

The “Spiritual Way of Life” of the Christian
20.6.2021

Oh Lord...Instill in us also reverence for Your blessed commandments so that, having trampled down all carnal desires, we may lead a spiritual life, both thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You. This is a segment from the Prayer of the Holy Gospel, which precedes the Gospel reading in the Divine Liturgy. This prayer helps those in attendance to understand the purpose of reading the Holy Gospel: To accept the commandments of the Lord with faith and devotion, so that they may grow in fulfilling them. Through the Gospel, the people will be helped in overcoming the passions (the flesh and otherwise), as well as living a spiritual life. Ultimately, this will lead to body and mind being united in one goal, which is to please God.

As we can see, these few words found in the Prayer of the Holy Gospel summarize the Orthodox spiritual life, which is moving towards holiness and *theosis*.

The Holy Fathers of the Church cared deeply for the spiritual life, and it is in their personal experiences that we can gain understanding on how to attain it. Let us take a brief look at how the Fathers guide us on this vital path for our salvation.

The first and most important thing we have to realize, is that we cannot make progress in the spiritual life by our own efforts. The word “spiritual” in itself reveals that the Spirit, or more specifically the Holy Spirit, is the source. It is the Holy Spirit, who is “*the Treasure of all Blessings and Giver of Life*”, that provides us with the spiritual life. Therefore, our primary focus should be union with the Holy Spirit. That is why all the Holy Services of our Church, as well as personal prayers, begin with the invocation of the Holy Spirit: “*O Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, ... come and dwell within us...*”

We are pleading with the Holy Spirit to not just come once, but to dwell in our hearts permanently, remaining with us forever. As St. Seraphim of Sarov says, this is the purpose of the Christian life, which is “the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, whose descent upon the Holy Apostles we celebrate on the Pentecost day.” Our Church helps us achieve this union through the offering of the Sacred Mysteries. At the same time, we do our part by making every effort through prayer, repentance and good deeds. These things we do should not be a source of stress, and if in the spiritual struggle we feel anxiety, we should know that this means we are not moving in accordance with the will of God. God wants us to walk joyously, and to not feel oppressed. St. Nektarios used to offer this advice: “Make sure that you keep the joy of the Holy Spirit in your heart secure”.

But for the Holy Spirit to enter our hearts, it must be cleansed from every sinful passion. As St. Basil the Great says, “as smoke sends away the bees, so the stench of sin does to the Holy Spirit.” This stench includes selfishness, enmity, condemnation, sins of the flesh, and others. This is why we see further down in the prayer to the Holy Spirit, that He may “*cleanse us from every blemish*” (that is, from every blemish that leads to sin). We certainly do our part in acquiring repentance and humility in our hearts, but only the Holy Spirit is able to provide us with this cleansing of our inner self.

Once the Holy Spirit has done this and resides within, we will be able to enjoy the fruits which the Spirit offers; fruits which St. Paul the Apostle records in his Epistle to the Galatians: “*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23). With this spiritual nourishment, as well as the continued inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Christian in the end enjoys the sweetness of the spiritual life: Holiness and union with God (= *theosis*).

My beloved brothers and sisters, while kneeling today and offering our Prayers of Pentecost, let us also fervently ask the Holy Spirit to come upon us as tongues of fire, to cleanse; to enlighten; and to warm our hearts, becoming for us the shining guide of our lives. Amen.