

Orthodox Christian Prayer

Prayer is central to the life of an Orthodox Christian. Scripture tells us that the Kingdom of God is within us (Luke 17:20–21), but to enter into it, we must free ourselves from the distractions of this world. The Church Fathers teach that God manifests Himself in the heart—first as a fire that purifies and then as a light that illumines the intellect. Through prayer, we seek *theoria* (the vision of God), by which we are united with Him (*theosis*), allowing us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries.

Although the Church Fathers speak of prayer in different ways and degrees, their teachings can generally be divided into three stages: **vocal prayer, meditation, and contemplation.**

1. Vocal Prayer

Vocal prayer is the foundation of an Orthodox prayer life. It involves uttering words of prayer, either spontaneously in our own words, using memorized prayers from the Church's tradition, or reading prayers from a service book or Scripture.

For those beginning a life of prayer, it is best to start with an Orthodox prayer book, following the established morning and evening prayers (Compline). Another helpful structure is the **Rule of St. Pachomius** (see handout). The key is to focus on the words of the prayers and avoid distractions. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the prayers at hand.

The Prayer Corner

Orthodox Christians often set up an **icon corner** as a dedicated space for prayer. Traditionally placed on the eastern wall of a home, an icon corner typically includes:

- Icons of Christ, the Theotokos, and the saints
- A prayer book and a Bible
- A censer, holy water, and holy oil
- A vigil lamp or candle

Prayers are usually offered while standing before the icons. If a vigil lamp or candle is present, it is customary to light it before beginning prayers. During prayer, Orthodox Christians may also perform **bows, half-prostrations, or full prostrations**, depending on the spiritual discipline given by their spiritual father.

2. Meditation (Μελέτη – Meleti)

In the Orthodox tradition, meditation refers to **profound, heartfelt reading of Scripture**. It is not an intellectual exercise but a prayerful immersion in the Word of God. The Church Fathers describe this practice as slowly reading, savoring, and repeating the words of Scripture, allowing them to dwell deeply in the heart. This process is sometimes likened to **ruminatio**n—chewing on the words until they nourish the soul.

A structured form of meditative prayer, drawn from the Patristic tradition, is **Lectio Divina** ("Divine Reading"), which follows four steps:

The Four Steps of Lectio Divina

1. **Lectio (Reading) – What does the text say?**

- Select a passage from Scripture (Psalms, Gospels, or Epistles are ideal).
- Read it slowly and attentively.
- What word or phrase that stands out to you? Make a note of it, write it down, or tell a friend (if you're doing Lectio Divina with someone).

2. **Meditatio (Meditation) – What is God saying to me?**

- Reread the passage, allowing it to interact with your thoughts and feelings.
- Reflect on the words that struck you. What emotion do they invoke? Make a note of it, write it down, or tell a friend.

3. **Oratio (Prayer) – How do I respond to God?**

- Read the passage again.
- What invitation is God extending to you? What action is God inviting you to take? Also ask: *Lord, what else do you want me to know?* Make a note of it, write it down, or tell a friend

4. **Contemplatio (Contemplation) – How does God want to transform me?**

- Read the passage one last time.
- Rest in God's presence, allowing His Word to dwell in you.
- Set aside active thinking and simply be with God.

3. Contemplation (Θεωρία – Theoria)

The highest form of prayer, **contemplation**, is considered true prayer by the Fathers. It is the path to **watchfulness** (νήψις – **nepsis**)—a state of spiritual attention and inner stillness.

The Fathers teach that our **thoughts** (λογισμοί – **logismoi**) often originate from demonic provocation, keeping us distracted, anxious, and even leading us into sin. These thoughts pull us away from true peace and obscure our vision of God. The goal of contemplation is to **silence these distractions** so that the mind may descend into the heart, where the Holy Spirit dwells.

The Jesus Prayer

A primary tool for achieving watchfulness is the **Jesus Prayer**:
"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

To practice the Jesus Prayer:

- Sit in a comfortable position.
- Pay attention to your breathing.
- As you breathe in, silently say, "**Lord Jesus Christ...**"
- As you breathe out, say, "**...have mercy on me.**"
- Repeat this prayer continuously for a set period of time.

The key to this practice is **attention**. Your mind will naturally wander; when it does, gently bring it back to the prayer. If painful memories, anxieties, or distractions arise, acknowledge them, then let them go, refocusing on the words of the prayer.

This discipline takes time. Learning to be **watchful** does not happen overnight, but with patience, the mind is gradually freed from distractions. As we grow in spiritual attention, our **false attachments and illusions** give way to something far deeper—the presence of God Himself.

The Fathers teach that through this **unceasing prayer**, we can find true peace, acquire inner stillness, and ultimately be granted the vision of God.

Summary

Orthodox prayer is not merely about reciting words but about entering into a **relationship with God**. The Church Fathers describe three stages of prayer:

1. **Vocal Prayer** – Using spoken prayers from tradition to focus the mind and heart.
2. **Meditation** – Deep reading and reflection on Scripture, allowing it to shape our lives.
3. **Contemplation** – Entering into inner stillness through watchfulness, culminating in the Jesus Prayer.

Each of these steps brings us closer to God, leading us toward **union with Him (Theosis)**. Prayer is not a technique but a **way of life**—a journey of love, attention, and transformation in Christ.