Sermon on the 7th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Sunday, July 23, 2017)

We all understand how important prayer is for the spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian. But how are we to pray? Two forms of prayer are evident in the Orthodox Christian life: private prayers said at home and unified Church prayer. Each has certain special characteristics. Our Savior gave instructions in the Gospel about private prayer: *When you pray, go into your room and shut the door, pray to your Father Who is in secret; and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you openly* (Matthew 6:6). Of course, home prayers are basic to us. Prayer is deeply intimate and heartfelt. Everyone who has sincerely searched for heartfelt and moving prayer, knows well how easy and natural it is to pray in solitude, in silence and peace. Moreover, our Lord firmly warns us against hypocritical prayer done for show, to elicit praise from people.

When a Christian prays to God, he must strive to contemplate the words of the prayers that he reads, and to concentrate his thought on the content of the prayers. Everyone knows how difficult it is to struggle against the pressure of outside thoughts and images that tiresomely besiege the person who is praying. This comes to us both from our personal distraction and from the indirect action of the evil-one. The task of a Christian is to apply all his powers to persistently shake off all these side thoughts that torment him, and to pray piously and with concentration. One should remember that an extra pressure of thoughts and images—often vile and blasphemous—comes to us directly from Satan, and the struggle of resisting these thoughts is a direct struggle against evil. Consequently, one receives great benefit from such a struggle.

Usually, we pray with Church prayers that we learn from childhood. This is necessary, because they lead us into that prayerful atmosphere by which the Church breathes. In this, one must beware not to slide into an automatic, mechanical reading of prayers without attention and penetration into the sense and meaning of the words of the prayer. To this end, a full reverence and concentration of attention is demanded, so that one actually prays—converses with God.

According to the harmonious testimonies of the great ascetics of prayer, in addition to reading the Church prayers, one must add their own prayers in their own words, praying for one’s own spiritual needs, and for neighbors and enemies. Often, a Christian cannot fully express his feelings and afflictions in the words of the written prayers. In this case, a living, sincere prayer in one’s own words is more appropriate, together with a confession of one’s daily sins and an expressed determination to struggle, with God’s help, against those daily sins. Such a prayer will come from the depth of the human soul.

Only a person who has developed sincere, penetrating and constant home prayer can fully participate in the public prayers in church. This participation is a firm necessity for every Christian. The Lord Himself said, *Where two or three  are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them*. The great preacher and teacher of prayer St. John Chrysostom says, “One can, of course, pray at home also: but you cannot pray there as you do in church where so many people are gathered, where a harmonious voice is raised to God: for here is something greater than individual prayer: one-mindedness, a union of love, the prayers of the priest. During public prayers, not only do the people send up their own voices to God, but together with them, the angels and archangels glorify the Master.” Thus, church prayer has a preeminently sacred character and it is given this nature by the grace of the Holy Spirit that, as we I know, enlivens our spiritual life, cooperating with our personal spiritual efforts.

A priest serves in church; he is not a priest because he receives a theological education, or has a calling to serve the Church. All this only prepares him for pastoral service. He is a priest only because he was consecrated to it by ordination, and enters through the mystery of priesthood into the pastorship, of the Church. So it is that our church is a consecrated temple, with a specially consecrated Holy Table. According to the word of the Holy Scripture, our church is a house of prayer. The Lord gave us an example of the honor due to God’s house when, during His earthly sojourn, He twice cleansed it of all disorder and indecency. At the divine services, we repeatedly hear the Holy Church exclaim the petition, “For this holy house and for all those who with faith, reverence and fear of God enter herein, let us pray to the Lord.” Each of us must enter a church in this disposition, remembering that here, one stands before the face of the Lord Himself.