



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# TALKS WITH ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS: ON RELUCTANCE TO PRAY

Most of us have encountered the rampart of reluctance – towering hundreds of feet high, cutting off all reason and light, and winding into the distance like the Great Wall of China. We cry out, “I can’t pray... I’m too tired, too bored, too busy, too late, too many children!... Suspecting that this dilemma may not be confined to the English-speaking world, we decided to ask Russian Christians about their own prayers, and how they go about dismantling this masterpiece of masonry.

Tatiana Valerievna, 27, Moscow

I was filled with youthful enthusiasm and I think I was much more fervent in my prayers when I was first baptized Orthodox five years ago. I spent a lot of time in church and was very devoted to doing my prayer rule at home. (My spiritual father had told me to read the morning and evening prayers in my prayer book as well as the daily Gospel reading.) In my enthusiasm I would end up reading extra prayers each day. I didn’t notice it at first, but I believe I felt somewhat proud that I could pray without ever tiring of it. It was a subtle feeling, but as I look back over my early years in Orthodoxy I can say that I was paying too much attention to the form and outer aspects of my prayer life. I never experienced this as a problem, so I continued to pray in this way.

After a time, however, a temptation arose and I found my daily prayers harder to do. Not hard in the sense of saying them, but hard in the sense of really feeling anything when I said them. That's when I began to see this as a problem and brought it to my spiritual father. He is a very wonderful person who could see what was happening to me without my saying it. He encouraged me to return to the simple pattern of saying the morning prayers, evening prayers, and the daily Gospel reading, but slowly and with feeling. In time, my heart began to warm up again and I felt the importance of the words I was saying. I think a lot of people have this experience.

As long as I keep my prayers steady and consistent, I am usually able to do them. Of course, probably like everyone else, there are times when I come home tired and think how I'd just like to relax. When I'm tired and in need of rest, I try to say my prayers earlier than usual so as not to give my mind too much freedom to talk me out of it. I find this usually works well.

### Vera Alexandrovna, 52, Moscow

I try to say my morning and evening prayers from the Orthodox prayer-book. Then, almost every day when I can, I add an Akathist to the Mother of God, the Lord, or to various saints. I often read prayers when I am riding in the Metro [subway] or on the trolleybus. It is sometimes a half-hour or longer ride, and I can silently read several canons for people who I know need God's help. With my work I travel around the city, so when I am walking or riding I think of people who need help and pray for them. Or, if I notice someone on the street who looks troubled, I mentally ask God to help.

Living in Moscow is difficult because it is a huge city with many different people, and there are always temptations on the street. If I can't afford to give something to a beggar (there are so many!) I at least try to pray for them so that my heart won't become hard, and for God to forgive me if I should have given something and didn't. If I see one who I think may buy vodka with the money, I sometimes buy him a bun or a piroshki, or a piece of fruit, as my spiritual father advised. Beggars are also a good test of the condition of my soul. When I am not in a good mood, or feeling proud, I feel irritated or disdainful of them. They see this, of course, and then I've spread my ugly mood to someone by just passing by.

I particularly pray for people who look unhappy, and for the young girls who are still innocent but are trying hard not to be. I was also unhappy and confused in my youth, so I remember how it feels. When I see pornography imported from the West on the street (now also Russian, although we never had it before) or unclean advertisements, the violent music and videos – I ask God to make everyone who looks at them feel disgust and want a cleaner life. Sometimes, I even ask Him to burn the news kiosks down, but I know that won't solve the problem. They will just be rebuilt. People's souls have to change.

When I pass by a church, I often go in to light a candle for people who are on my mind, or for my own troubles. I try to thank God for the good things He gives me, as soon as I notice them. There are so many blessings. Once I begin to give thanks, more instances of God's help occur to me, and I begin to feel how close He is.

The Orthodox prayerbook is important in a different way than my prayers on the street. I know from my Orthodox friends, that those who always read the prayers from the prayerbook feel that they have a heavenly wall of support, like an invisible protection between themselves and the world. I notice too, that they have a calm and a moral strength that I often lack. When I pray regularly for several weeks, I begin to feel that heavenly support also. I feel that my prayers have wings and that they reach heaven. This is especially true after receiving Holy Communion, if I have prepared well.

The prayerbook was written by saints, and through them we are connected to heaven. Even if I am praying alone, I think the Saviour's words, "Where two or more are gathered..." are also for me at this moment. These prayers are something I am doing with all Orthodox Christians, both those who are alive now, and in some mysterious way, I am also linked with those who prayed in the past.

When I finish praying or when the church service ends, I often look back and can see how my thoughts have wandered. Sometimes I am so ashamed that I make myself repeat prayers or canons that I have said without attention. Once, when I was going through a time when I didn't want to pray at all, I made myself a little paper book, and I said, "Alright, so you aren't praying. But at least be honest about it and write down every time you were supposed to pray and didn't. Then go to confession and show the book. Don't just say, "I missed my prayers sometimes." This helped, because I was

so ashamed at seeing it written down, knowing that I would show it to the priest, that I forced myself to pray again.

### Inna Valerievna, 34, Moscow

I start my morning prayers when I first wake up. Before I get out of bed I say fifty “Theotokos and Virgin Rejoice.” After each tenth prayer I say the Jesus Prayer and prayers to saints for different needs and people. Morning prayers from the prayerbook follow: I do up to the “Our Father” and then more by choice. I always add the prayers for the living and the dead.

In the evening we read one kathisma from the Psalter, along with the rather long prayers that accompany the kathisma. I also read prayers for the reposed from a special book. I then read about a half a page from the Gospels, whatever is a logical unit. Sometimes I also read some evening prayers from the prayerbook, but often I don’t, as there are already many prayers with the kathisma.

When I don’t want to pray, either I am tired, or just not inclined; there are various things that I say to myself, or rather, that flash across my mind:

1. My little son needs to see me pray or his soul will not get enough food and will starve. I must not miss the chance to add a new little stone to the foundation, or the world will add a different kind of stone.
2. I must pray and correct my behavior because my reposed relatives are waiting for me to pray for them. They are perhaps helpless and depend only on the prayers of the living, as a prisoner depends on other people to bring him food and water. Perhaps they suffer at the moment I decide not to pray.
3. (Very useful.) When one doesn’t pray and God wants that person to be saved, God can allow troubles, misfortunes, awful diseases and other such things to happen to provoke us to pray and aspire to salvation. If I don’t pray I don’t leave God a chance to be kind to me in this life, as my eternal salvation is more important. I can spare Him the pain of allowing me to suffer and myself, the suffering.
4. If one doesn’t make an effort, things don’t get done – at home, at work, everywhere. Things don’t get done by themselves, you have to push yourself to do them, and this includes prayer as well.



*Lighting a candle.*

5. Christ is the best of everything and everyone. *He is offering me His company* by allowing me to talk to Him in prayer. It is silly not to choose the best, preferring something else to prayer – like rest, entertainment or idleness, or even doing useful tasks. Prayer is one of the few things that will follow me into eternity.

6. I now have a body. In several dozen years (or months, or weeks, or days...) I will not have it. Living with the body I am free to do whatever I want. *When I die the soul will not be free.* It will not have the mouth, the heart, the mind, which are the tools for praying. While I have these tools, let me pray. The body is a democratic thing. It makes me equal to the aristocrats of spirit (the saints), because it can pray to God as much as I want to. And, if my soul is that of a spiritual pygmy, it can talk to God through my body. When the body is dead, the chance will be lost.

7. I try to perceive the desire to stay away from prayer as a passion, and praying as a normal and healthy pastime. Then, not praying appears as something morbid, something to be avoided. When I'm idle (not praying) I feel I am giving in to a passion.

I don't think all these things at once, just one or two of them, and then often in a flash. Sometimes they help, but if they don't I say to myself, "I will say just one short prayer and then have a rest." After I say one prayer, "I will just say one more, and then I can go do something else." However, after a few short prayers, the desire for prayer may increase. The desire to pray often appears in me after reading the Holy Fathers and books about prayer.

I don't want people reading this to think that I pray all the time, because I don't. I'm only learning to pray, and often have to force myself.

Sometimes I imagine our big world as an infinity of evil, chaos and death – and prayer as a tiny island of culture, order, warmth and beauty. I cling to this island, knowing that a puff of wind can carry me away into the darkness.

### Valery Andreevich, 33, Ekaterinburg

I don't think I was ever given a particular prayer rule to say. I always heard that it was customary for Orthodox Christians to read their morning and evening prayers, so that is what I do. A few years ago I was visiting Optina Pustyn and saw a copy of the prayer of the Optina Elders. Very often I find myself reading such prayers during my own daily prayers – not with any particular pattern, but as my heart moves me. One of my biggest problems is to keep from being restless – both mentally and physically – when prayers go on for a long time; particularly when I hear the same prayers over and over again. Sometimes I think, "Didn't God hear it the first time?" I remember this bothered me when I first began reading prayers from the prayerbook at home. I thought, "Of course He heard me the first time, so, why do I have to repeat so many similar prayers each time?"

Then, I attended a catechism class where the priest spoke of prayer. He said that many people become distracted when they pray and this can lead to a lack of depth and feeling. To try to get the feeling back, some compensate by doing even more prayers and prostrations, whatever it takes. I experience this like putting salt on one's food. The more you add, the more you need to even taste it. Less salt means a more refined sense of taste. So instead of adding prayers, I decided to do fewer prayers than I had been doing, which helped me better feel the words I was saying.

I try not to let prayer become lifeless and without feeling. My life is quite busy and I have trouble finding time to do everything I need to do. I am



often tempted with the thought of not praying when I'm tired. I think: "Well, there's always tomorrow." To tell you the truth, I often fall into this trap and just say a simple "Thank you Lord for this day." When this goes on for several days, I know that I am not doing what I should. When I notice this, I go back to saying regular prayers. I find the evening prayers easier to do than the morning ones. The evening prayers close the day, whereas when I wake up in the morning I am thinking about everything that I have to do at the office. This makes it harder to pray without having my mind running in many different directions. I know I'm really a beginner at this, but I am trying, and with God's help, I hope to get better at it.

### Pavel Feodorovich, 37, Nizhny Novgorod

Basically, I get up and read the morning prayers, followed by the daily Gospel reading. In the evening, I read the prayers before going to sleep. Besides that, I say prayers before and after eating and working. That's the extent of my prayer life at home. The biggest barrier I had to face, however, was a feeling of repetition in the prayers I read. I had been involved for several years with a Protestant organization here in Nizhny Novgorod and they stressed that Orthodox prayers were vain, because God doesn't like repetition. They would tell us that the Bible says not to use vain repetitions when we pray because such prayers won't be heard. I remember how much sense this seemed to make at the time, and it was something I had to struggle with in Orthodoxy. Questions like this can present problems to people just coming to Orthodoxy since they are often ill equipped to find an answer to them. I kept on saying the prayers, but I had no idea if they had any effect.

Providentially, just at this time, my priest told me that the prayers in the Orthodox prayerbook are not there just by chance. He said that they were composed by very holy and experienced men who themselves prayed such prayers and today are venerated as saints in the Church. Every single prayer has its meaning and reason for being. I experience prayer as a preparation of my heart to receive God. At home I pray before an icon of St. John Maximovitch who, more than anyone else I know, gave us an example of a life of prayer. I am weak, but somehow with this icon before me, I feel that he blesses my efforts.

Of course, I struggle almost every day with my desire to pray spontaneously. I find that I love speaking to God in prayer if it is not so fixed, like the

regular routine of prayers from the prayerbook. However, I'm also aware that this is my own emotion and feeling about prayer, and is not necessarily a guide to what is real, or even good for my soul. Spontaneous prayer can be added to the prayers in the prayerbook, but it is not a good substitute for them. The same tension that I often feel inside when I read the prescribed morning and evening prayers, which makes me feel uncomfortable while I'm saying them, actually makes me feel quite good once I have finished. I see this tension as a kind of medicine working to bring my soul and inner life back into line with God. It is impossible to pray if one has no awareness of the act of prayer as spiritual warfare. The world tries to condition us to believe that prayer is an unreal way of dealing with the "real world." Such thinking is actually far more dangerous. Prayer must be sincere. ✦