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Living an Orthodox Life: Prayer

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The Inward Temple. There is no need to weep much over the destruction of a church; after all, each of us, according to God's mercy, has or should have his own church—the heart; go in there and pray, as much as you have strength and time. If this church is not well made and is abandoned (without inward prayer), then the visible church will be of little benefit.

—Archbishop Barlaam to Abbess M., *Russia's Catacomb Saints*, p. 281

The basic items you need to have in a prayer book are the Morning and Evening prayers, the pre-communion prayers and canons, the prayers of thanksgiving following communion, and the Akathists both to our Lord and the Theotokos. Also, it is best to have one that is based on the same translation as is used in your parish. Furthermore, in talking with Priests a common theme emerges regarding confession: people need to be encouraged to confess regularly and only to *one* Priest. Those who move from Priest to Priest (or monk to monk) are not confessing their sins at all, but rather are seeking to avoid any true correction. Something to seriously consider.

Also, it is absolutely essential that every Orthodox Christian go beyond the use of the prayer books listed below and cultivate an interior life of the heart through the use of the [Jesus Prayer](#) ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"). Ideally, this should be done under the guidance of a spiritual father or mother. The practice of the Jesus Prayer is central to Orthodox spirituality. For an introduction to this—set in the broader context of the Orthodox understanding of salvation as *purification*, *illumination*, and *glorification*—see especially (among the books listed above) the work by Metropolitan Ierotheos (Vlachos) entitled [Orthodox Spirituality](#). One should also read the Russian Orthodox classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Another work widely acknowledged as an outstanding "handbook" on the Jesus Prayer is *The Art of Prayer* (Faber & Faber; now back in print). Here is an excerpt from that classic work:

"There are many among you who have no knowledge of the inner work required of the man who would hold God in remembrance. Nor do such people even understand what remembrance of God means, or know anything about spiritual prayer, for they imagine that the only right way of praying is to use such prayers as are to be found in Church books. As for secret communion with God in the heart, they know nothing of this, nor of the profit that comes from it, nor do they ever taste its spiritual sweetness. Those who only hear about spiritual meditation and prayer and have no direct knowledge of it are like men blind from birth, who hear about the sunshine without ever knowing what it really is. Through this ignorance they lose many spiritual blessings, and are slow in arriving at the virtues which make for the fulfilment of God's good pleasure." (p. 43)

For a sampling of spiritual treasure from this book [read this collection](#) from the letters of St. Theophan the Recluse, whose writings comprise a large portion of *The Art of Prayer*.

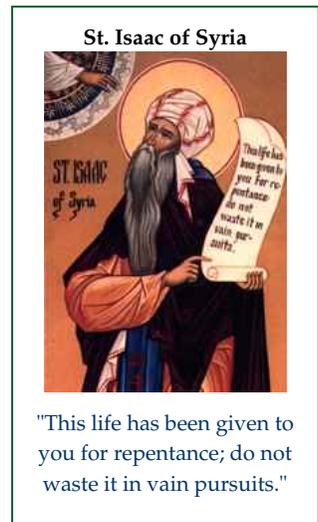
Finally, though the many-volumed *Philokalia* is the main corpus of writings on the hesychastic tradition, it is normally advised that a person who wishes to read this first immerse himself or herself in the Lives of the Saints. These typically comprise the "grade school" instruction—to see how others have embraced these practices and become glorified—, although as Father Seraphim Rose of Platina noted in his [Introduction to Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky](#), many aspects of any given Saint's Life are not to be specifically emulated. (One should definitely read his very instructive introduction.) Then one can move on to "high school," reading and applying to their life—and hopefully under a wise spiritual guide—the principles contained in the major preparatory text for the *Philokalia*: the *Evergetinos* (The Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, multi-volumed).

[Comboschini \(The Prayer Rope\): Meditations of a Monk of the Holy Mountain Athos](#). This is an excellent introduction to the practice of the Jesus Prayer.

[Introduction to the Jesus Prayer](#), by Her Royal Highness, Princess Ileana of Romania (later, Mother Alexandra, Abbess of the Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration in Ellwood City, PA).

[Prayer of the Heart for the Faithful Living in the World](#), by Elder Joseph of Vatopaidi (Spiritual Child of Elder Joseph the Hesychast).

[Father Paisios the Athonite: Guidance about the Jesus Prayer](#). An excerpt from *With Elder Porphyrios: A Spiritual Child*



"This life has been given to you for repentance; do not waste it in vain pursuits."

Remembers, by Constantine Yiannitsiotis.

[Interpretation of the Prayer - Lord, have Mercy!](#). An excerpt from the fifth volume of the *Philokalia* (not yet published).

[Elder Joseph the Hesychast and the Teaching of Mental Prayer Which Flowed from His Letters](#). A homily by Abbot Ephraim of Vatopaidi Monastery.

[Concerning the Jesus Prayer](#). From the Jordanville Prayer Book (1996 ed).

[On Practicing the Jesus Prayer](#), by St. Ignaty (Brianchaninov)

[On Prayer of the Heart](#): Excerpts from *Exploring the Inner Universe*, by Fr. Roman Braga.

[An Orthodox Prayerbook](#), a handy compilation of Orthodox prayers from the website of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration in Lowell, MA.

[Prayerbook of Holy Trinity Monastery](#): The entire text of this excellent prayerbook!

[An Aid to Prayer](#): Some Thoughts on the Use of a Prayer Book. From the *Orthodox America* website.

[Order of Prayer and Worship for Orthodox Faithful](#). Talk Given by Fr. John Townsend at the 1998 Southern Orthodox Conference, Atlanta, Georgia.

[Explanation of the Lord's Prayer](#): An Excerpt from *Concerning Frequent Communion*, by Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite.

[The Lord's Prayer](#): A Homily by Archimandrite George, Abbot of the Holy Monastery of St. Gregoriou, Mount Athos. Available in four Languages!

["All I Can Do Is Pray"](#). From *The Veil*, Vol. 13, No. 1.

[On Prayer](#), excerpts on a variety of issues related to prayer, from the Letters of St. Theophan the Recluse.

[A Prayer Rule](#), an excerpt from *The Spiritual Life and How to Be Attuned to It*, by St. Theophan. See also by the same author: [Inner Peace](#).

[The Cell Rule of Five Hundred of the Optina Monastery](#): another prayer rule to consider adapting to your abilities and circumstances. I posted this mainly because of the example it provides in the meshing of fixed prayers and Jesus Prayers.

[Selections from The Arena, On Prayer](#): by St. Ignaty (Brianchaninov)

[The Power of the Jesus Prayer](#). Based on the Testimony of the Nun Tatiana (1912). "If someone dies while saying the Jesus Prayer, his soul stands in the presence of the Lord, and he will be inseparable from Him for eternity. Likewise, if a man dies while uttering the prayer, 'Most Holy Theotokos, save me, a sinner,' then he will be inseparable from the Mother of God. If someone is not able to utter even a single word, then, if he struggled to attain this prayer during his life on earth, his soul will say it for him on his deathbed. The state in which the soul leaves the body is the state in which it abides forever. There will be no change for the better. Only if one is commemorated (on earth) can he alter the state of his soul."

[Humble-Mindedness: The Doorway to Pure Prayer](#): An interview with Elder Dionysius (Ignat) of the St. George Kellion, Kilitso Skete, Mount Athos, Greece. From *The Orthodox Word* (Jan-Feb, 2005).

[Prayer: Corporate and Private](#), from the book *Marriage and the Christian Home*

[The Icon Corner](#), from the book *Marriage and the Christian Home*

[Orthodox Prayers](#), including almost the entire Lenten Triodion (though a different version than the famous one produced by Bishop Kallistos and Mother Maria).

[How to Set Up a Personal Commemoration Book](#), for personal use at home. By Fr. John Whiteford.

[Prayer With the Non-Orthodox](#): a Q&A from *Orthodox Tradition*, vol. XIV, no. 4. Deals especially with the problem of praying at meals with heterodox Christians.

[Praying for the Non-Orthodox](#), from *Orthodox Life*.

[Prayer Life in an Orthodox Home](#), by Archpriest Roman Lukianov.

[Prayer, Feasts, and Fasts](#), by the Ever-Memorable Metropolitan Philaret of New York.

[The Psalms of David](#). Chapter Two from "The Typicon of the Orthodox Church's Divine Services."

[On the Necessity of Constant Prayer for all Christians in General](#), by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain.

[On Watchfulness, Prayer and Confession](#): A Homily by Elder Ephraim of Philotheou. Translated from the Greek by Fr.

Seraphim Bell.

[Excerpts from the Writings of St. John of Kronstadt](#), on prayer.

[Prayer: Our Nativity Centerpiece.](#)

It is necessary that we live in Christ, the Word of God and become Christ and the Word of God by grace. This is achieved when we live in the Church and participate in its holy mysteries...[and also] with the invocation of the name of Jesus and the reciting of the Jesus prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner", especially as the Jesus prayer is very closely associated with Holy Communion. All of the theology of our holy Orthodox Church is hidden in this small prayer. That is why we would always meditate on the sweetest and most joy-producing name of Jesus. The Jesus prayer is not only for monks. Of course, they have the opportunity to live continually within it. However, we, who are sinners, can also recite it. Let us set aside a certain time for this purpose and begin by saying the prayer for ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes at night, as undistractedly as possible. It is very important to set aside a fixed time (even if a very short one) where there are no interruptions. With the passage of time this certain hour will become longer and will sweeten the soul, the lips... Let us say it even when we walk in the street as well as before falling asleep, whenever we have spare time. Let husband and wife or all the family say it in the morning and in the evening for a few minutes. One of them should recite it calmly and peacefully and the rest of them Listen to it. Much grace will come then to the family. There are many couples and families that have practised it and have seen miracles in their lives... Those who want to go deeper in prayer need an experienced spiritual guide.

—Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpatkos, from the Epilogue to [A Night on the Desert of the Holy Mountain](#).

Recommended Prayer Books & Books on Prayer

[The Way of the Pilgrim](#). If you only have time to read one book on prayer, this is often recommended as *the* book. In the Prologomena to [Monastic Wisdom: The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast](#), Dr. Constantine Cavarnos writes, "About the book *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the Blessed Elder advises one of his spiritual children to acquire copies of it and distribute them to Christians, that they might benefit spiritually (Letter 78). It is worth nothing that in my meeting with him which I describe in *Anchored in God*, Father Joseph said to me: 'I suggest strongly that you read *The Way of a Pilgrim*. This book shows the importance of mental prayer, or prayer of the heart, and the manner in which it is to be practiced. The first part of this work is more valuable than the sequel, which seems to have been added by another author.'"

[A Listing of Suggested Prayer Books](#): an Orthodox Christian should definitely have one or more prayer books. However, he or she should also realize that although prayer books and the Psalter are very good, **the Jesus Prayer is better**:

Moreover let no one be in doubt when he leaves off prolonged psalmody, as if he is being deprived of a monastic rule. For just as those who believe in Christ have fulfilled all the law even if they have abandoned it, so also those who exchange prolonged psalmody for sacred noetic work fulfill the entire rule. Just as the law conducted all to Christ and longed for this, so also psalmody, after teaching us in advance, gives way to attentiveness of heart and prayer. And if psalmody itself decreases, this is what it was intended for. If some of those who are ignorant of the art of sacred noetic work and who do not want to learn it contrive many reasons and want to voice or express opinions that are to the contrary to what we write here, then let them read the holy books mentioned above, which were set down by the holy patriarchs, by the venerable fathers, and in particular this [little book of St. Hesychios](#). (From *Elder Basil of Poiana Marului*)

Elder Basil of Poiana Marului: Spiritual Father of St. Paisy Velichkovsky (Liberty, TN: [Saint John of Kronstadt Press](#), 1997). This is a primer for the *Philokalia*. Excerpt above. Read what St. Ignaty Brianchaninov had to say about this book:

In particular, the writings of the Elder Basil can and should be recognized as the first book to which anyone who desires to practise the prayer of Jesus successfully in our times should certainly turn. And that is its purpose. The Elder called his writings preambles, introductions, or the sort of reading that prepares the way for the study of the Greek fathers. (*Ibid*, p. 31 quoting *On the Prayer of Jesus*, p. 41)

[A Night on the Desert of the Holy Mountain](#), by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpatkos. This may be the single best book on the Jesus Prayer, at least in the Athonite tradition. It is written for both beginners and those who have some experience praying the Prayer. Highly recommended!

A Spiritual Psalter of St. Ephraim, compiled from the writings of St. Ephraim the Syrian by Bishop Theophan the Recluse (St. John of Kronstadt Press, 1997). One of the great treasures of Orthodoxy, this collection of hymns and prayers—providing a wide range of profound expression for the thirsty soul—is arranged in the manner of the *Psalter* and has long constituted one of the favorite sources of reading and prayer for monastics in pre-revolutionary Russia. It makes an excellent companion to one's Orthodox Prayer book.