

# FROM THE LIFE OF ST GREGORY PALAMAS

## THAT EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD PRAY CONSTANTLY

Let no one think, Christian brothers, that only priests and monks have the duty to pray continually, and not the laity. No, no. Every Christian shares a common duty to be in prayer always.

The Patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheos wrote in his Life of St Gregory Palamas, that the saint had a beloved friend named Job, a very modest and virtuous man. One day when the saint was in conversation with him, he spoke about prayer, he told him that every Christian should force himself every day in a simple way to pray, and to pray continually, as the apostle Paul had ordered all people: 'Pray constantly' (1 Thess. 5 : 17), and as the prophet David said, even though he was king and had to look after the interests of the entire kingdom: 'I always have the Lord before me' (Ps. 16 : 8. LXX), which is to say: though prayer, in my intellect, I see the Lord before me always. Likewise, Gregory the Theologian teaches all Christians we should, in prayer, remind ourselves of the name of God more often than we take our breath.<sup>1</sup>

The saint said these things then, and others too, to his friend Job. And he added that it bears on us to obey the recommendations of the saints, and that we should not only pray within ourselves continually, but that we should also teach others, monk and laymen, the wise and the ignorant, men as well as women and children, and encourage them to pray always. This was a new idea to the old man Job, and he began to argue. He said to the saint that constant prayer is only the activity of ascetics and of monks who live outside the world and its distractions, but that it is impossible for those who are in the world and who have so many concerns and labours there to pray constantly. The saint gave him still more evidence, more irrefutable proofs. But the elderly Job would not let himself be persuaded. Then the divine Gregory retreated from the discussion and the combat of words and fell silent. And each returned to his cell. Later, when Job was praying alone in his cell, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, sent by God who wants the rescue and safety of all men. The angel reproached him for having contested what St Gregory had said to him and for having opposed him on things which are clearly the source of healing for all Christians. He ordered him in the name of holy God to be attentive from then

onwards and to watch carefully to never speak against such work so useful to the soul, for he was opposing the will of God. He forbade him then to accept in himself thereafter any contrary thought, and he demanded that he consider things conforming to what the divine Gregory had said. Then the elderly Job, that simple man, went straight to see the saint. He fell to his feet and demanded his forgiveness for having opposed him and for having contested his words. And he revealed to him what the angel of the Lord has said to him.

You see, brothers, that all Christians, from the smallest to the greatest, have all of them the duty to pray constantly, to speak the intellectual prayer 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me', and to accustom their intellect and their heart to speak it always? Do you consider how this prayer pleases God and what advantage it gives us, because, in his extreme mercy, he has sent a celestial angel to reveal it to us, so that we can have no further doubt on this matter?

But what do men who live in the world say? 'We are in the middle of so many affairs and distractions. How is it possible to pray continually?'

I respond to them: 'God has never asked the impossible from us. He has not ordered us anything except what it is in our power to do. All men who seek health soul are capable of arriving at constant prayer, if they put the effort in. For if a thing were impossible, it would be so for all laymen, and there would not be many men in the world who achieved it. The father of St Gregory is an example among many others. This admirable man, named Konstantin, worked in the palace of the emperor. He was called the father and master of emperor Andronikos II. He occupied himself each day with royal affairs, without speaking of the affairs of his own household, for he was very rich, had many houses, servants, a wife and children. Despite everything, he never separated himself from God. He was so devoted to the continuous intellectual prayer that he often forgot what the king and the palace ministers said to him regarding affairs of the kingdom, so that he had to ask them many times on the same matters. It happened that the other ministers, when they ignored the cause, reproached him for having forgotten so quickly and to bother the king in repeated questions. But the emperor, who knew the cause, defended him, saying: 'Konstantin, the happy man, has his own thoughts. And they stop him from being attentive to empty and unimportant things of which we speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nazianzos, *Orations* XXVII, 5; E.T., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 7*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (*Christian Literature Publishing Co.*, Buffalo, NY, 1895), p. 286.

But his intellect is attached to what is true, to the things of heaven. And he is forgetful of terrestrial things. For all his attention is in prayer and turned toward God.'

As the holy Patriarch Philotheos says, Konstantin was then venerated and loved by the king and the great and the ministers of the kingdom, as if he was loved by God to the point that he gave him the ability to do miracles. St Philotheos, in the life of St Gregory, the son of Konstantin, relates that one day he had taken a boat with his family, to go to Galata to see an anchorite who lived there in a state of stillness, so as to receive his blessing. As they went along, he asked his servants if they had brought any food and drink to offer to the abbe. They told him that, in their haste, they had forgotten and had not brought any. This blessed man was a little upset by this, but said nothing. He went alone to the prow of the ship, put his hand in the sea, and in his silent intellectual prayer, requested God, the master of the sea, to give him some fish. And a little later (o your marvellous works, Christ King, through which, paradoxically, you glorify your servants), he removed his hand from the sea, taking in a large fish which he threw into the boat before the servants, saying: 'The Lord has thought of us and his servant the abbe. He has sent him something to eat.' Do you see, brothers, with what glory Jesus Christ glorifies his servants who are always with him and invoke his very holy and gentle name continually?

Did Eudokimos, that just and holy man, not live also at Constantinople? Was he not in the palace of the emperor, and involved in the affairs of the empire? Did he not live among the entourage of the emperor and the ministers of the palace, at the centre of cares and hassle? Despite this, the intellectual prayer never left him (as Symeon Metaphrastes reports, in the account of his life). So, when he found himself in the world and the things of the world, the three times blessed man led a truly angelic life above the world, and God recompensed him and gave him a divine end. Many others too, unnumbered, have, in the same manner, lived in the world and are totally committed to that intellectual saving prayer, as we can see in the accounts of their lives.

Brother Christians, I pray you therefore with the divine Chrysostom, for the saving of your souls, do not neglect that work of the prayer. Imitate those about whom we have spoken. And as much as possible, follow them. If the thing appears difficult at the start, be sure and certain, as in something coming from God himself who dominates the universe, that the proper name of our Lord Jesus Christ, invoked by us every day and continually, will make all difficulties smooth, and with time, when we are accustomed to the name, when we will have been filled with sweetness in him, we will know from experience that the continual invocation is neither impossible nor difficult, but possible and easy. That is why the divine Paul who, better than us, knew the great good that prayer does for us, and exhorts us to pray constantly (cf. 1 Thes. 5 : 17).

Now he has not wanted to demand from us a difficult and impossible thing, which we could not achieve; in that case it would have been necessary to be disobedient, we would have transgressed his order, and through that we would have been condemned. But the goal of the apostle when he said 'Pray constantly' was that we would pray with our intellect; this is something which it is always possible for us to do. When we work with our hands, when we walk, when we sit down, when we eat, when we drink, we can always pray with our intellect and bear in us an intellectual prayer which would be true and pleasing to God. We can work with the body and pray with the soul. The exterior man can accomplish all the bodily tasks, and the interior man can be entirely consecrated to the adoration of God, always bearing this spiritual work of the prayer of the intellect. It is this that Jesus, the God Man, asks of us when he says in the holy Gospel: 'When you pray, go into your chamber, close the door behind you and pray your Father who is in secret' (Matt. 6 : 6). The chamber of the soul is the body. The doors of our being are the five senses. The soul enters into the chamber when the intellect ceases to go and come in the things of the world, but finds itself in the middle of our heart. And the senses remain closed, when we do not allow them attachment to sensible and visible things. Thus our intellect is liberated from all activity of the world. Through the prayer of the intellect in secret, it united to God the Father. Christ says on this: 'Your Father who is in the secret will give you clearly your reward' (Matt. 6 : 6). God, who knows the secret of hearts, sees your intellectual prayer, and he rewards it by giving you great visible gifts.

For this intellectual prayer is the true prayer, the perfect prayer. It fills the soul with divine grace and gifts of the Spirit, like the perfume whose odour, in the vase, is much stronger than when it is stoppered. So it is with prayer. The more you close down your heart, the more full the heart with divine grace. Blessed are those who give themselves to this celestial work. For through it they surmount all the temptations of malign demons, as David vanquished the arrogant Goliath (cf. 1 Sam. 17 : 51); through it they extinguished the disordered desires of the body, like the three children extinguished the flame of the furnace (cf. Dan. 3 : 24-5); through it they appease the passions, as Daniel calmed the savage lions (cf. Dan. 6 : 18-9); through it they make the dew of the Holy Spirit descend into the heart, as Elijah made the rain fall on Mount Carmel (cf. 1 Kings 18 : 45). It is this intellectual prayer which rises to the throne of God, and is kept in the cups of gold, from where the perfume arises to the Lord, as John the Theologian says in the Apocalypse: 'The twenty four old men prostrated themselves before the Lamb with their citharas and with cups of gold full of perfume, which are the prayers of the saints' (Rev. 5 : 8). This intellectual prayer is a light which shines always on the soul of man and sheds light on the heart with the flames of the love of God. It is a chain which joins and united God to man.

O the incomparable grace of the inner essential intellectual prayer! It allows man to be always in dialogue with God. O true marvel! You are with men through the body, and you are with God through the intellect. The angels do not have a material voice. But they do not cease to glorify God with their intellect. It is their work. And they consecrate all their life to it. So you also, brother, when you enter into your chamber and close the door, that is to say when your intellect is not dispersed here and there, but when it enters into the heart, when your senses remain closed and are not attached to things in the world, when you pray always with your intellect, you are equal to the holy angels, and your father who sees the hidden prayer which you offer in the secret of your heart will give you in recompense great spiritual gifts. But what else do you want and what is better than to be always united with God through the intellect, as we have said, and continually to converse with him, without which, neither here nor in the next life can any man ever be happy?

Then, brother, whoever you are, when you take in your hands this book and read it for the good of your soul, I pray you, remember to invoke God, to say 'Kyrie eleison' for the sinful soul of him who has taken the trouble to compose this book and of him who has published it. They have great need of your prayer, so that the divine mercy will come to their souls as to yours. So may it be.