

St. John Chrysostom's Vision on Prayer – Man's Dialogue with God

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Abstract: Prayer is man's dialogue with the Creator of all creation. Since Creation, man has had a longing for God ingrained in him; a longing to know the One who made heaven and earth, the One who sets our hearts and minds on fire (*Ps 25:2*), as the Prophet David says. This longing of man for his Creator is sometimes manifested and doted in the wrong way (addictions in all their forms, religious fanaticism, wandering in the landmarks of faith, etc.). Among the life-giving forms of human longing for the divine, prayer remains the pathway marked out and recommended by the Holy Fathers on the human journey to know God. Just as we cannot know someone in depth without talking to them and being close to them, without analyzing their natural reactions in different circumstances, so we cannot claim to know God by confining ourselves to reading others' experience of Him, without making an effort to know Him personally, without having a direct and direct dialogue with Him, without pouring out our fullness or seeing our emptiness and emptiness before Him, without making our own contribution, giving thanks, giving glory and even asking for what is useful to the One who holds the world in His hands. Without all these direct and personal implications of our being, the possibility of a personal experience with God is drastically reduced. The importance and usefulness of prayer in human perfection are outlined and developed, in breadth and detail, in the writings of St. John Chrysostom in a style unmistakable and accessible to most Christians, as one who has experienced the seraphic sweetness of the joy of uninterrupted prayer with God.

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1. Defining Prayer

In order to understand what prayer is and what its various fruits are, as experienced and transmitted to us by St John Chrysostom, it is imperative to first penetrate into the essence of its definition. Some of the definitions given by the great hierarch are: “Prayer is food for the soul”.² It is “a great mystery because whoever prays speaks to God...”³ Among the most eloquent efforts, embodied in the writings, to define prayer is this saying of St. John: “Prayer is a shore for those troubled by the storm, an anchor for those tossed by the waves, a rod for the shaking, a treasure for the poor, a safety for the rich, a help against sickness and a protection for health. Prayer renders imperishable the goods we possess and with all haste prepares the evils that haunt us. If temptation comes, it easily drives it away; if loss of wealth or other soul-disturbing events occur, prayer also soon cures this. Prayer is a refuge from sorrow, the foundation of cheerfulness, the cause of everlasting joy, the mother of true wisdom.”⁴

2. The Necessity of Prayer

The degree of the necessity of prayer in our lives is mirrored by how we relate to the opportunity for our own salvation and the salvation of those around us; an opportunity given to us as a gift from our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The man who takes seriously the gift he has received, his life, gradually understands the absolute necessity of prayer as a form of nourishment for the soul and ultimately for the whole of his being. Thus, “the people have no less need of prayer than the trees of water. Neither can the trees bear fruit unless they do not suck water through their roots, nor can we bear the precious fruits of righteous faith unless we water our souls with prayer.”⁵ Although on the path of salvation we have many landmarks, including the lives of our forefathers, meaning both positive and negative examples that serve as examples of their experiences, but prayer remains the candle that accompanies us in our unique and intimate relationship with God, as the great hierarch says: “Without this, no good deed is in a man to bring him to good faith, but he is like a city that has no surrounding wall, and is easily taken by those who beat it, being stopped by no one. In this way also the

² Dcn. Gheorghe Băbuș, *Mărgăritarele Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom* [The Pearls of Saint John Chrysostom] (Oradea: Pelerinul Român, 2004), 86.

³ Băbuș, *Mărgăritarele Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom*, 8.

⁴ Saint John Chrysostom, “Word on the Fifth Sunday of Lent,” in *Homilies on Lent, Treasures of the Wilderness*, volume 19, (Bucharest: Anastasia, 1997), 92-3.

⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, “Despre rugăciune I,” in *Omiliile la săracul Lazăr: Despre soartă și providență. Despre rugăciune. Despre viețuirea după Dumnezeu*, trans. by Rev. Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2005), 211.

soul that is not surrounded with spices and disfellowshipments and prayers, does not dare to approach it, because it fears the power and strength of prayer. The soul not surrounded by prayer is easily overcome by devils. For prayer strengthens the soul more than bread strengthens the body.”⁶.

3. Manner and Tone of Prayer

Many of the Holy Fathers speak about the way we pray, but there is a red thread that unites all the patristic writings. The red thread is represented by man’s longing for divinity, manifested in the striving, in various ways, to gather ourselves together and stop wasting ourselves, to present ourselves as we are, with our thanks, glory and requests before God. Wherefore, „...if they would search out our carelessness in prayers, and our disobedience, and that, standing before God, and calling upon Him for help, we do not show even so much honor and shame towards Him, as servants show towards their lord, soldiers towards their captains, and friends towards friends? For when you speak to your friend, you are considerate of him, but when you deal with God, asking his forgiveness for so many sins and wrongs, you are often lazy, and while your knees are bowed low to the ground, you let your mind wander in the marketplace and at home, while your tongue is speaking vain and senseless words; and this we do not once or twice, but often. If God would only search this out, will he forgive us, will we be able to clear ourselves before him?”⁷.

The tone of prayer is our expectations of Him, which can be influenced by our preparation and inner state, along with how we arrange the words of our address in our relationship with God. Thus, joy, fear, respect, trust and gratitude are feelings that help us grow in our relationship with God. Therefore “it is fitting that when we approach God we do so with joy and with fear: with fear, lest we seem unworthy of prayer; with joy, because we are filled with thanksgiving for the great honor done to us, that our mortal nation has been granted such great care, that we delight in the joy of talking with God”⁸.

Our endeavor to harmonize the proper manner and tone of addressing God results in a gathering, a prayerful awakening, and, ... in this way let every Christian pray. First gather all his thoughts and then pray insistently to God. There is no need to say words without number. Few and simple words are enough. God’s

⁶ Băbuț, *Mărgăritarele Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom*, 88.

⁷ Saint John Chrysostom, *Predicile despre statui*, volume 2, trans. by St. Bezdechi (Râmnicu Vâlcea: Editura Episcopiei Râmnicului-Noului Severin, 1938), 179, the 20th sermon.

⁸ Saint John Chrysostom, “Despre rugăciune I,” 206.

answer to our prayers does not depend on the multitude of words we utter, but on the purity of our thoughts and hearts.”⁹.

The main kinds of prayer, in the vision of St. John Chrysostom, are those of praise, thanksgiving and petition. Prayers of praise are the introductory part of our dialogue with God. We owe it to God to bring him glory, remembering what he has done for us. The very nature of our surroundings and the natural, biological development of our organism (body) bear the Creator's stamp. Nature is the Natural Revelation through which we understand that everything around us, in heaven and on earth, from the phenomena of nature, to cosmic velocities, to the tender buds of spring; all bear the discreet signature of God. For all this and more, we owe praise to the One who has given it to us for our joy, giving us the task of being responsible for the way we administer this gift, for which “the greater praise is especially when we praise Him with a thousand and thousand mouths”. Every virtuous man causes all around him who see him to praise his Master; and the praise brought by those who see him brings the cause of the praise much and unspeakable goodwill from the Master. Are we not the happier when we not only praise the good Lord with our tongues, but also cause others to praise Him for our sake? The power of virtue is so great that it can cause a thousand mouths to praise the Creator. Nothing, beloved, is equal to the virtuous life. That's why the Lord said: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father (*Mt* 5:16). Have you seen that just as the dawning of light casts out darkness, so the dawning of virtue casts out sin, and the casting out of the darkness of error moves to glory the souls of those who see virtue?”¹⁰.

The prayer of thanksgiving is the continuation of the prayer of praise. It is our duty, after we remember the Creator's deeds and praise his wisdom in preparing them, to thank him for them. Gratitude is an indispensable component of any relationship, all the more necessary in a relationship with God. Gratitude arises from remembering all the good we have received from the Lord, helping us in our faithful and benevolent submission to the Divine Providence. Our thanksgiving to God and our striving to return His good by doing well around us draws a contest of giving¹¹, that we will always lose to God. There is a proverb that says “thanks to the benefactor, enlivens his generosity”. Thus, “God's custom is that if we do something small and insignificant, but only to do it, God gives us gifts with great generosity. And to see how overwhelming is our human nothingness and how great is God's generosity, look at what I am about to tell you. If we want to

⁹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Problemele vieții* [The Problems of Life], trans. by C. Spățăreanu and D. Filioareanu (Galați: Egumenița, 2007), 192.

¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, “Omiliile la Facere I,” in *PSB* 21, trans. by Rev. Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1997), 331, the 26th homily.

¹¹ See the life of Saint John the Merciful, who “tried to compete with God in mercy”.

give something to God, what more can we give Him than to show Him our thanks with words? But God gives us His gifts by works! And can words be equated with deeds? Being perfect, our Master needs nothing from us but words; and He requires that we thank Him by words; and again, not because He needs thanksgiving, but to teach us to be thankful and to know Him, the giver of goodness. This is why Paul also said in his epistle: Give thanks (*Col 3:15*). Nothing does our Master ask of us but this deed. Let us not be unthankful, nor be lazy in thanking the Master with our words for the good things he does for us with our deeds. The gain is all ours. If we give thanks to God for the goodness given, then in addition to the greater goodness we will gain, we will also gain much boldness before God.”¹² Our thanks are not necessary to the Lord, instead, nurturing a sense of gratitude for Him ignites a growing love and longing for Him. The same is true in interpersonal relationships, where gratitude makes us indebted, responsive and above all eager to be of service to our benefactor.

“It would be unwise to rejoice every day in His goodness, but not to thank Him even with words, especially when this thanksgiving is also useful to us. It is not God who needs what is ours, but we who need all His. The thanks we give Him add nothing to Him, but it brings us much closer to God. If remembering the good things we have received from people makes us love them even more, much more if we constantly remember the good things God has done for us, we are more eager to do His commandments. This is why Paul also says: Be thankful! (*Col 3:15*). The best guardian of benevolence is the remembrance of benefactions and unceasing thanksgiving for benefactions.”¹³

The prayer of petition is placed by the Holy Fathers as the last, as the final part of the praising and thanksgiving frame. Thus, the prayer of petition is divided into two main kinds. The first is prayer for our neighbor and the second for us. The first recommendation is to pray for our neighbor, placing him before us, praying for him first with the same zeal as for ourselves, thinking of the special needs of our fellow men around us, asking God to give them what we cannot give them, though they need it, together with His blessing which helps them in everything. Afterwards, after the praise and thanksgiving brought together with the request for the benefit of our neighbor, we are allowed to pray to God for ourselves. A recommendation regarding the request directed to ourselves is not to place the main emphasis on matter. Thus, the natural precedence is to ask for the spiritual, interior things, placing them above matter; and God, who knows our needs, will also give us the material things he knows we need. The Saviour

¹² Saint John Chrysostom, “Omilii la Facere I,” in *PSB* 21, 329-30, the 26th homily.

¹³ Saint John Chrysostom, “Omilii la Matei,” in *PSB* 23, trans. by Rev. Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1994), 324, the 25th homily.

Himself teaches us about the natural prioritization of our requests and searches in the words, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and the rest will be added to you” (*Mt* 6:33), “Let our concern, therefore, be one: let us be unceasing in prayer and not be displeased if God delays in fulfilling our requests; on the contrary, let us be even more patient. God does not delay the fulfillment of our requests in order to refuse us, but He does it because He wants to teach us to persevere in prayer, because He wants to draw us unceasingly to Himself. So does a father, who loves his children; he often does not grant his child’s request, not because he does not want to give it to him, but because he wants to have the child unceasingly near him. Knowing this, then, let us never be discouraged, nor cease to draw near to God to pray. If the cruel and merciless judge, who feared not even God, was compelled by the woman’s persistence to help her (*Lk* 18:2-8), how much more shall we, if we do what the woman did, persuade our kind and loving Master, our merciful Master, who is seeking our salvation, to help us!”¹⁴.

We often feel totally unworthy of His mercy and no longer dare to ask Him for anything, but St. John encourages us thus: “Do not say: I am unworthy! I do not pray! And the Canaanite woman was unworthy! Do not say: I have many sins! I can’t pray to him because he’s angry with me! God is not looking at your unworthiness, but at your soul. Draw near to him even if you are not his friend, even if you ask him for what you are not entitled to, even if you have squandered all your father’s wealth and have not appeared before him for a long time (*Lk* 15:11-32), even if you are without honor, even if you are behind everyone else, even if he is angry and angry with you! Show him that you are willing to pray to him and return to him; you will receive everything, and immediately you will extinguish both anger and condemnation.”¹⁵.

The consecrated moments of prayer are those in the morning, before and after the meal, in the evening, during the night, church services, prayers, the Holy Mysteries; all of them pouring out and keeping the framework of the permanent prayer to which the priest and the skish yearn, as well as all the souls who thirst for companionship with God.

Morning prayer is often linked to the first two main types of prayer: praise and thanksgiving. In the morning, we are glad and grateful for the gift we have received: a new day. The psalmist David says ... in the morning my prayer will meet you” (*Ps* 87:14) At mealtimes, before we sit down to eat, we give thanks to God, as the Saviour showed us, asking him to bless our food, and may it be to our health and joy. “We owe it to ourselves, when we go to the table to eat, first [before the meal] and then [after the meal] to give thanks to God, and we shall never fall into drunkenness and gluttony, but with that measure which is fitting,

¹⁴ Saint John Chrysostom, “Omiliu la Facere I,” in *PSB* 21, 391-2, the 30th homily.

¹⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, “Omiliu la Matei,” in *PSB* 23, 289-90, the 22nd homily.

tasting of all, rejoice both body and soul, for the meal which begins with prayer and blessing and ends also with prayer, will never be lacking in all good.”¹⁶

Evening prayer is how we end our day. In it, we are to bring glory and thanksgiving, and we often end by bringing our requests to God’s attention. But St. John warns us about how we end our day: ‘With what hope will you face the night? What dreams do you expect to have if you do not confine yourself to prayer, but leave yourself unguarded at the will of sleep? Thou shalt easily become a mockery of evil spirits, thou shalt easily be overcome by the demons that are always prowling about us, lying in wait to snatch away him who is found without prayer. But if they see us strengthened with prayers, they flee at once, like robbers and evildoers; for they see the sword of the soldier hanging over them. If it happens that anyone has not prayed, he is taken by force by evil spirits and driven into sins, tribulation and evil. Fearing all this, let us always be confined with prayers and spiritual songs.”¹⁷

Prayer during the night is of particular importance for our peace of mind. During the night we have the advantage of ambient silence, as thoughts are more collected. To highlight the usefulness and effects of night prayer, the great hierarch says: “Believe me, it is not thus that fire cleanses the rust, as night prayer cleanses the rust of our sins.”¹⁸ and “let us always practice prayers, day and night, but especially at night, when no one troubles us, when our thoughts are in great comfort, when there is much quiet and no disturbance in the house, when no one makes a noise to distract you from prayer, when the mind being assembled can bring them all and lay them all before the Doctor of souls. And if King David, who was a king and a prophet, being vexed with so many troubles, yet clothed with crown and porphyry, said, “In the middle of the night I arose to praise Thee for the judgments of Thy righteousness” (*Ps* 118:62), what shall we say who live an ordinary life, without cause of trouble, and do not do even what he did?...”¹⁹

The fruits of prayer are many, but among the most significant is the honour of talking to God; the creature conversing with the Creator. Another fruit of prayer is the training towards gentleness, wisdom and moderation in its wake. It “makes men temples of Christ. And just as royal palaces are made with gold, precious stones and marble, so also temples of Christ are made with prayers: That

¹⁶ Băbuț, *Mărgăritarele Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom*, 154.

¹⁷ Saint John Chrysostom, “Despre rugăciune I,” in *Omiliile la săracul Lazăr*, 211-2.

¹⁸ Saint John Chrysostom, “Cuvântul 26 – Despre Facere” in *Puțul și împărțirea de grâu – 57 de predici de Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur* [The Well and the Division of the Wheat – 57 Sermons of Saint John Chrysostom] (Bacău: Bunavestire, 1995), 72.

¹⁹ Saint John Chrysostom, “Cuvânt la cuvântul ce zice: Și era tot pământul o gură și limbă tuturor” [Word for word: And all the earth was one mouth and one tongue to all (*Gen* 10:1)], in Saint John Chrysostom, *Din ospățul stăpânului – Omiliile*, trans. by Bishop Irineu Slătineanu (Bucharest: Adonai, 1995), 181-2.

Christ may dwell, says Paul, in your hearts. Can there be a greater praise of prayer than that it makes temples of God? He who is ungodly in heaven, He enters into the soul of him who lives in prayer.”²⁰.

4. Conclusion

The man who does not want to count well the meaning and the use of prayer is a man alive in body but dead in soul. Through prayer we bring the glory and gratitude we owe to God. As oxygen is to the lungs and brain, so is prayer to the soul. He who practices it is gradually taught how to do it; it is God Himself who draws us into dialogue with Him. Let us not plead lack of time (which we ourselves deliberately spend in the wrong way) for St. John Chrysostom tells us fatherly still today: ‘The blessed David had many kingdom concerns and prayed to God seven times a day, and not only for himself but for all who were under his obedience and under his kingdom, but what answer shall we give before God because we neglect prayer? That for this the devil finds time and draws us into sin.’²¹ Prayer remains a threshold, a dialogue, a ladder, a form, a relationship and a special way of approaching the True God, who wants all people to be saved. Each person is called to salvation, but the way in which each one takes salvation seriously concerns us all.

²⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, “Despre rugăciune II,” in *Omilia la săracul Lazăr*, 218.

²¹ Băbuț, *Mărgăritarele Sfântului Ioan Hrisostom*, 153.