



## PORTSMOUTH ABBEY

### Pray Without Ceasing

“We have no command to work and to pass the night in vigils and to fast constantly. However, we do have an obligation to ‘pray without ceasing.’” This quotation from Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345-399), is a good reflection of the belief of the early Christians about prayer. In the letters of St. Paul we frequently see the injunction to pray ceaselessly, as, for example in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (“Pray without ceasing”) and Romans 12:12 (“Be constant in prayer”), and Ephesians 6:18 (“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit”). In the Gospels themselves Jesus emphasizes persistent prayer, as in Luke 18 where Jesus taught the disciples a parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” These passages of Scripture were taken very seriously by the early Church and much discussion was given to this idea and how it could be achieved.

In the literature of the early monks (and one must remember that monasticism was in its origins just a way to maintain the integrity of the Christian life as its edge was being lost by its greater acceptance and by its greater compromise) there are frequent references to this topic. Thus in St. Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony* (c. 357), which was so influential in the growth of monasticism, we learn that Anthony, the paradigmatic monk, practiced “unceasing prayer.” Though there were already formal periods of prayer (the canonical hours of the divine office), there are many sayings of the early monks emphasizing that the set periods of formal prayer were not enough. Thus there is a story from the Desert Fathers about a superior of a monastery who thanked St. Epiphanius of Salamis (c.310-403) for his prayers by which his community were faithful to their canonical hours, never omitting the office of terce, sext, none or vespers. Rather than praising them for their fidelity to prayer, Epiphanius reproached them saying that they were evidently, therefore, neglecting the remaining hours of the day which they spent without prayer.

One way to deal with this idea of unceasing prayer was undertaken by an eastern order of monks from the fifth century, the *Akoimetai* (“the sleepless ones”), who organized their formal prayer (the singing of psalms and so on) in shifts so that at any one point there was always some group of the monastery praying. For them it was, indeed, a *laus perennis*. But the injunction, however, was not addressed to the Church at large, or even to communities, but to individuals. Another group, the Messalians (“the praying ones”), took that phrase most literally and reasoned that it meant saying prayers, vocally or mentally, continually, and condemning anything that interfered with that. While they included spiritual occupations like reading of scripture as prayer, they refused all worldly

work, especially manual labor, quoting the words of Our Lord that one should not labor for the bread that perishes (John 6:27). They believed that they had the right to receive necessities from the Christian faithful. The Desert Fathers had no use for such men as this story shows us.

A brother came to the monastery of Abba Sylvanus and when he saw all the brethren at work he said to the elder, 'Do not labor for the bread that perishes. Mary has chosen the better part' At this the elder called a disciple and said, 'Zachary, give this brother a book and show him to an empty cell.' The ninth hour, which was the hour for dinner, came and passed. The guest was intently watching the door to see if someone would come and get him for dinner, but no one called him. At length he rose and went to find the elder. 'Abba,' he said, 'are the brethren fasting today?' 'No, they have all eaten,' replied the elder. 'Why wasn't I invited?' 'Because,' answered the elder, 'you are a spiritual person and have no need of bodily nourishment. But we, carnal as we are, are obliged to eat and this is why we work. You, however, have chosen the better part; you read all day long and have no desire for bodily nourishment.' At those words the man made a prostration and said, 'I beg your pardon, Abba.' The elder pardoned him and concluded his lesson with the words, 'This is how Mary herself stands in need of Martha. It was because of Martha that Mary could receive her promise.

In another story where the Messalians are criticized, an explanation is given on how one is able to keep the injunction to pray always, the story of Abba Lucius.

Some of the monks who are called Messalians went to Enaton to see Abba Lucius. The old man asked him, "What is your manual work?" They said, 'We do not touch manual work but as the Apostle says, we pray without ceasing.' The old man asked them if they did not eat and they replied they did. So he said to them, 'When you are eating, who prays for you then?' Again he asked them if they did not sleep and they replied they did. And he said to them, 'When you are asleep, who prays for you then?' They could not find any answer to give him. He said to them, 'Forgive me, but you do not act as you speak. I will show you how, while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God, soaking my reeds and plaiting my ropes, and I say, 'God, have mercy on me, according to your great goodness and according to the multitude of your mercies, save me from my sins.' So he asked them if this were not prayer and they replied it was. Then he said to them, 'So when I have spent the whole day working and praying, making thirteen pieces of money more or less, I put two pieces of money outside the door and I pay for my food with the rest of the money. He who takes the two pieces of money prays for me when I am eating and when I am sleeping; so by the grace of God, I fulfill the precept to pray without ceasing.'

Lucius fulfills the obligation to pray without ceasing by frequently saying a short prayer (in this case from Psalm 51) and by earning enough that others will pray when he is eating and asleep. We see here the common monastic practice of saying prayers, psalms or parts of psalms, while one worked. We see much the same in Cassian (c.360-435), who transmitted the tradition of the Desert Fathers to the Latin West and whom St.

Benedict mentions explicitly and with approval for his spiritual teaching. He believes that prayer has to cover more than just the canonical office (“For whoever is in the habit of praying only at the hour when the knees are bent prays very little.”). He mentions the Pauline injunction to pray unceasingly six times in his great work on monastic spirituality, the *Conferences*, and he believes that this is “the monk’s goal and the perfection of heart.” He also recounts (in his tenth conference, “On Prayer”) how certain monks would frequently use the phrase “O God, come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me,” (from Psalm 70). In fact, he spends many pages showing the excellence of this “formula of piety” (which had been handed on to them by the oldest of the Fathers and which they hand on only to a very small number of the souls eager for it) which, if continually used and meditated upon, could meet every difficulty and every evil desire and defeat them. This verse was useful for each one, in whatever condition of life.

It contains an invocation of God in the face of any crisis, the humility of a devout confession, the watchfulness of concern and of constant fear, a consciousness of one’s frailty, the assurance of being heard, and a confidence in a protection that is always present and at hand, for whoever calls unceasingly on his protector is sure that he is always present. It contains a burning love and charity, an awareness of traps, and a fear of enemies. Seeing oneself surrounded by these day and night, one confesses that one cannot be set free without the help of one’s defender. This verse is an unassailable wall, an impenetrable breastplate, and a very strong shield for all who labor under the attack of demons. . . This verse should be poured out in unceasing prayer so that we may be delivered in adversity and preserved and not puffed up in prosperity. You should, I say, meditate constantly on this verse in your heart. You should not stop repeating it when you are doing any kind of work or performing some service or are on a journey. Meditate on it while sleeping and eating and attending to the least needs of nature. . . Let sleep overtake you as you meditate upon this verse until you are formed by having used it ceaselessly and are in the habit of repeating it even while asleep. Let this be the first thing that comes to you when you awake, let it anticipate every other thought as you get up, let it send you to your knees as you arise from your bed, let it bring you from there to every work and activity, and let it accompany you at all times.

This frequent use of short prayers we also see in the Western Christian tradition by the use of pious aspirations (traditionally called “ejaculations”) periodically during the day and in the Eastern Christian tradition by the frequent repetition of the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Until now unceasing prayer has only been seen as explicit prayers, but there is also “implicit prayer” in the activity of one’s life. Origen (c.185-254) in his *On Prayer* includes good works and virtuous living as prayer: “And he prays constantly (deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments are included as part of prayer) who unites prayer with the deeds required and right deeds with prayer. This is the only way it seems possible to fulfill the precept of unceasing prayer. We have to envision the whole life of a pious Christian as one long prayer, and the exercise we commonly refer to as prayer is merely part of the whole.”

This prayer can also be seen as an implicit state of prayer, a stable attitude, disposition or habit, a habit of the heart one might say. In his *Homily on the Martyr Julitta* St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) talks about how the actions that flow from the right disposition, a state of prayer, are also prayer: “We should not express our prayer merely in syllables, but the power of prayer should be expressed in the moral attitude of our soul and in the virtuous actions that extend throughout our life. . . This is how you pray continually—not by offering prayer in words, but by joining yourself to God through your whole way of life, so that your life becomes one continuous and uninterrupted prayer.” We see the same in St. Maximus the Confessor (c.580-662): “Sacred Scripture never commands us to do what is impossible. The Apostle himself recited psalms, read Scripture, and served others, yet he prayed without ceasing. Continual prayer means keeping the soul attentive to God with great reverence and love, constantly hoping in him. It means entrusting ourselves to him in everything that happens, whether in things we do or in events that occur.”

Besides the formal hours of prayer (and Origen expected even ordinary Christians to formally pray three times a day) we can also make our work prayer. While work can become prayer, there are plenty of stories in the spiritual literature about how work, even if begun well, done for God or coming from a heart turned toward God, can lead us away from God, leave us spiritually empty, or even into sin. To maintain its usefulness one could say frequent short prayers (as we see in the Desert Fathers and Cassian), or as we see in Basil (and also in the Desert Fathers) not the frequent use of short prayers but a constant mindfulness of God.

In the tradition, perpetual prayer is both the cause and the result of a life of virtue and purity of heart, of a life of asceticism and mindfulness of God, and by it we reach the Kingdom of Heaven and experience a foretaste of it. As Cassian writes: “This should be the hermit’s goal and the object of all his efforts: to merit to possess already in this life and in his mortal body a preview of future blessedness and a foretaste of the glorious life of heaven. Such I repeat, is the summit of perfection, when the soul is so free of carnal attachments that it can rise daily to the lofty realms of the spirit, until its whole life and every stirring of its heart becomes one continual prayer.”

In St. Isaac of Nineveh (a 7<sup>th</sup> century Syriac author) unceasing prayer is not ultimately our prayer, even one animated by the love of God within us, but the prayer of the Holy Spirit.

*Question:* What is the apex of all the labors of asceticism, which a man, on reaching, recognizes as a summit of his course? *Answer:* When he is deemed worthy of constant prayer. When he has reached this, he has touched the end of all virtues, and has become the abode of the Holy Spirit. If a person has not received in all certainty the gift of the Comforter, it is not possible for him to accomplish unceasing prayer in quiet. When the Spirit makes Its dwelling place in someone, he does not cease to pray, because the Spirit will constantly pray in him. Then, neither when he sleeps nor when he is awake, will prayer be cut off from his soul; but when he eats and when he drinks, when he lies down or when he does any work, even when he is immersed in

sleep, the perfumes of prayer will breathe in his heart spontaneously. From this point onwards he will not possess prayer at limited times, but always; and when he has outward rest, even then prayer is ministered to him secretly. For as a man clad in Christ has said, the silence of the serene is prayer, for their very thoughts are divine impulses. The motions of the pure mind are quiet voices, secretly chanting psalms to Him who is invisible.

That the Holy Spirit prays in us can be seen in Scripture (e.g. Romans 8:26 and Galatians 4:6) and it is certainly the experience of many holy people, both in earlier centuries as in the present. And as the great nineteenth century Russian saint St. Seraphim of Sarov told us, what is the Christian life but the acquiring of the Holy Spirit.