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To Our Clergy, Hieromonks and Brothers, Religious Sisters,
Seminarists and Beloved Faithful

Prayer in Our Parishes and in Our Families

In the last few years in our Church we often mention the “Vibrant Parish” strategy. In my opinion, one sign of a vibrant parish lies in its ability to give life and give birth to new, living, vibrant parishioners. A dead or dying parish is unable to give birth to new parishioners, or it will give birth to parishioners who are spiritually dead. In my view, a living parish exists when there are two dimensions present in it - vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension is reflected in our relationship with God, especially in prayer, both personal and communal. The horizontal dimension is that which we underline by the term “sobornist” (соборність) (catholicity, conciliarity, togetherness) and this entails firstly, communal prayer, but also communal work and the diversity of activities in the parish.

I want now to turn your attention first of all to the vertical dimension, which I regard as the most essential. If we are sincere with ourselves, we will admit that we cannot fully appreciate the importance and value of prayer for us. In our Church, I have never heard that a priest has ever received an ecclesiastical award because of the exemplary liturgical services he celebrates in his parish, or because of the high level of his own spiritual and personal prayer life.

In speaking about our prayer life, we have to admit that we all have difficulty. Very often we imagine an image of God that is incorrect and generates a fear of Him within us; a fear that the Lord will make demands of us or take something we possess away from us. Often, we don't want to pray because prayer is an encounter with God, like a mirror in which we are afraid to see ourselves in the reality of our true state. In a similar way, a sick person is often afraid to visit his doctor because he is afraid of the diagnosis he may make. In the Ukrainian language there is a saying that “what the eyes don't see will not pain the heart”.

From our experience, it is possible to analyze and measure everything that touches our physical life. It is the same with prayer, inasmuch as we can measure how much time we dedicate to praying. We have 24 hours in our day, and seven days in our week, totaling 168 hours. The average parishioner in our church spends around 1.5 hours in church on Sunday. Hopefully he also spends at least 5 - 7 minutes in prayer morning and evening - another 1.5 hours. Together

this makes 3 hours of prayer in a week. However, is this truly the case? If so, this paints a sad picture of our prayer life. According to this measure we give only 2% of our time to God, while we devote 98% of our time to our earthly life and cares, which sooner or later we will have to leave behind at any rate.

The average Protestant Christian, by example, spends 4 hours a week in church, not counting private prayer at home. Yet, for us, if the Sunday Divine Liturgy stretches a little beyond an hour, we complain that it is too long! An observant Jew spends a half hour in prayer in the morning and another half hour in the evening in addition to six hours in synagogue on the Sabbath. We know also that the majority of Muslims pray 5 - 7 times daily from ten to 30 minutes. Just think - all of this comprises from one to three and a half hours daily. How often and how long do we pray on a daily basis? In fact, Muslims adopted the practice of praying 7 times a day from Christians. Today in our Church, the practice of praying 7 times during the course of a day remains only in monasteries.

Are we faithfully investing our time? Certainly, if our prayer life was our personal business, we wouldn't be so lax. No thinking person would invest his money in an unprofitable venture, yet we invest almost all our life and our time in something that has no prospects for the future. We realize this, yet we still persist in investing our unique life in something that is completely unprofitable. Yet, sadly, statistics show us that in reality it is our earthly life that captures our interest and attention and not God or abiding with Him. From this we can clearly understand that we are not very interested in living our lives with God. What will eternity be like then, where we will spend "24 hours a day, seven days a week" with God, forever? Therefore, in order that we learn to love God more, it is imperative that we learn to love less that which is of the earth, to spend less time tied to earthly things, and more time to things that are eternal. What must we do? We must find time for God, and that is time for prayer, both personal and communal.

God is a living God, and when we encounter God - and prayer is an encounter with God - it follows that our parishes, our monasteries, our eparchies, will be alive as well. Dear friends, when we pray everything in us becomes revived. Catechism will be revived, missionary outreach will take place, our parishes will be alive with social and charitable service. Again, I emphasize, we will have vibrant parishes and a vibrant eparchy only when we maintain a constant relationship with the Fountain of Life. The Lord is alive and therefore only He can enliven us. Forgive me for stating categorically that without personal prayer and communal prayer in our parishes, we can achieve nothing good. Even the best thought out plans, decisions and strategies will not produce the desired fruit. They will be dead. It is worthwhile here to recall the words of His Beatitude Lubomyr Husar, which he often repeated: "Work as if everything depended on you, and pray as if everything depended on God."

We can't do much using a computer that is "offline"; a car no matter how shiny and expensive, won't go anyplace without gas; even the latest model of the iPhone, if we don't charge up the battery, will be useless to us before too long. So it is with each of us: if we are "offline" as far as God is concerned, we won't be able to achieve anything really good. In my view, saints are those who were and have always managed to be "online" with God. Many times the saints, without having access to many resources, or any outside aid, and having minimal influence on the powers that be, did great things that under normal circumstances would have cost millions of dollars. Why were these individuals successful? Because they were truly "poor" in God.

Our brain does not have the capacity to be certain we are always making good and wise decisions. What can the telephone or a computer do without the Internet? Even with "ДивенСвіт

(Divensvit)” we will not pray for long without renewal. Therefore, we must unite ourselves to God through prayer to draw strength and energy from Him. In my humble opinion, both Europe and America will be able to function for a while yet on the foundation of those “batteries” that were formed in the last century thanks to Christianity. However, this cannot continue for much longer. If there is no unity with God, then inevitably, new ideologies will appear. Examples from history readily come to mind: Nazism, communism and others. We see growing signs of this in our modern society again today. Because if we do not believe in the One Living God, we will create other gods for ourselves.

Every one of us, our parishes, our entire eparchy must be always “online” with God, so that we can be “recharged” through prayer and always draw upon the energy and grace of God. If we depend solely on our own ideas, plans and strategies, we will not go far; our “batteries” will quickly run dry. At one time Adam and Eve desired to live independently from God and this led to a great loss and fall. For this reason, Jesus Christ came to us to restore this lost unity. The Lord became a human being in order that we would be able to be participants in the Divine Life, so that human beings would become capable of life with God.

Therefore, my belief is very simple: if we desire a vibrant Church and vibrant parishes we must begin to pray. We must all do this beginning with me, the bishop, and the priests, deacons, religious and faithful. When we place prayer and liturgy in their rightful place of first priority, then everything else will fall into place.

Outdoors, when I seek warmth, I face the sun. If there is an obstacle placed between me and the sun, then the sun’s rays cannot reach me. If I desire the sun to warm me even more, I will stand where it shines brightly with no obstacles to its rays. The sun always shines, yet sometimes the clouds block it from us. As St. Augustine said: “God has already done everything for us and our salvation”. We must make time to spend in prayer with the Lord. When I pray I open myself to Him and God’s light enlightens me. Then, I am certain of how I must act, how I must live, which strategy to choose, which social project to engage in, when to speak and when to listen, when to stand on principle and when, out of love, to overlook the shortcomings of others.

In prayer we experience God in a personal and direct way. God possesses all the knowledge and the answers we need: what, how and when to act, and how not to act. In prayer we gain not only knowledge, we also receive a new experience of God. The more we pray, the deeper becomes our “being” with God, our abiding in Him; we are always “online” with Him. In prayer, we, not only individually, but collectively, as a parish and eparchy, gain the answers we seek. When each of us turns toward the one and the same God, He speaks to each in the same way and reveals the same message to each of us. For the individual and for the entire community, He points to that which is truly good.

“Liturgical prayer is the life of all of God’s people, of its very nature it is ‘with the people’ ‘folk prayer’, and not clerical, which is demonstrated by the etymology of this word. Therefore, it is necessary to evade all clericalism, so that the liturgy would break down all barriers, creating a community which includes everyone as participants.” Pope Francis addressed these words on August 24, 2017 to the participants of the 68th National Liturgical Week in Italy. Examining the history of our Church, we see all the grandfathers and grandmothers, who, thanks to the liturgical services celebrated in their parish churches, grew in Christian virtues, passed the Faith to the succeeding generation and became witnesses to their Faith even to the point of martyrdom. Of course, no decree or proclamation promulgated will instruct us in prayer, if we do not begin to pray ourselves. We are all capable of, and indeed, it is necessary for each of us to desire

to learn to pray, to find time for this. Then, no one but the Lord Himself will teach us how to pray.

Pope Francis also underlined the fact that: “The Church that prays gathers everyone to herself, whose heart is open to the Gospel without turning anyone away: the great and small, rich and poor, children and elders, righteous and sinners. The liturgical gathering “overcomes every barrier of age, race, language and nationality in the name of Christ.”

It is a bitter truth, however, that Christ has been relegated to the periphery in the life of the average parishioner in our churches. Many feel that God should not be allowed to overly ‘interfere’ in their daily life. People habitually insist that they believe in God, but in reality they act as if God truly does not exist. This is the result of contemporary secular ideology that has left its mark on the life of the Church. Therefore, I think we have no need of adapting ourselves to our contemporary secularized world by devising new prayers or new liturgical services. Rather, it is much more urgent that we rediscover the true content, sense and “power” of personal prayer and the liturgical services we already possess. It is not for us to alter the liturgical services to fit the individual, but rather to alter the individual to fit the liturgical services; in other words, to fit God.

When we rediscover the value of personal prayer and the true meaning and “power” in our liturgical services, when our prayer life (God) becomes the foundation of our world view, only then will we discover a powerful resistance to secularism. So, there is nothing more important for us in our parishes and in our Saint Nicholas Eparchy than a true return to the Truth, the Light and the Life, that is, a return to Christ, Whom we encounter in prayer.

We all live the material world that influences us and makes us materialistic. Each of us looks upon things in a subjective, dependent way, which compels us to think about and approach questions in a fragmented way. We do not possess the capability of looking at life, people or things in their entirety. This is why prayer is so essential in our life, so that we can be freed from our dependencies. True freedom lies in freeing ourselves from whatever binds us. Human science often tells us that intellect leads to freedom and truth. However, our intellect limits our ability to see ourselves. We attempt to understand ourselves by means of our imperfect human reason. Humans, being imperfect, desire to act perfectly. When we have a weak relationship with God, then of course, we will look upon the world through the lens of our personal imperfection. When we begin to live a life of prayer, then we draw directly from the wisdom of God.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyon said at one time that if we do not see the sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven in someone’s eyes, we cannot begin to seek the Kingdom. To paraphrase: if we do not see the sowing of the seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven in the liturgical services, we cannot begin to seek the Kingdom. It is imperative that we show the Heavenly Kingdom in our life and in the liturgical services. This is not easy to do, in fact, the holy fathers of the Church stated that to pray was to spill blood! It is easier for us to do anything but pray; each of us knows this from personal experience. The Protestant preacher, Wilfred Smith rightly wrote that “the devil would rather see us doing anything else, even a pious work, than praying on our knees.” We all theoretically realize this and “have nothing against it.” However, to live in prayer and to truly love prayer and the liturgical services is another thing altogether. One of our greatest difficulties remains finding time, or better, wrestling time from our other occupations, for personal prayer and participation in the divine services. It is also important to note that one of the factors contributing to the alienation of our faithful and the growth among our faithful of different religious sects and the general de-Christianization of our society remains the often overly formal and totally incomprehensible nature of the liturgical services.

We must admit that almost all of our church offerings are in the form of “buy and sell”: we barter in candles, holy cards, rosaries, even in liturgy intentions. We are used to this, but still we must think of what we are doing. It is readily noted that in most of our parishes, only liturgical services that have a stipend-intention attached to them are regularly celebrated, yet the faithful have the right to participate in services for which no stipend-intentions have been attached.

Many people do not attend the Liturgy for the simple reason it is never suggested to them to come. Liturgy times are often not placed on websites, bulletins or in announcements. Often, as I read recently on Facebook, we Ukrainian Catholics have a relationship with our liturgical services similar to the love/hate relationship of some couples. We should admit to ourselves in all sincerity that we don't have much love for the liturgical services. Exceptions to this exist but are, unfortunately, rare.

The pastor of the church is obligated to pray for his parish and to give a personal example of prayer. The service of the priest constitutes part of his “working day”, and he, just as working people in the world, is expected to follow a certain “workday discipline.” A question we clerics should ask ourselves: “Do each of us, bishops, priests and deacons, work a full 8-hour working day? Do we find ourselves often at the place of our work?” By this I mean the church, the place of personal and communal prayer. Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness and everything else will be given!

In conclusion, I wish to propose to you a program for deepening our religious awareness and encouraging people to a strengthening of their spiritual life. A result of the implementation of this program in our parishes can be the growth of a deeply faithful people in union with God. To achieve this, we need to inform our people about the fundamental aspects of the Christian faith, because, as we can see, they are not deeply rooted in them. Unfortunately, our average parishioner is, for all intents and purposes, unchurched.

Knowledge and understanding of the Christian and spiritual life among our faithful is admittedly very weak. I am convinced that this is one of the main reasons contributing to the distancing of our people from active participation in the life of the Church, its service and activity. We are all aware that parents, because of their weak knowledge of the Faith, have passed very little of it on to their children. As sad as it is to admit, many families exist in religious/spiritual and moral/ethical darkness. Precisely because of this, we see many cases of spiritual/emotional breakdown and a dimming of the moral conscience in our families today. Flowing out of this we also see the rise of conflicts in the family, disagreements, divorce and other unfortunate situations. The Lord is the sole Source of Good in the world and in the family. When a person abides in unity with God, then God helps to solve all problems and leads the person to salvation and life in God.

From the above we realize the need for raising the level of awareness of God, the actions of God and the Church, among our people. We must give our people an understanding of the essence of the Church and teach them to become active participants and members. This we must achieve through a systematic teaching about God, about the person of Christ, the Church and her teachings, the Holy Mysteries, living the Faith, etc. This will give our faithful the opportunity of raising the level of their knowledge of religious and spiritual life and deepening their experience of it in prayer. I must emphasize that this should be done not in a dry or formal manner, but rather through a lively, spiritual catechization. From the outset I stress that we are dealing here with the teaching of adults, not children.

- For this to be achieved I propose that in all parishes the pastor/administrator, without fail, gather his faithful together on a weekly basis, other than a Sunday or a Holy Day, during

which all would pray and then share their personal prayer experiences to gain fresh insights about prayer. They could also read and meditate upon a liturgical text. It would also be beneficial to read a portion of the Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church (Christ, Our Pascha, Part 2), as well as the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Part 2), on prayer. Other resources could be used as well, for example, video materials on the Liturgical Year and others from the blog of the Patriarchal Liturgical Commission: <http://plc-ugcc.blogspot.com.es>.

- I advise priests to organize weekly meetings of the faithful in their parishes for the study of the Christian faith, which would consist of a reading of the Bible, the Catechism of the UGCC and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I feel that if priests are supportive of this initiative, these types of gatherings would begin to bring forth obvious fruit within a year or two, and a positive stimulation to all aspects of parish life.
- I call our Christian families to the practice of morning and evening prayer. I especially encourage you to gather in your homes in prayer as a family each evening at 9:00 pm. The prayer could be for the needs of the family, the parish, the eparchy, for our entire Church, for peace in Ukraine and in the United States, for vocations to the religious life or for other intentions.
- I ask priests to frequently remind the faithful of the importance of personal prayer, especially the importance of prayer in daily life, and the benefits of cultivating a personal prayer regime at the very least the practice of morning and evening prayer, prayer before meals, and prayer before important life events. It is important also for family members to pray together at least once a day. This could be a family prayer at any time but perhaps best at the end of the day at 9:00 pm.
- I call upon priests to organize and prepare the parishioners for a 10 - 15 minute reading every Sunday in church immediately before the Divine Liturgy from the Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church (Christ, Our Pascha: Part 2) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Part 2). Each priest could determine the optimal way of doing this: either before or following the liturgy.
- I ask priests to apply maximum effort in organizing the liturgical services in such a way as to ensure as many faithful as possible take active part in them. It is necessary to develop a liturgical catechism and to continually explain the meaning and depth of the liturgical texts to the faithful.
- I propose to priests that excerpts from the Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church (Part 2) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Part 2) be included on parish websites, newspapers and bulletins throughout 2018-2019.
- I remind priests of their obligation to pray for their parish and to set a personal example for the parishioners of a life of prayer. Priestly service is a part of their “working day” during which they, as the faithful do in their daily work, adhere to rules and workplace discipline. Each priest in his daily personal examination of conscience must ask himself how closely he conforms to this. Are we often present in our place of work that is, in our parish church, doing our priestly work, that is, practicing personal and communal prayer?
- I ask priests and parishioners to focus not only on those who regularly attend church services, but also on those who, for whatever reason, do not attend church. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, we must constantly meditate upon what we must do to bring those who have fallen away back to God, as well as those who have never in their lives heard about the Good News of Jesus

Christ or who have never entered a church. What can we do, so that our common prayer and our liturgical services would interest them?

- Priests should constantly inquire of their parishioners regarding the reasons why members of their family, friends and acquaintances do not attend church services. Encourage them to think about the reasons for this situation, in hopes of understanding their problems, and their reluctance in attending liturgical services.

All of us, priests and faithful alike, are obligated to make a special effort in ensuring that personal and liturgical prayer has priority in the life of every parishioner. We must discover the authentic, central place of liturgical services in the life of the Church and teach everyone that personal and liturgical prayer can truly touch the heart, so that each would realize that he or she is a temple of God. Therefore, let us help everyone, and ourselves as well, in realizing a reform of heart. Reform requires first of all, a personal conversion; not merely a change of rubrics but a change of mentality in everyone from the bishop down to the smallest child. Let us always find the time for prayer and meditation upon the Word of God in self-sacrificing service to each other and trust in God!

May the blessing of the Lord be upon you!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Benedict". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross-like symbol at the beginning.

BENEDICT
Bishop of Saint Nicholas Eparchy