶

“When praying, we must absolutely subject our heart to our will, and turn it towards God. It must be neither cold, crafty, untruthful, nor double-minded... **Is it**³⁷ good for us to hear God’s voice of anger: *This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me* (Matt. 15:8). So do not let us stand in church in a state of spiritual prostration, but let the spirit of each one of us on such occasions burn in its working towards God.... And God requires our hearts. *My son, give Me thine heart* (Prov. 23:26). Because the heart is the principal part of the man – his life. More than this, the heart is the man himself. Thus he who does not pray or does not serve God with his heart, does not pray at all, because in that case his body only prays, and the body without the mind is nothing more than earth.”³⁸

³³ Ibid, pp. 437-8.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 258.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 514.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 193.

³⁷ In the original Russian this was set as a question.

³⁸ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 3-4.

“We must always, from our whole hearts, sing and express to God our praises, our gratitude and our requests; every work must be done before Him with the whole heart. He must be loved and trusted with the whole heart.”³⁹

“All you who draw near to serve God in prayer, learn to be like Him, meek, humble, and true of heart... The Lord seeks in us that which is like and akin to Himself, on to which His grace may be grafted.”⁴⁰

“When a man is about to pray, he must humble his proud heart, must cast away earthly vanity from it...”⁴¹

“During prayer, be like a lisping infant, mingling your spirit in one with the spirit of the prayer you are pronouncing. Count yourself as nothing and accept the prayer as a great gift of God.”⁴² “Be simple, trustful, undoubting as a child in Godly matters.”⁴³

Further, straightforwardness and sincerity are needed.

“If you wish that God should speedily give you hearty faith in prayer, strive with all your heart to speak and to do everything in regard to other people sincerely, and never be deceitful in your dealings with them. If you are straightforward and truthful with others, then God will give you straightforwardness and sincere faith also in reference to Himself. Him who is not straightforward in his dealings with other men God does not accept easily when he prays, making him feel that he is insincere with other men, and therefore cannot be perfectly sincere with God without [undergoing] affliction of the soul.”⁴⁴

“Be true to God always and in everything. If you say the prayer ‘Our Father...’ pronounce each word sincerely, with reverence, fixing your mind and heart upon God alone, not paying attention to anything or anybody around you. If you say any other prayer, say it also with all your soul, not with your heart divided, not paying undue attention to anything or anybody.”⁴⁵

In addition, a Christian life and freedom from passions are needed.

“It is quite impossible for anyone to pray whose mind and heart are attached to anything carnal—for instance, to money or to honours – or who has in his heart passions such as hatred or envy for others, because passions usually contract the heart, in the same way as God expands it and gives it true freedom.”⁴⁶

³⁹ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 85.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 144.

⁴² Ibid, p. 254.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 164.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 292.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 20.

“He who prays to the Lord, to the Mother of God, to the Angels and Saints, must first of all endeavour to amend his heart, and his life, and afterwards to imitate Them, as it is written: *Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful* (Lk. 6:36). *Be ye holy; for I am holy* (I Pet. 1:16).”⁴⁷

“It is sometimes well during prayer to say a few words of our own, breathing fervent faith and love to the Lord.... And how pleasing to the Lord this lispings of our own is, coming directly from a believing, loving, and thankful heart. It is impossible to explain this: it is only needful to say that when you are praying to God with your own words the soul trembles with joy, it becomes wholly inflamed, vivified, and beatified⁴⁸.”⁴⁹

Needless to say, prayer must be performed diligently.

“Do not spare yourself, but pray earnestly, even if you have been toiling all day....If you have made a rule to read so many prayers (whether they be long or short, fulfil the reading of all of them well), read the prayers with all conscientiousness, and do not do God’s work with your heart divided in two, so that only one half belongs to Him and the remaining half to your own flesh....Thus, be assured, if you hurry over your prayers, to give rest to your body, you will lose both spiritual and bodily rest.”⁵⁰

“Do not indulge your slothful flesh during prayer; do not hurry. The flesh, growing weary and oppressed by the holy work, hastens to finish praying, in order to rest or to occupy itself with worldly or carnal matters.”⁵¹

The subject of prayer should be worthy of God.

“Ask the precious God,” teaches St. Isaac the Syrian, “not to offend Him with the insignificance and vanity of your request. Elisha asked God for the exceptional grace which was in the Prophet Elijah (cf. 2 Kings, Chapter 2), and was exalted... But Israel asked for the meat of Egypt and was put to shame.”

“When praying, put aside all worldly cares,” says St. John Cassian.

The most worthy subject of prayer is prayer for our neighbors.

“When you pray, endeavour to pray more for others than for yourself alone, and during prayer represent to yourself vividly all men as forming one body with yourself... Pray for all as you would pray for yourself...look upon their infirmities and sicknesses as your own; their spiritual ignorance, their sins and passions...their temptations, misfortunes, and manifold

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 258.

⁴⁸ blissful

⁴⁹ Saint John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, p. 105.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 381.

afflictions as your own. Such prayer will be accepted with great favour by the Heavenly Father, that most gracious, common Father of all....”⁵²

Finally, during prayer there must be complete reconciliation with everyone.

When ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have aught against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive you your trespasses (Mk. 11:25–26).

Thus sayeth the Lord.

Such should be the prayer of a Christian soul.

Chapter 11, verses 15–19, 27–33

In this passage of the Gospel (verses 15–19), the Lord again appears before us in a form in which we so rarely meet Him on the pages of the Gospels account. Usually meek, merciful, all-forgiving, in the narration of the 11th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, He shows His wrath twice. The first time His anger strikes a soulless fig tree, but now it descends upon people. It is as if the Lord wants to warn people and make them understand that not all in Him is goodness, forgiveness, and forbearance, that righteous anger can flare up in Him, and there will be a time when He will appear as a dreadful, punishing Judge.

The reason for the sudden outbreak of anger was His zeal for the house of God, aroused upon seeing that disgraceful scene which He and the apostles found at the entrance to the Temple and which clearly spoke of complete disrespect for this holy place. An outright marketplace was set up in the courts of the Temple. Entire herds of sacrificial cattle were driven there, which filled the air with their roaring, mooing, and bleating. Sellers of sacrificial doves perched on the benches with their cages from which came cooing and flapping wings of frightened birds. One could see the figures of usurers and moneychangers exchanging common coins for sacred shekels which the tribute to the Temple was paid with and the donations to the sacred treasury were accepted. There was a continuous deafening hustle and bustle of the noisy eastern crowd bargaining to exhaustion over every obol. Because of this cry, it was hardly possible to hear the words of the sacred hymns and psalms, and the prayers of the priests who were offering the sacrifices.

In part, this indecent trade which was almost inside the very premises of the Temple resulted from the conditions of the sacrificial ritual as defined by Moses in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Sacrificial animals had to satisfy specific, strict, ritual conditions

⁵² Ibid, p. 364.

(Lev. 22), and their suitability in this respect could only be determined by specialized priests. Therefore, when buying a sacrificial animal at the market, an inexperienced person not versed in the subtleties of requirements of the ritual Mosaic Law, could easily make a mistake or be deceived and bring such an animal to the Temple, which upon examination could have been rejected by the priests as unsuitable for the sacrifice. Because of this, the trade in sacrificial animals gradually became concentrated near the Temple. The priests preliminarily examined the cattle which was brought and determined its suitability there, allowing only selected animals which fully met the requirements of the Law to be sold. In addition, the priests themselves were often interested in such trade, especially the Sadducean high priestly families. Thus, it is known that among these the Ananov family had its own extensive dove farm on the Mount of Olives, which brought a decent income from selling sacrificial pigeons at the Temple. This is why the priests who were obliged to maintain order during worship not only did not care about stopping or limiting the size and intensity of this trade, but even encouraged it. This resulted in those disgraceful scenes of market fuss and clamour in the House of God, which the Savior and His disciples witnessed.

And Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves; And would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple. And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves (cf. Is. 56:7; Jer. 7:11) (verses 15–17).

These words of the Savior reflect His deep respect for the Temple of God and recognition of its importance for all peoples as a house of prayer. There is an important lesson for us in these words and actions of the Lord.

There exists an opinion that the church as a special place for worship is not necessary for Christians at all.

“God can be worshipped everywhere, because God is omnipresent,” say the supporters of this opinion, “And the Savior Himself in His conversation with the Samaritan woman clearly expressed this thought when He told her: *believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father....But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:21,23-24).*

However, in the above words, the Lord was resolving the ancient dispute between the Jews and the Samaritans. The former considered the Jerusalem Temple to be the only and

exclusive place of worship, while the latter – the temple on Mount Gerizim. Of course, there were no grounds for such exclusive attachment to one particular place of worship other than ethnic pride, and the Lord was pointing out that the worship of God was possible everywhere, in any place. But this does not at all prohibit construction of churches or prayer houses. The main meaning of the words of the Savior was that wherever a person prays to God – at church or outside of church, everywhere his prayer should consist not of bodily movements alone, but of the burning of the spirit and of the uplifting of the mind and heart. Worship in truth means not hypocritical worship consisting of words alone, but worship in deed, when recognition of God is witnessed to in one's life by a reverent attitude towards Him and fulfillment of His commandments.

Thus, one cannot in any way see a negative attitude towards church in the conversation of Christ with the Samaritan woman. Only the spiritual essence of worship of God becomes clarified here. On the contrary, the example and life of the Savior speak clearly of His respect for the Temple and the importance which He attached to the house of prayer in the spiritual life of His followers. He Himself often visited the Temple, prayed there, taught people, and the episode from Chapter 11 of the Gospel of Mark especially clearly shows that He regarded the Temple as a most great sacred object.

This reverent attitude toward the church was preserved among the ancient Christians. When persecutions of pagan emperors made it impossible for them to perform the divine service openly in prayer houses, they hid in the mysterious vaults of the tombs where the martyrs for the faith were buried, but did not cease making common prayer. And there, in the silence of the underground crypts, in the intricate labyrinths of the catacombs, among the tombstones over the graves of the martyrs, in the obscure, wavering light of resinous torches and flickering oil lamps, their prayers were brought to heaven just as fervently, and melodies of inspired hymns resounded loudly under the vaults of the subterranean catacombs. For them the catacombs served as a church where they found strength and support in their common prayers and in the sacraments. The need for church as a place of united prayers and the special grace-filled power of God which pours out on the assembled faithful was recognized in such a manner even in those difficult times.

Centuries passed. Paganism was dying out. Christianity was recognized as the dominant religion and came out from the mysterious inaccessible catacombs into the wide expanse of the Roman Empire. A new era of flourishing began for the Christian Church, and churches started to play a special role as centers for educational activities and strongholds in the fight against the darkness of paganism.

This period was especially rich in monuments of Christian church architecture. The crowning glory of the magnificent flourishing of ecclesiastical architecture is the famous church of St. Sophia in Constantinople. After Emperor Justinian built it, as they say, he exclaimed: "I have surpassed you, Solomon!"

This church is of exceptional importance for us Russians, and in its history, perhaps, one can see most clearly and appreciate the impact that churches had on the spread of Christianity and on the rise of religious feeling in the souls of believers and unbelievers who visited them. It was precisely there that the Russian ambassadors of the Holy Prince Vladimir, sent by him for close acquaintance and comparative assessment of different faiths, experienced that deep, compelling inspiration, which they described with the words: "We did not know where we were: in heaven or on earth..."

This response played a decisive role in the choice of the Russian faith, and we owe this to a large extent to the majestic and captivating impression which Hagia Sophia made on the Russian envoys.

And how many testimonies can we find in the lives of the saints concerning the influence of the church on the spiritual life of a person, an influence which sometimes produces a decisive change in the soul!

One foreign merchant had trade relations with Novgorod and would travel there. There was probably a rich hoard of religious, still unconscious feelings in his soul. He occasionally visited Russian churches and experienced such extraordinary moments there that he began to go to them more and more often. And finally, he reached such a state that it was not his distant homeland which felt like his native country, but this city, inhabited by a foreign people who spoke a language which was foreign to him.

The white cathedrals and churches of Novgorod with their bell towers, the dark icons illuminated by flaming candles and softly flickering icon lamps, the monasteries which spread along the banks of the abundant Volkhov River, all the daily life of Orthodox Russia of old had a power over his soul.

The merchant converted to Orthodoxy, distributed his property to the poor, and became a fool for Christ...

This was the beginning of the marvelous feat of St. Procopius of Ustyug, the Fool for Christ.

There lived a boy of the Mongol Horde, the nephew of Khan Berklai. Bishop Cyril of Rostov, whom his contemporaries called blessed and edifying, came to the Horde at that time on

ecclesiastical business and talked about how St. Leontius preached Christianity in the Rostov lands, and about the miracles that flowed from his relics.

The nephew of Khan Berklai listened to all the narratives of Cyril. Some sweetness poured into his heart from these stories. A radical change occurred in his soul. He longed to know the true God and decided to follow Cyril. He passionately wanted to see those Russian churches where services were performed to the mysterious and all-powerful Christian God, and where the miracles which Cyril told about took place.

He distributed a part of his wealth to fellow tribesmen who were in need, entrusted a part of it to Bishop Cyril, and secretly left the Horde following him.

And there he was in Rostov, standing in the church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, famous for its splendor. Chorists were singing harmoniously from choirs to the left and right. The icons, as if reflecting heavenly beauty, shone with their precious decorations, illuminated by flames of countless softly glowing candles, and light, transparent clouds of incense spread over the praying crowd. At that moment, in the unequalled beauty of the Christian divine service, the Prince felt God. He seemed to clearly feel some kind of connection between this praying crowd, this church which the love of people raised to the Creator of the worlds, and Him, lofty and incomprehensible, toward Whom the prayer of this people was striving, to Whom the choirs were singing praises, for Whom the flames were burning and the smoke of the incense ascended.

The sun of truth rose at that moment, as the chronicler says, in the soul of the Prince: he came to know the Christian God and saw Him with the eyes of faith. Falling to the feet of St. Cyril, he asked to be baptized. In baptism he received the name of Peter.

He settled in the house of St. Cyril, visited churches, studied the Russian language and Russian reading and writing... Silent, always engaged in prayer or thinking about eternity in his soul, the Right-Believing Prince Peter was the father of all poor and miserable people. In deep old age he became a monk and peacefully passed away to God around 1280. He gave the world an example of the power which the church with its divine services has over the soul.

Sometimes a person, when influenced by the words of friends, or by adverse books he has read, may speak against the Church. But in reality, during the Vigil service, to the touching melody of the Magnification “We magnify, we magnify thee...,” to the lamenting sounds of the Great Doxology: “I said, O Lord, have mercy on me, heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee,” in a dim church some kind of incomprehensible feeling descends upon the soul, some kind of grace-filled tranquility which is not experienced anywhere as fully as here...

Where can we be completely calm, full of hope, joyful? Only where our true realm, our permanent calling is. And where is our true calling, where is the work to which we have been called without end, which we will serve even when the world is destroyed and there are left only human souls with God who created them? What is our eternal work, if not glorification of Christ? And churches exist only for this, and everything that occurs in them has only one purpose – the constant glorification of Christ.

“Have you ever been in an almost empty church at the early Liturgy on a winter day, when almost the entire church is drowning in darkness, and pennyworth wax candles barely mark the outlines of the iconostasis of the altar where the service is taking place; have you heard the trembling voice of a lone acolyte singing the tune of the Cherubic Hymn, and in these meager surroundings have you felt wonder at the greatness of Christ’s sacrifice and the miracle taking place amid this meagerness?...The presence of God in solitude is felt even stronger in the church than when it is filled with a crowd” (E. Poselyanin, *Ideals of the Christian Life*).

It is precisely for the sake of this special presence of God that the Church has always demanded and continues to demand a reverent attitude towards the church and divine services taking place in it.

“If anyone teach that the Lord’s house is contemptible, and that so are the gatherings therein, let him be anathema,”⁵³ the Council of Gangra decreed in its fifth canon.

When ancient Christians went to church for public worship, they prepared extremely strictly for it and watched over themselves to the extent it was possible in order to stand worthily before the altar of the Lord and partake in the Holy Mysteries; they cared not only about offering their prayers to the Creator, but also about ensuring that these prayers were pleasing to God.

First of all, internal purification from enmity, malice, and malevolence was required.

If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift, the Savior instructed (Mt. 5:23–24). Therefore, Christians strove to come to church with a pacified soul and there “offer the holy offering in peace with everyone.” The deacon’s exclamation also called for this: “In peace let us pray to the Lord.” The inscriptions written on the gates or on the pediment of the church often invited people to do the same: “Peace be with you, whoever you are, if you are in peace, enter this house with a pure heart.”

⁵³ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 525.

As a sign of this internal purification, ablution was performed at the entrance to the church, for which a washbasin was placed at the church doors.

Approaching the altar of the Most High, a Christian had to forget all of his ranks and earthly distinctions. A spirit of deep humility permeated the whole divine service, invisibly wafted under the vaults of the church and filled the hearts of those who prayed. Before the Almighty there were no distinctions of strong or powerful, high or noble: everyone was completely equal and equally insignificant. Therefore, magnificent outfits, precious jewelry, or emblems of high position were not allowed. Unpretentious clothes which were modest, dark, or single-colored prevailed. Weapons, armor, and military insignia were left at the door of the church, in the vestibule. Entering the church, the believers would kneel down, kiss the doorposts and thresholds, for the whole church was a great holy thing and all parts of it were sanctified by the grace of God's presence. This custom is partly preserved in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, where Catholic believers even in our days mount the marble steps of the majestic staircase leading to the cathedral on their knees.

Deep reverent silence reigned among the worshippers, interrupted only by the sacred hymns and short responses with which the people answered to the exclamations of the priest and petitions of the litanies. The deacons kept order and the whole atmosphere of the church and divine service was imbued with such deep seriousness, such intense religious feeling that it involuntarily amazed and subjugated everyone who entered the church.

When the Emperor Valens, who was an Arian, once entered the church where St. Basil the Great was serving the Liturgy, an amazing sight met his eyes: orderly rows of worshippers, deep silence, and focused religiosity reigned in the church. The saint himself, surrounded by reverent choirs of deacons and priests, stood in front of the altar table. All of this was so unlike what Valens saw in his churches that he was shaken to the depths of his soul. With sinking heart and trembling hand, he held out his offering to one of the choirs. No one moved; no one approached him to take the offering, since they did not know how the Archbishop would react to this. It was as if no one noticed the presence of the emperor. Poor Valens almost fainted. The impression was striking!

Keeping discipline among those who pray, the Church often punished irreverent and indecent behavior in the church. This was usually practiced in monasteries. Describing his journey around the monasteries of the Nitrian Desert, Palladius of Heliopolis wrote that he saw three palm trees in one of them, to which monks who stood in church negligently during the monastic rule of prayer and divine service were tied for punishment. While they were tied, they were also quite severely beaten and judging by the fact that the palm trunks were smooth as if

polished, one could think that punishments of this kind were assigned quite generously and were applied quite often. Even the civil authorities on their part took measures in this regard. We know of the edicts of the Emperors Honorius and Justinian, who established severe punishments for indecent behavior in church.

Due to the same deep respect for churches, trading near them was completely forbidden. The Sixth Ecumenical Council in its 76th canon decreed: “That within the sacred precincts no tavern or showcase for the display of edibles⁵⁴ or of other kinds of merchandise must be set up; for the respectability of the Church must be preserved, seeing that our Savior and God, instructing us by His conduct while living in the flesh, bade us not to make His Father’s house a house of merchandise (John 2:16). He even poured out the coins of the money-changers and drove them all out of the temple who were making it a market place. If, therefore, anybody be caught in doing what is here prohibited, let him be excommunicated.”⁵⁵

And with what zeal and fearlessness, did the great hierarchs of the Church of Christ defend the inviolability and dignity of churches making sure that people defiled by grave sins did not enter there and thereby did not offend the holiness of the house of God! Once the emperor of Byzantium Theodosius the Great stained himself with a grave crime: he ordered that thousands of dwellers of the city of Thessalonica be massacred who were gathered in a circus for a competition due to some minor fault. When after that, not having been cleansed by repentance, he decided to enter the church for prayer, he was met on the porch by a great saint of that time Ambrose of Milan. The saint stopped the Emperor whose conscience was stained by the blood of innocent victims with a stern accusatory speech. And the formidable emperor complied. He realized that entering the church without asking forgiveness for the grave sin which lay on his soul meant committing sacrilege and aggravating his guilt. He humbly listened to the stern speech of Ambrose and brought repentance, fulfilling the heavy penance imposed on him by the saint.

With steadfastness did another great saint, John Chrysostom, stop Empress Eudoxia on the threshold of the church of Hagia Sophia.

So zealously did the Christians of past centuries guard the holiness of churches!

Why did they value their churches so much, and why should they be precious and holy for every Christian?

⁵⁴ In some sources “perfumes.” However, in the Russian text of Bishop Basil, the quotation from the Pedalion uses the variant “edibles.”

⁵⁵ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 381.

The church is an earthly Heaven, as Fr. John of Kronstadt put it; it is the house of God, a place of special divine presence. The greatest sacrament is performed there which *the angels desire to look into* (1 Pet. 1: 12). Angels there invisibly serve with the priest.

When St. Seraphim of Sarov was still in the rank of deacon, he sometimes saw angels serving together with the brethren and singing. They had the image of lightning-like youths wearing white gold-woven clothes. And the way they sang could not be expressed in words. Recalling this, St. Seraphim would say: “My heart was like wax, melting with unspeakable joy.”

And this is what Father Seraphim saw on Great Thursday while he was serving the Liturgy.

As it is known, the Small Entrance at the Liturgy marks the entry of the celebrants into Heaven, and the priest prays at that time: “With our entry do Thou cause the entry of the Holy Angels serving and glorifying Thy goodness with us.”

When, after the Small Entrance, Hierodeacon Seraphim exclaimed: “O Lord, save the pious, and hearken unto us,” and, turning to the people and giving the sign with his orarion, finished: “And unto the ages of ages,” he suddenly changed completely and could not move from his place, nor utter the words. Those who served with him realized that he had seen a vision. Under his arms he was led into the altar where he stood for three hours, one moment flushing all over, another moment turning pale, still unable to utter a single word. When he came to his senses, he told his elders and mentors, Father Pachomius and the treasurer, what he saw. “I, the wretched one, just exclaimed, ‘O Lord, save the pious, and hearken unto us!’” and, directing the orarion toward the people, finished: ‘And unto the ages of ages,’ when suddenly a ray like the light of the sun illuminated me and I saw our Lord and God Jesus Christ in the form of the Son of Man in glory, shining with indescribable light, surrounded by the Heavenly Powers, Angels, Archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, like a swarm of bees, and Coming in the air from the Western gates of the church. Approaching the ambo in this form and raising up His most pure hands, the Lord blessed those who were serving and those who were standing in prayer. After that He entered His holy icon in the iconostasis which is to the right of the Royal Doors, and was transfigured, surrounded by angelic choirs which shone with indescribable light throughout the whole church. But when I, earth and ashes, met the Lord Jesus, I was honored with a special blessing from Him. My heart rejoiced purely and was enlightened in the sweetness of love for the Lord.”

When St. Sergius of Radonezh celebrated the divine liturgy, people saw how Angels served together with him and how he took communion from the Holy Chalice with fire.

St. Niphon, Bishop of Cyprus, had a miraculous revelation regarding the sacred actions of the priest during the Liturgy. Once he was standing with his disciple in the church during a Patriarchal service, and began to see in the spirit a fire coming from heaven and covering the altar and bishop. When the Trisagion was sung, four angels appeared and sang along with the singers.

When St. Basil the Great recited the prayers of transubstantiation, the columbarium or golden dove hanging over the altar table was shaken by an invisible force.

Thus, the church is a place of communication between Heavenly and earthly things. At the same time, the church is a school of faith and piety, for an abundant stream of lessons on the moral constitution of life and the soul are offered in it in sacred hymns, readings of the Holy Scripture, and sermons.

And how many great decisions which have changed the whole nature and direction of life have been made under the influence of some word or text of the Holy Scripture heard in church!

The words of the Gospel's Beatitudes struck the attention of St. Symeon the Stylite during the Liturgy: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven* (Mt. 5:3), leading to the beginning of his great ascetic life. The same is said about St. Anthony the Great in his biography.

In church believers often receive healing of spiritual infirmities and bodily illnesses.

This is why Christians of old valued the church, treated it with deep respect and when there was occasion to, they zealously took care to go to church and be present at the services. When St. Barsanuphius reached old age and was almost unable to move due to his weakness, he asked to be taken to church at least in a cart and attended divine services daily. When St. Porphyrius, Bishop of Gaza, became unable to use his legs in old age, he crawled on his knees so as to not miss services in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem.

I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness (Ps. 84:10)... *I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord* (Ps. 122:1), exclaimed the Psalmist David, expressing his delight and love for the temple, and the Sixth Ecumenical Council, considering the attendance of church obligatory for every Christian, thus decreed:

“In case any Bishop, or Presbyter, or Deacon, or anyone else on the list of the Clergy, or any layman, without any graver necessity or any particular difficulty compelling him to absent himself from his own church for a very long time, fails to attend church on Sundays for three consecutive weeks, while living in the city, if he be a Cleric, let him be deposed from office: but

if he be a layman, let him be removed from Communion.” (Sixth Ecumenical Council, canon 80).⁵⁶

At the same time, the Orthodox Church inspires those who pray during the divine services to stand with reverence and the fear of God, not forgetting before Whom they stand and to Whom they offer their prayers.

“Let us lift up our hearts!” exclaims the priest before offering the Holy Gifts...

Check yourself at this moment: where is your heart? Is it really “up,” at the Throne of the Most High, or is it still bound by worldly vanity and earthly cares, and are you not lying to God, answering the exclamation of the priest, “We lift them up unto the Lord!”

“In the church,” admonishes St. Tikhon of Zadonsk, “you must stand as if in heaven before the Heavenly King... Do not look around, lest you be condemned with the Pharisee.” And making a poetic comparison, St. Abraham of Smolensk says that those who pray should be like the wax candles which flicker in front of the icons. “Look at the candle and be like it: stand straight, motionlessly, reverently; let your prayer burn ardently and aspire to heaven, like a candle flame, and let your heart tremble and melt like wax with a bittersweet feeling and joy.”

Beware of scattered thoughts and inattention in prayer, for this is offensive to God.

Once Ivan the Terrible, who was devout like all Old Russian tsars, was attending the Liturgy in the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow. However, the Tsar’s thoughts were scattered – he was dreaming of a new palace which he thought of building on Vorobyovy Gory⁵⁷, and in his mind he was musing over a plan for its construction.

After the Liturgy, going back to his palace, he met St. Basil, the Fool for Christ of Moscow.

“Were you at the Liturgy?” the Tsar asked him.

“I was, but I didn’t see you!” answered the holy fool.

“How so?” the Tsar objected.

“Tsar!” said the holy fool in a quiet, reproachful voice. “You were at Vorobyovy Gory!”

And the Tsar realized his sin, exposed by the clairvoyance of the holy fool, and bowed down low to him.

The Holy Fathers of the Church speak out particularly strongly against indecent behavior in church and against frivolous, idle conversations during the divine services, which, by the way, is extremely common among us and constitutes a habit difficult to eradicate.

⁵⁶ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 384.

⁵⁷ A hill on the right bank of the Moskva River.

“Let me say,” St. John Chrysostom sharply remarks in one of his sermons, “don’t you have houses for your idle talk?”

And indeed, why go to church if you spend the entire divine service in idle chatter discussing all the news of the marketplace? First, this careless attitude towards church and inattention toward the divine service is insulting to God. Second, it is not only rude and impolite with relation to other people who are praying, but also constitutes a direct transgression against them, preventing them from praying, drowning out the holy words of the service for them, distracting their attention, preventing them from concentrating, and depriving them of precious moments of joy and grace-filled consolation usually associated with sincere prayer. What right do we have to steal these moments from them?

The holiness of the altar must be especially carefully guarded. Here all should be immersed in prayerful silence, and there should not be a single superfluous or idle word.

“If you need to say something in the altar,” St. Seraphim taught, “say it briefly and quietly, and be silent again; for God Himself is present here with His Angels.”

Lay people are not permitted to enter the altar.

“Let it not be permitted to anyone among all the laity to enter within the sacred altar,” the Sixth Ecumenical Council forbids in its 69th canon.⁵⁸

In the practice of the spiritual life, communal church prayer is generally considered more effective than private, solitary prayer, although it is quite possible that the personal feeling of a person who prays, especially at the first stages of his spiritual development, be inclined in favor of the latter. “But we ourselves,” said the Optina elder Fr. Macarius, “cannot judge the worthiness of our prayer, and the satisfaction or self-gratification which we often experience in solitary prayer, can be the deceit and delusion of the devil.”

The following story is told from the life of St. Juliana of Lazarevo. Once there was an unusually severe, freezing cold winter. The ground cracked from the cold, and St. Juliana, who had no warm clothes, would remain at home to pray. And there appeared a voice to the priest from the church of St. Lazarus, coming from the icon of the Mother of God: “Go and say to the merciful widow Juliana – why doesn’t she go to church? Her prayer at home is pleasing, but church prayer is higher. Honor Juliana: the Holy Spirit rests on her.”

And when, at the call of the priest, Juliana came to the church, prayed with tears, and kissed the icon of the Mother of God, a great fragrance spread throughout the church and the whole village. And Juliana began to go to the church every day to pray.

⁵⁸ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, trans. D. Cummings, New York, NY: Luna Printing Co., 1983, p. 372.

Let us finish this homily on the importance of church and church services with the words of the great saint John Chrysostom: “And just as a great harbor, sheltered from winds and waves, offers great security to anchored ships, so indeed does the house of God, as if rescuing those entering from any storm of secular matters, offer a place with great calm and security to stand still and hear the divine sayings. This site is the establishment of virtue, the schoolhouse of philosophy; not just in the service, during the hearing of Scriptures and the spiritual teaching and the council of the venerable fathers. But at every other time, only cast yourself before the courtyards, and immediately you set aside secular considerations. Enter into the courtyards, and it's as if some spiritual breeze envelops your souls. This same tranquility makes you shiver and teaches you to practice philosophy. Elevate your thought, and do not refrain from remembering those present, but transfer yourself from earth to heaven. If apart from the service the profit of presence here is so great, then whenever the prophets altogether cry out on all sides, whenever the apostles evangelize, whenever Christ stands in your midst, whenever the Father accepts what is happening, whenever the Holy Spirit shares its own exultation, with how much advantage do those who are present go forth....”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ St. John Chrysostom, *On Changing Names: Homily 4*, trans. A. Jacobs. <https://andrewjacobs.org/translations/names.html> Accessed: May 9, 2024.