

# PRAYER WITH AND FOR THE NON-ORTHODOX

## ≡ PRAYER WITH THE NON-ORTHODOX ≡

**Q:** *The Church forbids us to pray with non-Orthodox. When invited to a meal in a Protestant household, what do we do when they say “grace,” e.g., the “Our Father” before a meal?*

**A:** In this age of ecumenism, one is hard-pressed to argue with the “givens” of the religious world: “We all have the same God,” or “All religions are good and are equal.” If we apply these notions to science, it is immediately apparent that they are absurd: “All observations are valid and equal,” or “Alchemy and chemistry are both sciences and are equal.” Quite obviously, even *within* a given religious tradition, there are those who understand its precepts well and those who hardly grasp them. And so, a simple Orthodox believer would not claim to understand God with the same insight and perception that, say, a great Saint or Teacher of the Church understood Him; in a sense, in terms of their understanding of Him, these individuals have different experiences of God. How, then, since we consider Orthodoxy to be a correct statement about the nature of God, man, and the universe, can we actually have the same God as those whom we consider erroneous in their beliefs? Nor can any rational individual argue that all religions are equal. Even among modern religious traditions, some teach the ascendancy of peace and love, while others advocate violence and even elevate it to the level of a “holy pursuit.” The problem is, of course, that ecumenism is based on simple-minded or trendy notions of religion and the Truth. It thus forces us to confront complex philosophical and theological questions at a very low level, leaving little room for subtlety. In this context, praying with others takes on a special significance. Prayer is an expression of our Orthodox understanding of, and relationship to, God; therefore, we cannot engage in joint prayer with the non-Orthodox as an expression of a “commonality” with them which we in fact do not have. This fact is reinforced by Church Canons that prohibit prayer *with* (though assuredly not *for*) the non-Orthodox.

Now, admittedly, if we refuse to pray with the non-Orthodox, we appear—again because we are unable to address religious issues, today, with any depth—rude, if not downright sectarian. In view of this, probably the most prudent thing to do, when you are invited to a meal in a non-Orthodox household, is to stand (or sit) respectfully while your hosts pray as they see fit. Afterwards, before you eat, you can Cross yourself and silently recite the appropriate Orthodox prayer. Whatever you do, you must keep in mind that the canonical guidelines that prohibit us from praying with the non-Orthodox, based *solely* on the precepts discussed above, must never become an occasion for showing disrespect or disdain for others or for their religious traditions. The Holy Canons are designed to protect our Faith, as the *criterion* of Truth, from any vitiation by what is foreign to that fullness of Christianity that Orthodoxy is. But this desire to protect our traditions is not selfish; it is motivated by love for those outside Orthodoxy, the pristine Faith—preserved among us alone—to which we hope that they will one day turn, if they are truly searching for God. Just as a good chemist would be remiss, were he to endorse some superstitious procedure from the false science of alchemy, so we Orthodox must not endorse the spiritual practices of those outside the Church. However, just as a chemist need not ridicule an alchemist, but should try to bring him to a knowledge of the real science of chemistry, so we must not show disrespect for the heterodox, but attempt to educate them by our good example and civility.

There are, of course, Orthodox who, zealous without knowledge (*cf.* Romans 10:2), would use the Holy Canons—which are not laws, but principles which should guide us in making decisions regarding delicate matters of Christian comportment—to justify their un-Christian hatred for the heterodox and for heretics. They would thus argue that we should not sit at the same table with heretics or non-Orthodox, forgetting that this canonical prescription is aimed at insuring that, by eating in public with unbelievers, we do not somehow give the impression that we endorse their error and thus bring scandal on others. In modern America, this is hardly a risk while having dinner with non-Orthodox friends. Unthinking people might also say that by listening to the prayers of non-Orthodox, we are technically praying with them. We must simply ignore such irrational rubbish for what it is. An advocate of such thinking once told us that, following the *agape* meal in his parish on Sundays, all leftover food was thrown away, rather than given to the poor, since it had been blessed by an Orthodox Priest. To do otherwise, in his view, would have meant throwing what was blessed to the dogs. One can only imagine what Christ, Who calls us to feed the poor (*cf.* St. Luke 14:13), or Saint Paul, who tells us to feed even our enemies (*cf.* Romans 12:20), would have said of such a thought. Prudence and true zeal should lead us in our relationships to the heterodox at all times. Otherwise, our wisdom becomes foolish and *anti-Christian*.

Source: *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XIV, No. 4 (1997), pp. 24–25.

≡ **COMMEMORATION OF NON-ORTHODOX AT THE PROSKOMIDE SERVICE** ≡

**Q:** *In the Proskimidia, can non-Orthodox be commemorated? Most Priests in our modernist jurisdictions do this.*

**A:** The public worship of the Orthodox Church represents our oneness in Baptism and Faith and our oneness with the Church Triumphant. While we fulfill our obligation to pray for all people during these services, we pray by name only for Orthodox Christians. This is a binding rule for all Orthodox worship. It applies to the *Proskomide*, or Service of Preparation, as well.

By praying as the one Church, we more greatly facilitate the eventual union of all people in Christ. This exclusivity in our worship, then, is not motivated by a rejection of those who are not in the Church, but by a desire to pray efficaciously for their conversion and enlightenment.

The habit of commemorating a president or ruler by name during the Liturgy, when he is not Orthodox, also violates the nature of our public worship. While we may commemorate Orthodox kings and queens, we should refer to the non-Orthodox in authority over us in a general way. Thus, in our monastery we pray for the Greek king and for “the civil authorities of this land.”

It should be noted that, just as strongly as the Church prohibits the commemoration of non-Orthodox in its public worship, equally firmly the Fathers of the Church insist that we must in our private prayers pray for all mankind, including our enemies, and especially for those outside the Orthodox Church. Thus our care and prayer for our non-Orthodox brothers and sisters is not a secondary issue, but a primary spiritual responsibility. It cannot, however, compromise or distort our understanding of the public worship of the Church and our unity in Baptism, Faith, confession, and the path towards *theosis*, or deification in Christ.

Source: “Liturgical Notes,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (1990), p. 15.

≡ **PRAYERS FOR THE REPOSED NON-ORTHODOX** ≡

**Q:** *My father, who was not Orthodox, reposed last week. I recently read an article by David Ritchie in Orthodox Life that says in essence that only Orthodox can be saved. What, then, is the use of private prayers for non-Orthodox who have reposed? A Priest explained to me that God gives*

*the command, but that He also does what He pleases and that no one but God knows who is going to Heaven and who is going to Hell. I would appreciate your comments on this.*

**A:** While the excellent article in *Orthodox Life* on the caution with which one must approach contemporary near-death experiences is accurate and timely, the summation of Orthodox teaching on the salvation of souls contained in it needs clarification: “Souls not saved by the Orthodox Christian Faith, repentance, Holy Baptism, a life in the Church, and good works will be condemned, together with the devil and his angels, to the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14) and to everlasting separation from God” (David Ritchie, “The ‘Near-Death’ Experience,” *Orthodox Life*, Vol. XLV, № 4 [19], pp. 16–31). We habitually face the “temptation,” as in the discussion of prayer for the non-Orthodox and the final disposition of the souls of those outside the Orthodox Church, to enter into the realm of a problematic alien to the liturgical and experiential dimensions of the Orthodox Hesychastic tradition.

This temptation is twofold. *First*, it poses prepackaged questions from the realm of intellectual scholasticism and, in turn, offers prepackaged answers to these questions of a purely academic nature—answers which give quick solutions of the kind sold in the “supermarkets” of Western religious institutionalism and their “sectarian” annexes. *Second*, it affords an image of God as a dread and impartial Judge, Who, after a terrifying trial, saves whomever He wishes and damns whomever He wills, and this on the basis of a contrived list of virtues and sins, an index of moral obligations.

When—having succumbed to the twofold thrust of this temptation—we are drawn into a discussion of prayer for non-Orthodox Christians, both the living and the dead, and a debate over the possibility of their salvation, our prepackaged answers are ready. But one who loves in Christ does not yield to this temptation; he abides in the bright realm of Grace and freedom, far from the tendency to *ideologize* theology. For such a man, it is inconceivable that he should not pray spontaneously and sincerely for the whole of creation, for men, birds, animals, reptiles, the enemies of Truth, and even for the demons.

Love in Christ is lived experientially, as a charismatic state. In this state, the Divine Comforter gives to man a “compassionate heart,” with the immediate result that he is now dominated by a boundless love “for all of created nature.” This charismatic love in Christ is most certainly not a sentimental love, that is, love within the limits of createdness; rather, it is the uncreated Energy of God, which enters into our heart, making it merciful, “in the likeness of God.” Insofar as our Lord is all-merciful, so our hearts become all-merciful, by the action of Grace, and we assuredly face no “dilemmas” with regard to those for whom we should pray.

Prayer is not only the expression of certain requests to our Lord, but is primarily the “Energy” of the Comforter in our hearts, a total embracing of the whole of creation in the bosom of a heart which has been blessed and which has been granted *mercy*, by the Holy Spirit, to be *merciful*.

How is it possible, in this charismatic and deifying state, for “compassion” and “just judgment” to co-exist in the heart? How is it possible for us to pose questions and offer answers about who will be saved and who will be damned, about who is worthy of our prayer and who is not? Just as our all-merciful Lord Himself does not hesitate to pour out His Grace—and this lovingly—even on the evil spirits and on those who reject Him, so also he who loves in Christ pours out his prayer lovingly, unconstrainedly, and naturally on all men, being unable to “restrain” the “abundance” of life, *giving* what he *has been given*.

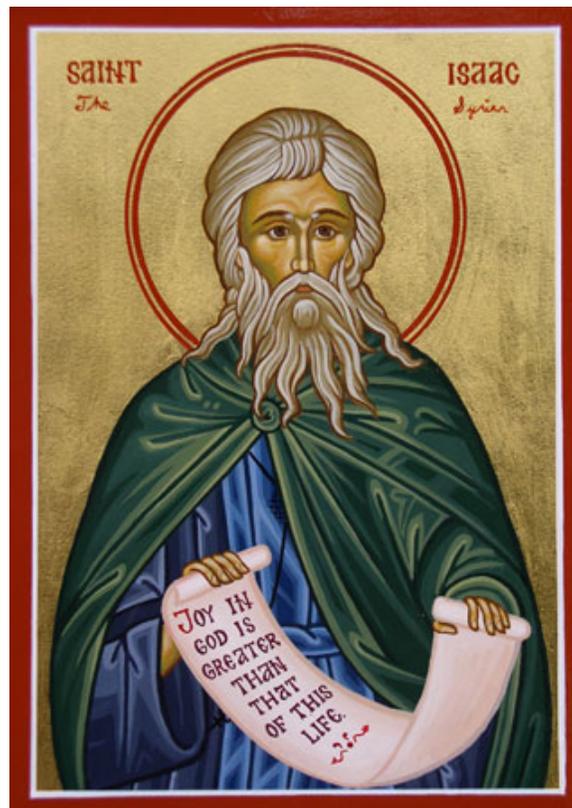
And if the demons and unrepentant men should feel this love of God as a tormenting “fire,” our Lord is not to blame for this; for He Who is Love and only Love is not able to “deny” Himself!

Two small references to the writings of Abba Isaac the Syrian may help us to gain a more profound understanding of the question at hand. We commend them to our reader:

From the Saint's eighty-first Discourse: "And what is a merciful heart?' And he said, 'The burning of the heart for all creation, for men, birds, animals, and demons, and for every creature. From the memory and contemplation of them, his eyes pour forth tears. Out of the great and intense mercy that grips his heart, and from great fortitude, his heart is humbled, and he cannot bear to hear or to see any kind of harm or the least distress come over creation. And for this reason, he offers tearful prayer at every hour, even for irrational creatures, for the enemies of the Truth, and for those who injure him, that they might be kept safe and receive mercy, and likewise for the genus of reptiles, out of the great mercy that is aroused in his heart boundlessly, in the likeness of God.'"

And from his fifty-eighth Discourse: "Mercy and just judgment existing in a single soul is like a man worshipping God and idols in the same house. Mercy is opposed to just judgment. Just judgment is the equality of the balanced scale. For it gives to each as is meet, and does not incline to one side or show partiality in recompense. But mercy is pity aroused by Grace and inclines a man compassionately to all; and just as it does not requite the man who deserves harsh treatment, it fills to overflowing the man who deserves what is good. And if mercy is on the side of righteousness, then just judgment inclines towards evil; and just as grass and fire cannot abide in the same house, so neither do just judgment and mercy abide in the same soul. Just as a grain of sand cannot counterbalance a large quantity of gold, so God's necessary justice cannot, in like manner, counterbalance His mercy."

Source: Orthodox Tradition, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (1996), pp. 38–40.



SAINT ISAAC THE SYRIAN