

# A Stupendous Event

Last month, when His Grace, Bishop Demetrius was with us for the Feast of St. Cosmas, he spoke of the Divine Liturgy as a stupendous event. Of all the events that occur in life at any time or in any place, the Divine Liturgy is the most amazing, the most awe-inspiring, and the most important. When we think of other events that occur, like an inauguration or a visit of a head of state or a wedding or a soccer game or a theatrical production or a special party—nothing can compare with the Divine Liturgy in its relevance to our lives. If we rated events from 1 to 100 in order of importance, the Liturgy would be no. 1, and the next event would be as low as 85 on the list. So when we decide which events to attend, for an Orthodox Christian the Divine Liturgy always takes precedence over everything else.

Bishop Demetrius said that among those attending the Divine Liturgy, some have little understanding of what is taking place while others are completely blown away by it. Why is this? Perhaps it is a function of how close one has drawn to our Saviour through prayer and how much one has taken thought concerning the Mystery.

Speaking of our Saviour's actual presence in the flesh at the Divine Liturgy, St. John Chrysostom says: "But He gives Himself to you not only to see, but also to touch and eat and receive within yourself. That which when angels behold, they tremble, and dare not so much as look at without awe on account of the brightness that comes from it—with this we are fed, with this we are comingled, and we are made one body and one flesh with Christ. We are joined both with each other and with Christ. . . .desiring to show the love which He has for us, . . .He has mixed Himself with us; He has kneaded His body with ours, that we might be . . . like a body joined to a head. What shepherd feeds his sheep with his own limbs? And why do I say shepherd? There are often mothers that after the travail of birth send out their children to other women to nurse. But He cannot bear to do this, but Himself feeds us with His own Blood, and by all means entwines us with Himself. He allows those who desire Him not only to see Him, but even to touch and eat Him, and fix their teeth in His flesh, and to embrace Him, and satisfy all their love. . . .but because the former nature of our flesh, which was fashioned out of the earth, had become deadened by sin and destitute of life, He brought in, one might say, another sort of dough and leaven, His own flesh, by nature indeed the same, but free from sin and full of life. And He gave all to partake thereof, that being nourished by this and laying aside the old dead material, we might be blended together into that which is living and eternal . . ." <sup>1</sup>[This is love indeed—that He Who is God becomes one flesh with us.]

We cannot progress in the spiritual life without this physical union with our Saviour. St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain<sup>2</sup> speaks of the necessity of receiving the Holy Mysteries as follows: "The Lord says imperatively, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you' (John 6:53) . These words make apparent that divine Communion is just as necessary for the Christian as Holy Baptism. For He used the same expression when speaking both about Baptism and about Communion. Concerning Baptism, He said: 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God' (John 3:5). And concerning divine Communion [He spoke as mentioned earlier]. Therefore, just as without Baptism it is impossible

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<sup>1</sup> Chrysostom's Homily XLVI on St. John.

<sup>2</sup> In *Concerning Frequent Communion of the Immaculate Mysteries of Christ* by St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite.

for one to live the spiritual life and be saved, it is impossible for one to live without divine Communion. But since [according to the Canons] these two have this difference, that Baptism is to occur but one time, while divine Communion is to occur frequently and daily, it is right to conclude that there are two requirements respecting divine Communion: one, that it is to be received; and the other that it is to be received frequently.”

## The Prayer Rope

Meditations of a Monk of the Holy Mountain <sup>3</sup>

Let us take a look at a typical prayer rope. It is black, the color of mourning and sorrow, and this reminds us to be sober and serious in our lives and always to keep death before our eyes. Repentant prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer, can bring us what the Holy Fathers call joy-making sorrow. We are sorry for our sins and our weaknesses and failings before God, our fellow men and ourselves; but in Christ, Who pours out His mercy and forgiveness on all who call upon His Name, this sorrow becomes a source of joy and comfort.

This prayer rope has been knotted from wool, that is, it has been sheared from a sheep, a reminder that we are rational sheep of the Good Shepherd, Christ the Lord, and also a reminder of the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The cross at the bottom of the prayer rope reminds us of our Saviour’s sacrifice—the victory of life over death, of humility over pride, of self-sacrifice over selfishness, of light over darkness. And the tassel? Well, you can use it to wipe away the tears from your eyes, or, if you have no tears, to remind yourself to weep because you cannot weep.

The story is told of a monk who decided to make knots in a rope in order to use them in carrying out his daily rule of prayer. But as fast as he could make the knots, the devil untied them, completely frustrating the monk’s efforts. Then an angel appeared and taught the monk a special kind of knot consisting of interlocked crosses, and these knots the devil was unable to unravel.

The prayer rope is one of the items given to an Orthodox Christian monk at the time of his tonsure. It is given to him as his spiritual sword with which he, as a soldier of Christ, will wage war against our enemy the devil. This sword is wielded by calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ with what is known as the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* Or in a shorter form: *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.* Or *By the prayers of the Most Holy Theotokos and all the Saints, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.*

When monks carry the prayer rope in their hands, it serves as a reminder of their obligation to pray unceasingly as instructed by the Apostle Paul. But the prayer rope is not intended to be used only by monks; it can also be used by any person who wants to learn to pray often to God. The prayer rope is an aid to us in offering our prayers secretly to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Portions of an article published in “*Agoritiki Martiria.*”

But one thing is extremely important. Before we start any rule of prayer, we must ask for the advice, the blessing and spiritual guidance of our spiritual father. Many times the Holy Fathers emphasized the importance of this so that we might avoid delusion and not stray from the true Orthodox path.

There are two ways we can pray using the prayer rope: 1) At the time of our regular prayer, when we pray the rule of prayer that our spiritual father has told us to follow (this may include prayers from the Prayer Book, reviewing the day and confessing our sins, praying in our own words, reading spiritual books, etc), we hold the prayer rope with the left hand between the thumb and index finger and move from knot to knot. At each knot we simultaneously do two things; with our right hand we make the sign of the Cross and we say the prayer "*Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.*" We go around the prayer rope as many times as our spiritual father has instructed. 2) At any time of the day when we have free time, without being seen by anyone, secretly, we hold the prayer rope in our left or right hand and move from knot to knot with our thumb whispering or meditating on the prayer "*Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me*" or "*most Holy Theotokos save us.*" Stealing these little pockets of time during the day and filling them with prayer can become a precious treasure that no one can take from us and one that is laid up for us in Heaven.

One can also combine bows or prostrations while using the prayer rope, and this physical action contributes to the fervor of our prayer and expresses our supplication as we humble ourselves before God. Many people use the prayer rope when they lie down to sleep. After signing their bed with the Cross, they take their prayer rope, cross themselves as they lie down and quietly pray with the prayer rope until they fall asleep. And waking up with the prayer rope still in your fingers or next to you on the pillow helps begin the new day with prayer.

The holy bishop St. Ignaty Brianchaninov mentions that the lengthy services of the Orthodox Church are also a good opportunity for praying with the prayer rope. Often there are times when it is difficult to concentrate on the words being read or chanted, and it is easier to concentrate quietly on the Jesus Prayer with the assistance of the prayer rope. In fact, St. Seraphim of Sarov said that it helps a person concentrate better on the service itself.

We are constantly occupied by all kinds of thoughts that appear in our heads, and it seems we no sooner start to pray than we catch ourselves thinking about something else. Here again, the physical presence of the prayer rope in our fingers can help us catch ourselves and return to our task of prayer more quickly. Or meeting up with one of the markers or with the cross on the prayer rope as we move it through our fingers, reminds us that we have been robbed of the prayers we intended to offer. And immediately we can offer our prayers anew without getting further entangled in our distracting thoughts.

Regarding constant prayer, in his sermon about sobriety and prayer, St. John Chrysostom says the following: "Brothers, be always occupied with mental prayer and do not move far away from God until you receive God's mercy and compassion. Never ask for anything but for His infinite mercy and this is enough for your salvation. When asking for His mercy, cry aloud in entreaty with humble and contrite heart from morning to night and, if possible, during the whole night, saying unceasingly, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'."