

PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH
Epistle of the Synod of Bishops
of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in 2017
to Clergy, Monastics, and Laity

“Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11: 1)

Very Reverend and Reverend fathers!
Venerable brothers and sisters in monasticism!
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

Having gathered at the Holy Synod in Briukhovychi near Lviv on 3-12 September 2017, we, the bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, focused on the central aspect of the life of the Church, namely, prayer—both personal and communal prayer. We strive to share with you the fruit of our common spiritual reflections.

Although prayer is the natural consequence and manifestation of a person’s faith in God, nevertheless, one must learn to pray, constantly restoring and deepening their ability to communicate with God. The request of the disciples of Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1), is always of relevance to us, because our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the main teacher of prayer. And today, we as a Church humbly approach Him and repeat the request of the disciples. In the modern world— which, on the one hand, offers a beautiful, unprecedented opportunity to humanity, and, on the other hand, presses on it with an avalanche of information and confuses with pseudo-values and ideologies— this request becomes of particular importance.

From the Gospel, we see that Christ teaches prayer primarily through His own life and example. His relation with the Father is manifested continuously, both in public affairs and in personal and intimate communication with Him. Preaching the Good News about the coming of the Kingdom of God, Jesus often invites His disciples to keep vigil and pray. The Divine Teacher also offers them a verbal example of prayer, the “Our Father,” which Christians from the first centuries to this day consider to be the most important and most authoritative. In this prayer of Jesus to the Father, He reveals all truth (cf. Matthew 3:15) about God and man, because this prayer, from the mouth of the Lord Himself, reminds us that God is a loving Father who is close to people in all of their lives’ states, needs and difficulties, and it reminds us that a human person is a beloved child of God, called to fulfil the Lord’s plan, namely that His name be hallowed, that His kingdom come, and that His will be done (cf. Matthew 6:9-10).

A prerequisite for Christian prayer is our humility before God, the recognition of our inability to communicate with the Creator. In our liturgical services, we reveal this weakness to our God and humbly admit: “Teach us your statutes, because we do not know how to pray as we ought, unless you, Lord, guide us by your Holy Spirit” (Seventh Morning Prayer during Matins). And the Lord, in His mercy, gives us His Holy Spirit, who “searches the hearts of men,” “helps us in our weakness,” prays with

us, and “intercedes for us according to the will of God,” as Saint Paul teaches us (cf. Romans 8:26–27). Therefore, every liturgical service and every conversation with God in prayer begins with calling upon the Holy Spirit.

True Christian prayer implicates a meeting with the living God and establishing a personal relationship with Him. This may involve silently listening to the Word of God – which is especially needed during this time of informational noise and consumerist tumult – as well as praise and gratitude, humble supplication and repentance. Sincerity and authenticity are very important elements of this relationship. The personal prayer of a Christian is an encounter of a living, real person with a living God. Before the face of the Creator, a believing person does not deceive or does not put on masks because they do not doubt the kindness and unconditional love of the Lord God.

An intrinsic feature of Christian prayer is the openness of human person to the will of God and the willingness to accept it: “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God” (Psalm 142:10). Therefore, prayer should not be seen as a human endeavour to persuade God to fulfil our desires. Our sensitivity to the voice of God is much more important than our requests, because the Lord knows “what each needs even before they ask or are aware of it” (Fifth Evening Prayer during Vespers).

A Christian is never alone in prayer, they are united with their brothers and sisters in Christ. According to the testimony of Christ, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20), prayer is most complete in its communal dimension. Therefore, common family prayer is very important for Christian life and the Divine Liturgy is its summit and source.

Serving God is a dialogical act: the Lord blesses those who bless Him and sanctifies those who trust in Him (cf. Ambo Prayer of the Divine Liturgy). That is why the main liturgical service of the Church is called the “Eucharist” – thanksgiving for all that the Lord has done for us according to His great mercy. The purpose of the Eucharist is not only to change bread and wine, but above all to change us, to unite us with Christ. The ministry of the Eucharist is “for us,” so that “all of us, who share in this one bread and cup, with one another” may be united “into the communion of the one Holy Spirit” (Epiclesis of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great). Through the Holy Eucharist, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” are present in this world. Through the Eucharist, the Church becomes a sacrament of salvation of the world and at the same time is the forerunner of “life of the world to come.”

Prayer is the cooperation of man with God, and therefore it is inextricably linked with the responsibility of each person for their own life, for the life of the Church, and for the whole world. Every Christian who, with an open heart, appeals to the Giver of his life and the Lord in prayer, is called in the same way to build the Church with his own life, and to spread in the world God’s salvific action. We must remember the words of the Apostle James: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). If our personal and communal prayer is a manifestation of faith, it must, therefore, be reflected in good deeds, in the ministry of service (*diakonia*) in the Church

and in society. Then all of life will be a lasting glorification of God through deeds, words, thoughts, intentions, and efforts.

It should be remembered that the cradle and the first school of prayer is the Christian family, which we traditionally call the domestic Church. Therefore, we express our sincere gratitude to our parents and grandparents from whom children and grandchildren hear the words of prayer for the first time in their lives and learn to utter these words of prayer with due attention and awe. Such prayer often establishes the foundation for the Christian upbringing of a child, as well as the beginning of his or her gradual growth in faith and virtues. We call upon all Christian families to continue to diligently foster family prayer, both in the morning and in the evening, and with prayer on their lips to begin work and thank God for their daily bread during meals.

At the same time, we encourage parents, as well as catechists and clergy, to pay significant attention to educating children in prayer, using the rich spiritual heritage of our liturgical tradition when teaching the Christian faith in catechetical schools, in sermons, and during retreats, especially focusing on the liturgical texts in which the Church expresses its faith and the saints share their experience of prayer.

Because priests are the leaders of prayer for parishioners in the parish community, we express our recognition and appreciation to every priest and deacon who are for their faithful examples and teachers of prayer. At the same time, we renew the call to all clergy and pastors about daily perseverance in prayer, both personal and liturgical. Let us remember that the church community, which does not pray, betrays its vocation and deprives its members of the many gifts of God they need in their everyday and spiritual affairs. Our great desire and wish is that, through the zealous cultivation of liturgical and personal prayer, theological educational institutions and institutions for formation within our Church help the Church's future ministers to gain authentic experience in communicating with the living and merciful God.

We express particular acknowledgement to the consecrated communities, whose main meaning of life is prayer — both personal and liturgical. The service of prayer of monasteries today is more than ever important to our people. Therefore, we urge monks, nuns, and religious to duly perform their liturgical prayer rule in accordance with the prescriptions of our rite. We believe that our monasteries will remain schools of the Church's prayer for their members and all faithful of the Church.

We want to emphasize that, as shepherds of the Church, we sincerely respect and appreciate the manifestations of prayerful piety of our laity. In particular, we mean prayer fraternities, movements, and communities, which, under the guidance of experienced clergymen, we encourage all faithful to participate in. We especially want to note the practice of pilgrimages to holy places, which the Lord generously granted to Ukraine. Pilgrimage to holy places with proper spiritual accompaniment becomes a very important school of prayer for the faithful of our Church. The prayer of God's journeying people reflects the mission of the Church — to always enter into the salvific presence of God. The Lord God constantly comes for our sake and for our salvation, and the Church always comes to meet her immortal Bridegroom. In this

sense, every Christian is a pilgrim, a living witness of God's salvific coming to this world.

Over the past few years, our people have faced difficult challenges. These difficult and tragic circumstances have revealed the unprecedented power of the spirit of our people, a force that derives from prayer and trust in God. At the most difficult times, many of the faithful of our Church did not cease to pray and keep vigil. Thanks to the enduring support of prayer, sacrifice, and dedication of many of our priests, monastics, and lay people, we overcome great difficulty every day and move forward. Prayer is the power of our people and the source of salvation; therefore, we call upon everyone to continue to persevere in prayer with the words of the Apostle Paul: "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:11-12, 14).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! The Lord blessed our Church with the freedom to pray, which we did not always have. At the same time, He gave us life – space and time to meet and communicate with Him. Let us use this gift!

As was said in the beginning, the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray. Let us pray, let us keep vigil, let us listen to His Word in the silence of our hearts and in our communities. He speaks and comes to us to be with us personally in the new year, with our families, with our communities and with our people. Let us rejoice in this mystery and live in peace!

May the blessing of the Lord be upon you!

On behalf of the Synod of Bishops
of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

+ SVIATOSLAV

Given in Kyiv
at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ,
on the day of our Holy Hierarch and Father Nicholas
Archbishop of Myra in Lycia, Wonderworker,
19 December A.D. 2017

Priests are instructed to read this Epistle to their faithful after every Divine Liturgy on Sunday 31 December 2017.