



How to Pray



According to
St. Basil the Great

Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty



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St. Basil the Great was born in the year c. 329, and was one of ten children. Some prominent figures in the history of the Cappadocian Fathers were his brother, St. Gregory Bishop of Nyssa, St. Peter Bishop of Sebaste, and his sister St. Macrina, a model for ascetic life. In the year 370 A.D., St. Basil became the successor of Eusebius, the Archbishop of Caesarea, and today we attribute a liturgy to him – the most commonly used liturgy year round in the Coptic Church.

The writings of St. Basil are distinguished by his spiritual and practical approach. St. Basil never looked to prayer as a routine, but rather he looked at it as the instrument to use in working towards our goal of salvation. He was interested in presenting practical exercises of prayer that are effective. In discussing how to approach prayer in the text below, he introduces the concept of building up our prayer life through exercises and training in prayer under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Just as an athlete trains for a marathon, we as Christians must train our minds and bodies for prayer.

In this pamphlet, the approach to prayer will be presented in the hopes that you, the reader, gain an enhanced understanding of the life of prayer.

1. It is of the utmost importance that **we begin all our prayers with thanksgiving and praise** as the Epistle to the Colossians states in chapter 4:2 “*Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.*” Even in the case where one has a spiritual request to make of God, he or she should not ignore His grace and gifts that have brought him/her thus far in life. We should thank Him for every condition, and in any condition, even before



we ask Him for His forgiveness of our sins. This theological concept is evident in the Agpeya (The Canonical Hours), where we start every hour with the Prayer of Thanksgiving, before we proceed with the Prayer of Repentance (Psalm 50).

2. In moments of prayer, we should **consider ourselves as if we are on a journey to Heaven**, where we isolate ourselves from the world, and are not preoccupied with worldly matters and concerns. We should focus our minds, hearts and bodies on Heaven, so our feelings, thoughts and emotions are enflamed towards Heaven and the Heavenly. Jesus is the joy in our depths, even when we offer repentance.

3. After we shift our focus from the earthly to the Heavenly, St. Basil motivates us to offer our prayers with the spirit of the Holy Bible. This means that we should **use the Bible as the map to guide us through prayer**. We look to the Psalms when offering up our requests to the Lord. The Psalms remind us of the work of the Holy Trinity in us throughout the hours of each day, which is the heart of the Gospel of our salvation.

4. Now that we know that we must first give thanks when we pray, **we cannot forget to repent, and remind ourselves that we are sinners**. When we confess and remember our sins in front of the Lord, it is important to remember that we are standing in front of the Forgiver of all sins. Therefore, we should not justify ourselves in our sins, but rather seek the Lord's forgiveness and guidance towards a repentant path of newness and purity.



QUOTATIONS FROM THE WORDS OF ST. BASIL

1. It is important that we begin our prayers by **glorifying** our God, and singing hymns. After glorifying the Lord, one may offer up his requests, but ask for what is according to His pleasure. When you pray, do not start by presenting your requests first, so that it does not appear that you resort to prayer solely for making requests, but rather that you desire to worship Him.

2. When you begin to pray, leave behind your earthly concerns, and lift up your mind to Heaven. Forsake all the creation, visible and invisible, and begin to glorify the Creator of all things, and begin your **dialogue** with Him.

3. Put in your mind the **words of the Scripture** and say:

“I bless You O Lord, O Merciful, and Longsuffering, for You are patient with me, though I commit sin daily. You granted all of us the power to repent.

For You have patience with us, O Lord, so that we may bless You, glorify You, and praise You, for You oversee the salvation of all mankind.

For our salvation, You sometimes permit grief and tribulations; sometimes You teach us with Your living doctrines, and sometimes You rebuke us through the prophets. Lastly, You visited us by the advent of Your Only Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

You are He who created us, and You are our God and our Father.”

4. If you glorified Him with hymns from the Scriptures, then you have to start saying in humility: *“I am unworthy, O Lord, to open my mouth before You, **for I am truly very sinful.**”* Say this even if you are not repentant, and do not think thus you have sinned, for there is no one without sin except God. It is clear that every



human being on earth commits many sins, and even if we cannot recall them, we must still admit that we are sinners. Like St. Paul the apostle said: “*For what I am doing, I do not understand*” (Rom 7:15).

You commit a sin when you proclaim that you are sinless, for we are all sinners in this life. It is said, “In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Phil 2:3), and also “When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants” (Luke 17:10)¹.

When you take food to nourish your body, you can scarcely be induced to leave the table before you are fully satisfied, except in an urgent situation, where you will not readily do so. **How much more eagerly ought you to dwell on your spiritual nourishment and strengthen your soul with prayer;** for the soul is as far superior to the body, as heaven above earth, and the Heavenly above the earthly.

The soul is the icon of Heaven, because the Lord dwells within it; but the flesh is of the earth, wherein live mortal men and irrational beasts.

Regulate the needs of your body, in conformity with the hours of prayer, and be prepared to dismiss arguments that draw you away from the observance of the rules of prayer.

It is the way of the devils to urge us to be absent during the time of prayer on the pretext of a seemingly worthy reason, so that they may plausibly draw us from saving prayer².

It behooves us to make suitable requests in prayer, even if we are at the very point of death³.

No man ought to pray or prophesy with his head covered; and no woman, with her head uncovered⁴.

St. Basil the Great

¹ راجع دير السريان: القديس باسيليوس، ٢٠٠٣، ص ٥٢-٥٣

² *On Renunciation of the World, (Frs. Of the Church, volume 9, p. 28-29).*

³ *Morals, Rule 65:1.*

⁴ *Morals, Rule 56:7.*

A PRAYER FOR REPENTANCE BY ST. BASIL THE GREAT



O Master, God of all, the righteous Father who is without boundaries!

O ever-present and remaining forever. O eternal One who exists before all ages, more than without a beginning.

You are always present, and never-changing; You have no beginning to Your existence, and You have no end.

O You who are imperceptible in essence and unlimited in greatness, absolute in goodness, and flowing in nature.

Your depth, strength and wisdom cannot be described for they are unfathomable.

I bless You O God, as You look onto my wretchedness in kindness and mercy, for You save me from the filth of the world that is worthless and malicious, made of brick.

I bless You O Lord for showing me, a sinner, Your wonderful love and mercy.

You became my Beloved One to the end in all things.

You are the Nurturer and the Overseer of all, the Guard and the Helper, the Refuge and the Redeemer, the Fortress for every soul and body.

I bless You O Lord, for You show me, the unworthy, Your overabundant and infinite love.

Although I daily subject myself to Satan because of my laziness, You guard me and deliver me from his traps.

I bless You O God, for You grant me the strength to repent for my sins, and You grant me countless opportunities to return from my malevolence.

I bless You O Lord, for although I have no power, You strengthen my weakness, and You do not allow me to fall completely, but You stretch Your helping hand from above and You bring me back to You again.



What can I say to You O Master, O most Good, for all the goodness you bestow on me? You never cease pursuing me, and laboring for me, I the sinner.

What thanksgivings can I offer You? This is why I cry out to You from dawn till evening like a swallow, and I will sing joyfully to You like a nightingale.

I will not stop blessing You all the days of my life, O my Creator, who is Benevolent to me, my Protector.

I am unworthy to talk to You O God, for I am very sinful. However, I thank You O God, for You are patient with my many transgressions, and You did not punish me until this moment.

I thank You O God, for You do not desire the death of the sinner, but rather he returns and lives (Ez 18:23).

I deserve to be greatly punished, and be casted out from Your presence, but, Your love that sustained me extended Your mercy on me.

I thank You O God even when I am powerless to thank You in the proper way that befits Your patience for me.

Have mercy on me O God, and make my life in harmony with Your will.

Lead me, for Your kindness knows what is best for me.

According to Your great mercies make me perfect in every good deed that pleases You, and free my despondent body.

For Your work is mercy and our salvation O God.

We glorify You, thank You, and worship You with Your Only-Begotten Son, and Your Holy Spirit who is All-holy, All-Good, the Life-Giver, now and forever and ever, Amen.

St. Basil the Great

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