

The Prayer Corner: Establishing Space and Time for Prayer in Your Home

Introduction

When we are trying to establish a good habit, especially when we are just starting, it is helpful for us to carve out a definite time and a physical space where we pursue the new practice. Thus, if we are trying to get the exercise that our doctors keep telling us we need, it is encouraging and helpful to dedicate a time to the activity and a space for the bicycle or the weight machine or our walking shoes. For that reason, many people join gyms that provide a pre-dedicated space for exercise. When we go to that space, we intend to exercise. The Apostle Paul exhorts his young protégé Timothy: "Train yourself in devotion to God, for, while physical training has some value, devotion to God is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:7-8). In fact, the very word translated into English by the words "train" and "training" in this verse of Scripture is the Greek word we get the words "gymnasium" and "gym" from. Let us, then, in wisdom, set aside a specific time and space for some *spiritual* exercise, the most basic act of which is prayer.

Minimum Requirements for a Prayer Corner

- ❖ A quiet spot (table, book shelf, top of a chest of drawers)
- ❖ An Icon/s (preferably of Christ to begin with)
- ❖ A Prayer Book
- ❖ A willing and obedient heart full of love for God and for others

Basic Instructions

Place or hang the icon in a convenient, prominent, quiet place, on or above a bookcase or shelf. If you have several icons, you should arrange them in an Orthodox fashion. The icon of the Theotokos and Christ (the Nativity of Christ or His First Coming) always goes to the left, and the icon of Christ (the Risen Christ or His Second Coming) always goes on the right. If you have a cross, the cross goes in the middle, between the two. Open the Prayer Book to an appropriate place. Quiet your heart before God. Cross yourself. Begin praying. Repeat this practice often, preferably every day, preferably several times a day, for the rest of your life!

Practical Instructions: "The Hardware" of Prayer

1. Using Vigil Lights: These are lamps that are always lit, and vary from electric to seven-day candles to olive oil or refined oil lamps of various shapes and designs. Electric lights are convenient and need no maintenance. However, "natural" light from a burning source has a wonderfully calming and quieting influence, and light, from whatever source, has the practical effect of allowing you to see what you are reading. If you burn a votive candle in a glass container, put a bit of water in the bottom to snuff the wick when it burns down. If you use a traditional Greek-style olive oil lamp, follow the ancient custom of the monks of Mt. Athos of putting some red wine in the bottom of the oil reservoir before adding the oil and before lighting. This will allow the wick to snuff itself after the oil burns out, and the wine will not heat up and explode out of the reservoir, as it might with ordinary water! There are different wick kits and arrangements available. The short, replaceable, disposable wicks are probably the best for home use. They last for a day or two and are easy to replace. Go to Costco or local ethnic market for that great big bottle or can of good olive oil. Any other vegetable oil will burn as well but olive oil is "authentic."
2. Making holy smoke: Incense is quintessentially Orthodox. It derives from the use of incense for worship in the Jewish Temple (Exodus 30:1-10), and it represents the prayers of the faithful ascending to heaven, to the throne of God (Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4). On a personal level we will begin to associate the smell of the incense with the Church and with the practice of prayer, for our sense of smell – researchers today tell us – is the sense most closely tied to human memory and it calls us back to that liturgical world of praise and worship. Small brass censers need some kind of simple insulation. It is best to put a small amount of sand or fine dirt inside the censer before placing the charcoal in it. Only use a very small piece of charcoal. If you have obtained the standard large size church charcoal, break the tablet into halves or quarters, and only light one piece. This type of charcoal has a very lively starter, and simply holding a lit match or butane wand lighter (the best) to the side of the piece will usually suffice. Also, unless you enjoy the acrid smell of the starter chemical, it is probably preferable to light the charcoal outside. The starter quickly burns off. The piece of charcoal will be red hot and ashy within just a few minutes and ready for a small bit of incense. Japanese Buddhists also use and produce for sale very fine charcoal tabs without starter. These take longer to light, but have no acrid smell and burn very well. Use only one grain of incense at a time. Several pieces will produce an enormous amount of smoke and may result in your smoke detectors going off, interrupting your prayer time! Be

careful not to burn yourself. The censer will get hot. If you want to pick up the censer and wander about the house while singing the *Magnificat* (the hymn of praise sung by the Virgin Mary found in Luke 1:46-55), get a censer that has a wooden handle or use a hot pad or wrap the handle with twine or something that will insulate it. (Note that in accordance with Church practice, a layperson can carry a censer around at home but only ordained clergy may move or swing a censer to “bless” objects and people in Church.) After the charcoal completely burns down to ash, it is not necessary to clean the censer. Simply tamp the ash down and the censer will be ready to use again. Remove some of the old ash when the censer is completely full. (Throw it into the garden—since it was used in prayer, it is, by definition, “blessed.”)

3. Expanding and Developing your Prayer Corner and Your Prayer Life

- ❖ Gradually add more icons, especially icons of Christ, Christ’s Life, Christ’s Mother, and the saints, especially patron saints (like St. Paul, after whom our Church is named, and the saints for whom you and the members of your family are named).
- ❖ Add a Bible for devotional reading: for example, *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson Publishers), because of its explanatory notes written by Orthodox Scripture scholars, teachers and theologians. If you have a Protestant edition of the Bible such as the *New International Version*, please be aware that Protestant Bibles do not usually contain all the books of the Bible found in the Old Testament and are therefore, from our point of view, somewhat deficient.
- ❖ Add a Psalter (a separate edition of the Psalms) for reading and praying through the Psalms or use the Psalms found in your Bible. Read a few Psalms each day besides the daily morning or evening Psalms. The Psalter is the foundational Prayer Book of (Judaism and) the Church. It was the Prayer Book of the Lord Jesus. Reading the Psalms is basic to spiritual life. It is therapy.
- ❖ Add a censer (see above).
- ❖ Add a calendar or an *Horologion* to your shelf. *This is actually essential.* It is vital that we as Christians are praying as a worldwide community in accordance with the same feasts and fasts and remembering the same Saints each day. This is part of our identity. An *Horologion* is a (large) book with the combined texts of the services, an abbreviated *Synaxarion* (the principle saints for each day with their hymns), and special hymns and prayers for various periods of the Church year. .

- ❖ Add other candles on candle stands. "Let there be light!"
- ❖ Add holy objects and reminders: Anointing Oil, Holy Water, Palm Crosses, etc. Make your corner a truly sacred space! *Do not keep anything not related to prayer and contemplation on your shelf. Do not allow this space to become a parking place for keys, old receipts and spare change.*
- ❖ Add other prayer books and texts. *The Orthodox Study Bible* has a nice basic set of morning and evening prayers. Another short outline of morning and evening prayers can be found in a little pamphlet called *Building a Habit of Prayer* published by Conciliar Press. Our Archdiocese has published a very nice little prayer book, *My Orthodox Prayer Book*, with many prayers for various occasions. Father Steve has also prepared booklets for the *Hours of Prayer* (15 minute prayer services that are scheduled throughout the day at 6AM, 9AM, 12Noon and 3PM) as well as *Compline* and the *Typika Service*.
- ❖ There is also a wealth of material on the Internet, but use these with some caution. Ask a priest or your spiritual father or mother for advice! Never assume that something is safe or good just because it is posted on a web site that uses the word "Orthodox." There are also many excellent books on the market on the subject of prayer. Two good places to start are: *God and You: Developing a Daily Personal Relationship with Jesus* by Father Anthony Coniaris and *Beginning to Pray* by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom. THE treasury of material on prayer in the Orthodox world is the *Philokalia*, now available in translation in four volumes. This is an anthology of the writings of the saints on prayer, especially inner prayer, the prayer of the heart, and other topics of the spiritual life, the Bible, resisting temptation, etc., from the 4th century through the 14th century. The *Philokalia* is invaluable, but it is NOT for beginners. A much briefer but still excellent anthology is *The Art of Prayer*, edited and with an introduction by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, now back in print and widely available. There also exist several useful collections of daily readings from the Church Fathers. These assist busy people to delve into the Fathers of the Church.
- ❖ Add your own petitions. Develop your own list of people you want to pray for regularly and things in your experience and in your life that you want to bring before God. Pray for your family, your friends, your priest, and especially your enemies.

Practical Instructions: Words of Wisdom

Are you too busy to pray? Why? Perhaps your life is very busy right now. What can you do to make time to pray? *If you are too busy to pray, then you are indeed too busy.* Beginning something new is one challenge. Continuing what we begin is

another. It takes time and persistence to build a new good habit. Probably the chief obstacles to prayer in these modern times are our many distractions and our lack of time, or more precisely, our over-commitments and lack of priorities. If you are just beginning to pray, it is wisest to start small. If you try to take on too much, you are liable to fail and get discouraged. If you spend five minutes praying before you leave the house in the morning, at first that five minutes will seem long. But after a few weeks, the time will fly by, and you will want to spend a few more minutes. Build slowly. Saying the Jesus Prayer in the car on the way to work isn't ideal, but it is better than no prayer at all. It is better than listening to the radio. If you miss your prayer time, then confess your inadequacy to God and move on. Do not grovel in failure. Each day is a new opportunity, a fresh canvas. Practice being quiet. Silence is golden. Silence will grow out of prayer, and silence will also aid prayer. Practice being in God's presence. Do prostrations. Make sacred the space where we meet God and where we listen for His "still, small voice." We are often not where we are or should be. Our bodies may be standing before the icons, but our minds are elsewhere. One of the most essential requirements in learning to pray is learning to be in one space at one time and only in that space and time. Prayer also helps us learn this.

Prayer draws us into the presence of the Living God. Prayer is wonderful. But also expect to experience opposition when you pray. The Devil, the Evil One will take notice of you. When you pray, you are entering into combat with the forces of darkness. Keep praying, especially when you do not feel like praying. A sleepy, half-hearted prayer is better than no prayer. Sometimes simply doing what you are supposed to do will lead you to a true interaction with God whose goal it is to transform us. Make it a goal to eventually pray for one half hour every day, except on days when you are particularly busy. On these days, pray for a whole hour! Do not neglect your sleep, but remember that prayer is better than sleep. We can live with very little sleep for a while, but without prayer we may actually perish!

Learn to view each day as if it were your last on earth. Pray as if you were going to die today. Everything in our spiritual lives comes from prayer. Prayer is basic to loving God. It is our acknowledgement that without Christ we can do nothing, and that we need Christ more than anyone in this world or the next. Prayer is also the most basic way to love other people. If you love someone, pray for him or her. If you struggle with hatred for someone, pray for them! If someone hates you or has done you wrong, pray for them! Prayer is our first step towards true forgiveness and peace of soul. Prayer is our way of releasing our troubles and giving them to God.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians 4:4-7*



Examples of Orthodox Christian Prayer Corners from around the World



