

# **PHILOKALIA**

## **The Three methods of Prayer according to St Symeon the New Theologian.**

Prayer is commonly known to each faithful and the proper way (method) of prayer is handicapping many in their prayer pursuit. We are spending more time on how to pray than actual praying. The Philokalic Fathers, especially St Symeon the New Theologian, have already went through prayer until they, themselves, became prayers. Their experiences speak aloud and paved to us the prayerful way. They, themselves, learned praying from prayerful and trusted people who had gone through the same questions, counsel, practice and result.

St Symeon the New Theologian is directing and guiding the seekers of spiritual life since the tenth century in their prayer pursuit. He left us a text entitled “The Three Methods of Prayer” in which he explains his practice of prayer that he learned from the fathers who have guided him. These three distinctive methods are to be taken as steps of the ladder of maturity from childhood through the youth age to manhood; each age has its practice, time and goal. They are to be practiced consecutively at the right time, which is due when the previous method was completed successfully.

### **A. Common characteristics in the three methods**

#### ***Vigilance and Prayer: The Synergy between the Intellect and the Heart***

St Symeon, like the fathers of the Church, regards the heart as the place of all evils. Those who wish to attain life have to attain the purity of the heart and guard it as such. He, therefore, gives to prayer and attaches to it the companion of attentiveness. He consecrates them as the inseparable couple united in oneness while each subject is keeping its identity. He even calls the three methods of prayer: methods of prayer and attentiveness.

Attentiveness is the crucial state of intellect for prayer. It validates prayer and allows it to advance and to achieve its goal. Both, vigilance and prayer together, is the gate of life and death, for the unguarded prayer is defiled and through watchfulness, becomes pure. Attentiveness prepares the person for prayer and prayer extinguishes his sins and invokes

the name of Jesus Christ to take over the heart, which, in its turn, lifts up the intellect to the divine things. They are like the soul and the body; they need and protect each other.

So Thus the intellect, the tool of watchfulness, and the heart, the place of passions and sins, are always in synergic movement. The intellect remembers the words of God which arouses the love of God in the heart of the person at the first stage. Then the intellect replaces the vanities of the heart with the words of God by withdrawing itself from sensory things and taking control of its wandering at the second stage. At the third stage, the intellect watches over the heart and the purified heart, in its turn, purifies the intellect and elevates it (to even) beyond the third stage of prayer; to the stage of the perfect who is in undeviating absorption in contemplation while the intellect, as it is fixed on God, inflames the heart with God's Light.

### ***Physical Postures***

The physical form, the language of the body, is also common in the three methods of prayer and attentiveness, for the outer body is in synergic movement with the noetic and inner ascent of the person. The outer look of the body is orchestrated in symphony with the inner rhythms of the heart in St Symeon's thoughts on prayer.

He asks the beginner to stand with his hands open and eyes lifted heavenwards. This posture is to open the heart for the invocation of the words of God to come and sink in its depth. It is a form of invitation and welcome; the standing form represents the tallest and the straightest form of the body which makes the person spaciouly nearer to heaven than any other posture, while the raising of hands, eyes and intellect upwardly represent the bodily language of supplication and petition from where the help we wish to come and to where we wish to go; the heavenly kingdom, the place of our initiation and our attainment.

St Symeon did not give us any bodily posture for the second method of prayer and attentiveness. I assume that sitting is the posture that is required for the seeker after salvation has to concentrate his thoughts inwardly and frees it from the sensory images and matters, and because in the third method he asks him to sit in a kind of circle; his head bent towards his navel.

The posture of resting the beard on the chest and focusing the physical gaze with the whole of the intellect upon the centre of the belly is, in a way, forming a circle in which

the intellect, while was standing, invoked the words of God to reside in him searches for them now in his heart. While the intellect is looking inwardly it finds at the beginning darkness, but with incessant inner searches and the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ it finds a great joy. So the circular form is to keep the detached intellect attached to the words of God and the Name of Jesus Christ in a close capsule in which the intellect and the heart is purifying and illuminating each other.

### ***Pride***

Although the three methods of prayers and attentiveness are methods and stages for prayers and ascetic works, St Symeon is aware of the works of evil and the tricks of the enemy. He warns the beginner and the perfect as well, from the iniquity of pride, arrogance and self-esteem. It is very easy for the person who is worshipping God and doing His commandments to fall into the deceit of pride. The person is in the right path. He is pleasing God. He is better than those sinners and suddenly becomes like the Pharisee while all others are like the Publican. He assumes that he received favor in God's eye and the grace of God is allowing him to shed tears, see lights, smell sweet scents and hear voices while he is neglecting the counsel of anyone.

Meanwhile, St Symeon recognizes that community and obedience are the safety pins from the sin of pride. The beginners and those who made progress to the second method are saved by the community and those who are well advanced are saved by their obedience to their spiritual fathers.

## **B. Distinctive Features of each Method of Prayer and Attentiveness**

### ***First Method***

The first method of prayer is the foundation of the spiritual building. It is the step where the soul rouses in love and longing for God. Here, the beginner, the adolescent, uplifts his intellect heavenwards and fills it with God's thoughts and love. He cleans out his heart from all other lovers and replaces it by his love to God and God's love for him. He, therefore, watches over his heart by gazing upwards, raising his hands aloft and calling down help from heaven. He images the celestial beauty, the angelic hosts, the abodes of the saints in the dwelling of God, the heavenly kingdom, through the remembrance of the words of scriptures, the holy fathers, and the life of the assembly, the Church. This

longing curtails his passions and allows him to stay attentive to the deceits of adultery for he becomes God's lover.

### ***Second Method***

The second method is like constructing the pillars and the walls of the spiritual building. This construction of walls begins, at the right time, when the beginner, the adolescent, is advanced in his longing and love, when he arrives at his youthful age in spiritual life. At this stage, he withdraws his intellect from the delights of this world and concentrates it on reciting psalmody assiduously for it pleases God and it brings delight to the tongue. As such, he guards his senses and collects his thoughts from the passions of the sensory realities and attaches them to the words of prayer that he is offering to God. He, then, grows in his love unaware of the vanities of this world for his heart is longing to the true delight, the true love.

The second stage is the struggling stage where the intellect pursues the delights of the heart. The intellect has now the foundation of God's delight in its heart. Although, it might drag away towards the worldly passions of the heart, it has the chance to drag back the thoughts by remembering the delight of God's words and by the unceasing practice of psalmody. At this stage, the young person, is never at peace for he is split between the false and the true delight, love; one is the passions of his youthful heart and the other is what his heart is longing for which was made known through the help that was received by the tools of the first method of prayer and attentiveness.

### ***Third Method***

It is time now to put the roof on the spiritual building. The youthful age arrived to its maturity, its manhood. It is now for the third stage, which is more astonishing and hard to explain, to be introduced, though there are few who practice it. The youth who are wishing to find peace and harmony and who are inflamed with their pursuit love of God to attain life enter the world of obedience, which delivers them from entanglement with the evil world.

The world of obedience makes the intellect and the heart peaceful and safeguarded. It allows us to die to every worldly and bodily attachment and not a transient thing may enslave and capture us for our trust is set in God, the spiritual father and our neighbor, community. It allows us to act with a pure conscience; the conscience of God, the

spiritual father and the community. Our actions must be fulfilled according to God's commandments and by refraining from doing anything that conflict with worshipping God. They must also be done in accordance to the exact counsel and guidance of our spiritual fathers, by doing everything we like to be done for us, for the community, and by taking care of God's creation. It is to live as we are in the presence of God.

So, this third method is the method of practicing the stillness of the heart. The seeker who became a mature adult has one task to fulfill in this world of obedience; the task of guarding the heart pure. He repulses and expels all thoughts sown in the heart by the enemy through perseverance of prayer and the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ.

Although the person mounts to the third method of prayer and attentiveness, he is not yet achieved the goal of spiritual life. It is but the highest form of prayer which is the tool to attain life, deification. It leads to the fourth rung or stage of spiritual life, the stage of the undeviating absorption in contemplation, the state of the perfect.

The three methods of St Symeon were addressed for monks. Can the ascetics in the work environment benefit from them? Certainly, if they cannot benefit from the outwardly physical postures, they can benefit from the inwardly application of the three synergic methods of the intellect and the heart. Ascetics in their cells and ascetics in the working world are God's creation in His image and unto His likeness. Both groups have intellects and hearts that may follow their love to passions or their love to the Creator. So, the application of the three methods can lead any person to deification.

*Submitted with God's grace by Deacon Jean El-Murr*