

Using the Church's Calendar as a Guide To Orthodox Christian Life

A Lenten Reflection Given in 2007

I. Introduction:

Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving: these form the three great Pillars of Repentance. They are to be practiced with renewed devotion during the season of Medz Bahk (which is Armenian, literally for the “Great Fast”). Each of these three disciplines are referred to by Our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in the Gospel of St. Matthew chapter six. This happens to be the Gospel lection designated for Poon Paregentan, at the very beginning of the Great Fast. Its obvious our Church Fathers chose this lection, to point us to these three great spiritual disciplines.

Tonight I will focus on prayer. The question is how do we make prayer a part of daily lives and not something we just do once a week on the Lord's Day? Seeing that this year's Diocesan theme is the joining in Spirit of Church and Home, my talk will focus on the question of the practical application of prayer in our daily lives and specifically how to develop a daily rule of prayer: either for ourselves individually or for our family collectively.

II. The Importance of Having a Daily Rule of Prayer

Our meditation tonight is, “Using the Church's Calendar as a guide to Orthodox Christian Life.” For Christians, prayer is life. Our goal is to be in constant conversation, constant communion with the All Holy Trinity and prayer is the essential means of doing this. St. Paul emphasizes the importance of prayer in many of his epistles: to the Church of Rome he wrote “Be steadfast in prayer” (12:12), to the Church in Ephesus he states “Pray always” (6:18), to the Church of Colossae “continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (4:2), to the Church of Thessalonica “night and day be praying exceedingly” (3:10), and later in the same epistle he writes “pray without ceasing” (5:17).”

Prayer directs our whole life to God. Prayer, like fasting, requires sincere faith in God and a deep desire to draw close to Him. As St. James said in his epistle, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (4:8).

And St. Paul adds “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Whereas fasting is a sacrifice of something good we enjoy, like meat, dairy and desserts, prayer is a sacrifice to God of something else we hold dear: our time. Its taking 10 or 15 minutes out of our busy lives, in the evening and in the morning as St. Paul wrote, and saying to our God, “You are more important than any other affair I might be busied with.” And God is pleased with such a sacrifice. St. Peter states in his first epistle, “You also, as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5).

Recognizing the importance of personal prayer, our sister Orthodox Churches encourage every Orthodox Christian to follow a daily rule of prayer. They emphasize this because being an Orthodox Christian is not the result of our mere intellectual belief, nor is it a result of our accepting a set of theological truths. No, Orthodox Christianity is holistic, and is meant to incorporate and penetrate into our entire lives. Its not something just to be believed. Its something to be lived. And one of the most helpful ways to live the Orthodox Faith is by keeping a daily rule of prayer, closely following the Church’s Liturgical Calendar, observing its Feasts and Fasts; celebrating its canonized Saints and following their teaching and example. This, more than anything, keeps our homes intimately close, and “one in spirit,” with the heart and mind of the Church.

III. A Daily Rule of Prayer: Practical Suggestions

Many times new programs are suggested as ways to get people more interested in their faith. Although well intentioned, these programs often do not resonate with our faithful or clergy because they contain foreign elements and teachings not consonant with our Church’s historic faith. Obviously the Church cannot endorse practices or embrace teachings which are inconsistent with the faith transmitted to us from our Fathers. As St. Jude Thaddaeus wrote in his epistle, we hold to the “faith, which is *once for all* delivered to the saints” (1:3). What I am suggesting today, I would submit to you, is not only consistent with our Church’s historic faith and tradition, it actually springs from the very life and prayer of the Armenian Orthodox Church. The practice of having a daily rule of prayer is rooted in the Church’s monastic and canonical prayer Tradition and is directly dependent upon the Church’s liturgical Calendar.

Now, there is not one set formula to creating a daily rule of prayer. But it is recommended that we have a basic structure that can always be followed, even on our busiest days. This basic plan can always be added to as time allows or as we develop our daily rule in its depth and meaning. What I am going to describe are suggestions of basic elements that make up a Daily Rule that you can either incorporate or choose from to fit your own prayer style and needs. Our daily rule can be offered anywhere but it is traditional to have a special place in our home designated for our offering of praise. We can make this place more conducive to prayer by lighting a candle before a Holy Icon (or “Surpabadger”), and offering incense to God as we begin our prayer. It is also traditional to face East which is the direction of not only the rising Sun, but also traditionally of our Lord’s Second Coming.

1. Opening prayer: This can be any inspiring prayer, but in keeping with our desire to stay close to our Church’s prayer Tradition, preeminence should be given to the historic prayers of our Church. “The Book of Hours” by Tiran Srpazan Nersoyan has a very helpful English translation of our Church’s Morning and Evening Prayer Services (see “Book of Hours” pg. 12). Its important to remember the Latin maxim, "Lex orandi, lex credendi," which means: "the law of prayer is the law of faith." Our Church's prayers are actually theological statements. We pray what we believe. Therefore, if we want to know the faith of our Church, all we have to do is look to our Church's prayers as a sure guide. The same is true of hymns.

2. Hymns: St. Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Church of Ephesus: “Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... (5:18-21)

The singing of a Hymn is an important part of our daily rule. As the Latin Father St. Augustine put it, “He who sings prays twice.” We can use any inspirational hymn to our Lord, but as Armenian Christians we should give precedence to our sacred, historic Armenian Hymns and Sharagans. It also good to find hymns that correspond to the liturgical season the Church is in. The Holy Etchmiadzeen website has great suggestions for this.

3. The Holy Psalms: As the Church Fathers teach, “The psalms are prayer to God, composed for us by God Himself!” These Psalms can either be recited or chanted either in Armenian or English. There is no better praise of God available to us, which is why the Church has always used them extensively throughout all of her Divine Services and Holy Mysteries. St. Gregory of Narek in his Book of Prayers, rhetorically asked this question regarding the Holy Psalms:

“To what end should I recite the Psalms, to what purpose sing them daily with the harp of my voice...” He then gives this answer: “How blessed is the spiritual message of the Psalmist... how sublime the exaltation of grace expressed with prudent forthrightness, inspired by heavenly goodness... how great the desire for the intimate kinship of spiritual communion to hope in God and built upon Him in the joyous words of the psalm, ‘The Lord fulfills the desire of all who fear Him...’” (Prayer 61).

4. Meditation on the Church’s Feasts or Lives of the Saints:

It is a wonderful thing indeed to discover that the Church, every year, offers us an elaborate plan of Christian living and Orthodox Faith encapsulized in the Church’s Liturgical Calendar. For instance, Sundays are dedicated to the Lord and to Major Feasts of His Life. In fact the Lord’s entire life is relived every year in the Church’s liturgical calendar. Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays are dedicated to Saints. Wednesdays and Fridays are fast days. Saturdays are dedicated to the more prominent Saints and Feasts of our Church.

The best way of having our “Homes one in Spirit with the Church” is simply by daily being aware of the Church’s liturgical calendar. The diocesan website is an excellent aid in this. Unfortunately, the calendars distributed by the diocese omits many of the daily saints, nor does it make note of fast days. But the diocesan website makes note of both.

An important thing to remember is when the Church fasts, we should fast; meaning our entire family. Equally important is remembering that when the Church celebrates a Feast, we should feast. These festivities can include having elaborate dinners and scheduling our family celebrations to coincide with the Church’s feast periods. In this way, we conform our lives to the life of the Church, instead of vice versa. The mind of the Church becomes our own. The life of the Church becomes our life.

A noteworthy thing about our Church's calendar is that in addition to all New Testament Saints, we observe all the great Old Testament Saints as well. This demonstrates the great emphasis our Church places on remaining firmly rooted in the Scriptural foundations of the Faith.

Like all ancient Churches, we also commemorate saints from our particular Armenian Church as well as those from the universal or catholic Church. Ofcourse when we use the word "catholic" in the Orthodox tradition we are referring not just referring to the Churches under the jurisdiction of the Church of Rome. "Catholic" in the Greek connotes "fullness" or "universality." So when we use this word, as we do in the Creed every Sunday, we are referring to the entire Church which was built on the Apostles and the Apostolic Faith.

Often these saints of the ancient catholic Church are forgotten or overlooked. Yet its important to learn about these Saints and a joy to discover why they are commemorated yearly. Saints like St. Anthony of the Desert: who inspired so many Armenian monastics that he is included in our intercessions every Sunday in the Divine Liturgy. St. Athanasius the Great is credited with the formulation of the Nicene Creed which all ancient Churches recite every Sunday. Not only this but the prayer the priest says during the singing of the Soorp Soorp is historically known as the Anaphora of St. Athanasius; so he is a very dear Saint in our Church. St. Cyril of Alexandria wrote the Christological formula: "One Incarnate Nature of God the Word." Our church Fathers considered this so important that we joined the other Oriental Orthodox Churches in refusing to speak of two natures in Christ, making our Communion unique among the ancient Apostolic Churches. St. Cyril of Jerusalem is special to Armenians because it was he who wrote the Lectionary we follow during the Great Fast. St. John Chrysostom has several prayers included in our Divine Liturgy and he was actually exilled and driven to death through forced marches in the land of Armenia. St. Basil the Great formed the Divine Liturgy which developed into the Soorp Badarak Armenians celebrate every Sunday.

Each saint, whether from our particular Armenian or of the ancient catholic Church, has been placed on our Calendar by our Church Fathers for a specific purpose and reason. The saints are not just people who lived good lives. Each one of them manifests an essential element of the Orthodox Faith and Life which our Fathers deemed important for us to recall yearly for the preservation of the faith and life of the Armenian Orthodox Church. The more familiar we become with the struggles and

heresies which our Church Fathers have had to overcome throughout the centuries, the more fortified we are against repeating them.

The easiest way to learn about the saints and feasts on the Calendar is by utilizing the *Domar* published by the AOTRI. This book has a biography of every saint on our calendar as well as an explanation of every feast and fast. It is an indispensable tool to the English speaking Armenian Christian. Even if you have to get an old copy, the biographies remain relevant.

5. Daily Readings: The next important part of the daily rule is the reading of the Holy Scriptures

The Great Latin Church Father, St. Jerome (who, by the way, is honored as one of our own 12 Great Doctors of the Church) once said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” Scripture reading is important because when we pray, we speak to God. And when we read the Scriptures, God speaks to us. Now many people realize the importance of Holy Scripture but they don’t know how to implement it into their daily lives. One of the easiest plans for reading Scripture is offered to us in the Church’s Lectionary.

The Church’s daily Lectionary, is available on the Diocesan website and in the back of the Diocesan calendar. Every day the Church in its wisdom has ingeniously selected passages of Scripture to highlight the wisdom and importance of the Saint or Feast we are celebrating -or- of the Fast we are observing. On most saint days there are four lections. We can read the first two in our Morning prayer and the second two during our Evening offering. On Fast days only two lections are offered (an Epistle and a Gospel). We can supplement this lighter Scriptural load with prayers of repentance like those of St. Gregory of Nareg’s “Book of Prayers.” Or we can spend extra time in a good Orthodox Bible commentary like the O.S.B. to understand the Bible in our Church’s historic tradition.

6. The Lord’s Prayer: A practice recorded in the oldest Christian document outside the NT, called “the Didache” (written b/t 70-100 AD), was the ancient Christian tradition of praying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Following this ancient rule we can incorporate the Lord’s Prayer in our morning and evening prayer. And since lunch time is usually a hectic part of the day, the Lord’s Prayer could suffice as our midday prayer. For variety we can either recite it or sing it, either in Armenian, English or whatever language we prefer.

7. Intercessions and Closing Prayer: See “Book of Hours”: p. 39 & 90

IV. Conclusion:

To conclude: St. Paul wrote to the Church of Colossae: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (3:16-17).

This is what we do every Geeragee (Lord’s Day) in this Holy Temple and it is also what we can do everyday in our homes. The idea of praying to God daily as part of a daily rule is not an obligation. Rather, like the Soorp Badarak, it is an invitation.... an invitation to exercise the great privilege we have as Christians to worship the Living God. Following a daily rule of prayer fortifies us in our Faith so that we will not just be “professing,” but rather “practicing” Orthodox Christians. This is a way to ensure our that our homes and our lives are “one in Spirit” with the Church. Thank you.

Suggestions for a Daily Rule of Prayer

A good daily rule can incorporate the Lord’s prayer three times a day, singing a hymn and offering a psalm in the morning and in the evening, dividing up the Church’s Scriptural lections between morning and evening, and remembering the Saint or Feast honored on any given day.

1. Opening Prayer: May be taken from the Book of Hours, Divine Liturgy, or examples in the Orthodox Study Bible
2. A Hymn: Any Church Hymn or Sharagan appropriate to Church’s liturgical season.
3. The Holy Psalms: Can use daily Psalms recommended in Orthodox Study Bible (O.S.B.), or use your favorites, or pray them sequentially, one after another.
4. Meditation on the Church’s Feasts or Lives of the Saints: think about how the lections relate to his or her life or that of the particular feast. Use the Domar by A.O.T.R.I.
5. Holy Scripture: Follow daily readings from Lectionary. Use the O.S.B.’s commentary on the lections to understand what they mean in our historic, Orthodox approach.
6. The Lord’s Prayer: Can be sung or spoken, in Armenian, English, etc.
7. Intercessory and Closing Prayer: See opening prayer above.

You may contact me with any questions regarding the material covered in this talk (or otherwise) by e-mail at: derghazarian@juno.com -or- my website: “Looys Kreesdosee” = “Light of Christ” website address: <http://www.geocities.com/derghazar/>

Note: The word “Lent” comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word meaning “spring.” The English speaking faithful of the Latin Church adopted this word for the forty day fast because it coincided with the season of spring. Orthodox Churches, in their mother tongues, refer to this season as the “Great Fast.” This is to differentiate it from the numerous other fasts we observe throughout the liturgical year. When Orthodox migrated West, some began calling this season “Great Lent” in order to make it more palpable or intelligible to our Western Christian brethren. Today, many Orthodox have resumed using our historic title for this season: “The Great Fast,” as I will be doing tonight.

Suggested material to help build a Daily Rule of Prayer:

Nearly all of the following books are available through our Church bookstore.

1. “Orthodox Study Bible” by our sister Eastern Orthodox Churches. The best Orthodox study Bible available. Also has a very helpful guide for a daily rule of prayer.
2. “Domar” by the Armenian Orthodox Research Institute: Has a biography of every saint and an explanation of every feast and fast on our Church’s calendar. Indispensable!
3. “Book of Hours” An excellent source of English translations of our Church’s Canonical Morning, Sunrise and Evening Prayer Hours. Also contains the Famous “Hymns of the Days of Creation” by St. Nerses the Gracefilled, (commonly known in Arm. as ‘Norasdeghzyal’). This is especially useful during Fast weeks because on most fast weeks no saints are commemorated. The Church instead defers to the historic Eastern monastic themes commemorated on specific days: Sunday is dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ, Monday to the Nine Holy Angelic Choirs, Tuesday to St. John the Forerunner, Wednesday to St. Mary the Bearer of God, Thursday to the Holy Apostles, Friday to the Crucifixion, Saturday to those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. St. Nerses’ Hymn offers a deep theological prayer on each of these daily themes.
4. “Speaking to God from the Depths of the Heart” by St. Gregory of Narek: the greatest of all Armenian prayer books. An on-line guide to choosing prayers from this book which correspond to our weekly themes during the Great Fast (Medz Bahk) is available at: <http://www.stgregoryofnarek.am/index.php>
5. “Jesus Son” by St. Nerses Shnorhali: Another spiritual masterpiece of prayer available in Armenian and English

6. Holy Ethchmiadzeen website daily liturgical calendar and lectionary: The home page lists the day's feast or saint. Go to the top of home page and click "education," then go to "Church readings," and click "2007" and the appropriate month and day. Web address: <http://www.armenianchurch.org/index.shtml>

The Diocesan website is an excellent source for hymns and other family faith aids.
Website address: <http://www.armenianchurch.net/>

7. Once we become familiar with the biographical info. of these Saints, we can grow even more in our holy faith by becoming familiar with the writings of these Saints - especially the great theological doctors of our Church. Most of their writings are easily accessible -in Orthodox editions- through Amazon and St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. In this way we allow their relevance and importance to our Church to directly impact our own life and faith. Website address: <http://www.svspress.com/>