

Unceasing Prayer: The Mother and Wellspring of Joy in Christ*

“Pray without ceasing”

“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation”

(1 Thessalonians 5:17; St. Matthew 26:41)



In a previous discussion of the blessed Apostolic exhortation, “rejoice always,”¹ we characterized joy in Christ as the reliable barometer of our spiritual state.²

Everlasting and unceasing joy is the product of the constant presence of our Savior within our hearts, and this is attained through unceasing prayer.

1. Continuous prayer is the expression of our fervent love for Christ and of our desire that He, and He alone, should be the Lord of our hearts and the wellspring of our joy: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart.”³

• But is it possible for the Faithful to pray without ceasing when they live amid so many secular distractions and face innumerable worldly cares?

The sanctified experience of our Church responds in the affirmative.

“All Christians,” says St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, “young and old, men and women. should pray at all times, where they ply their trades, when eating, when walking, when taking care of any business, saying this short prayer, sometimes with the lips, and at other times in the mind and in the heart: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.’”⁴

St. John Chrysostomos assures us that, wherever we may be and at whatever time, it is possible for us to set up a spiritual altar and offer our prayers:

‘And how is it possible’—some say—‘for a man living in the world and tied down [to his work] to pray for three hours a day and run to Church?’ [I reply:] ‘It is possible and very easy’; ‘Let us not make excuses for ourselves, saying that there is no house of prayer nearby; for, the Grace of the Holy Spirit—if we are spiritually awake—makes us ourselves Churches of God, and so, from every point of view, it is very easy for us to pray’; ‘wherever you find yourself, you have the altar, the lance, and the sacrificial victim with you, because you are yourself the Priest, the altar, and the sacrificial victim. Wherever you may be, then, you can set up your altar, as long as you evince a vigilant disposition, and neither the place nor the time will impede you; and even if you do not kneel, or smite your breast, or stretch forth your hands to Heaven, but show only fervor of mind, you have fulfilled everything necessary for prayer. It is possible even for a woman who is holding a distaff and weaving to lift up her gaze

mentally to Heaven and call fervently upon God. It is possible for a man who goes into the marketplace, while walking, to offer earnest prayers. And another man, who is sitting in his workshop stitching hides, can consecrate his soul to God [through prayer]. The slave, when shopping, when going up or down the street, and when serving in the kitchen, can pray zealously and vigilantly, when he cannot go to Church. God is not embarrassed about the place [where one prays]; He seeks only one thing: a fervent mind and a temperate soul.⁵

2. Moreover, through constant invocation of the Holy Name of the Lord our lips and hearts are sanctified; likewise, all of our affairs and tasks are blessed. In this way, our life is “seasoned,” since we flavor it with the salt of the Holy Spirit, Who is the true source of our joy. It is precisely for this reason that the Saints encourage even craftsmen, saying, as St. John Chrysostomos does: “Are you a craftsman? As you sit at work, chant psalms; ...a psalm is a great companion.”⁶

St. Basil the Great considers it an emulation of Angelic hymnody when a pious soul,

as soon as the day begins, hastens to honor the Creator with hymns and canticles; and then, when the sun is shining brightly, he betakes himself to his various tasks and, with prayer as his companion everywhere, seasons his labors with hymns, as with salt; for, it is the assuagement provided by hymns that bestows on the soul a cheerful and untroubled state.⁷

3. As well, we should never forget that unceasing prayer is indispensable and necessary for the salvific struggle to achieve inner wakefulness.

Our Lord urged His holy Disciples before His Passion: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”⁸

This injunction possesses perennial and universal validity: it is addressed to every faithful member of our Holy Church, who, though he may live in an intensely worldly environment full of temptations, ought nonetheless to be alert and to preserve his heart pure and free, so that it might be an “abode,”⁹ a temple, and a dwelling-place of the Holy Trinity, the inexhaustible wellspring of true joy.

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• **Indeed**, then, our lay brethren in the world

“are capable of praying, when working, when eating and drinking, when at home and when outside, when sitting, and when walking, if only they will forsake garrulity and gather their minds into their hearts.”¹⁰

* Source: *Άγιος Κωνσταντός*, No. 291 (July-August 1999), pp. 209-210.

Notes

1. I Thessalonians 5:16.
2. See *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 285 (July-August 1998), pp. 81-82.
3. Deuteronomy 6:5.
4. St. Nicodemos, notes on I Thessalonians 5:17.
5. St. John Chrysostomos, “On Anna,” Oration 5, §§5-6, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LIV, cols. 667-668.
6. *Idem*, *Second Baptismal Catechesis*, §4, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XLIX, col. 237.
7. St. Basil the Great, Epistle 2, “To his Friend Gregory,” §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXII, cols. 225C-228A.
8. St. Matthew 26:41.
9. St. John 14:23.
10. St. Nicodemos, *Ἐξομολογητᾶριον [Manual of Confession]* (Athens: M. Saliberos Publications, n.d.), 3rd ed., pp. 45-46.