

Great Lent Giveaway 2011

Growing a Monastery

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Giveaway
2011

Benefitting
the Ukrainian
Orthodox
Church
Monastery
Initiative



Youth Group Session 3– Pray Without Ceasing – The Jesus Prayer

(Excerpts of this session are from the Pray Without Ceasing Curriculum written by Debra Burgan and Natalie Kapeluck Nixon 2006. The full Pray Without Ceasing Curriculum is available on-line at www.uoc youth.org)

After receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Apostles followed Jesus Christ's instructions to go out into the world to teach the Gospel. Much of the New Testament tells us about their work of starting Churches in cities they, especially Saint Paul, visited. Once a Church was started, Saint Paul would often send letters to remind the new Church of how Christians should live, to help them deal with problems they may be having, to help them stay strong, and to keep growing.

These letters gave such important advice, that we still read and listen to them today. When do you hear these letters read?

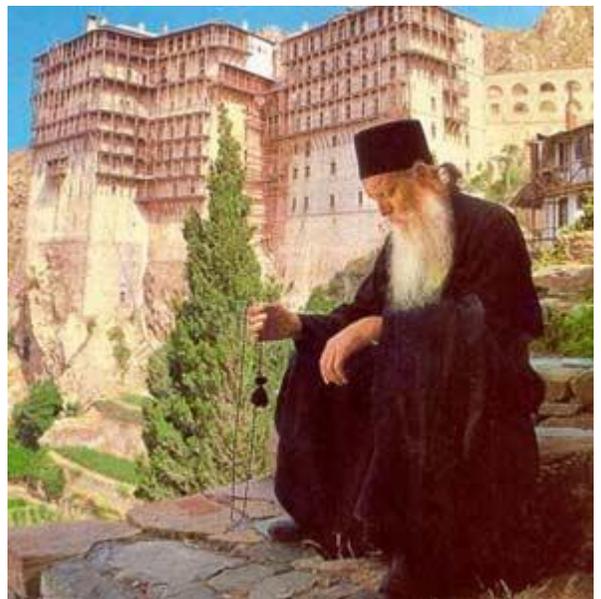
Do you know another word for letters like these?

The words “pray without ceasing” are from an epistle, which Saint Paul wrote to the Church in the city of Thessalonica.

What does “without ceasing” mean? What are some things that are happening ceaselessly right now?

Can you really do anything without ceasing? Well, you already do! Your brain never stops working, sending messages to every part of your body...that's why your heart beats and you keep breathing. What Saint Paul is really telling us is that prayer should be as much a part of our life as our own breath is.

Why breathing? We never stop breathing as long as our bodies are working. Even when we are asleep, our bodies know...without us telling it every second, to keep breathing in and out; steady and calm. Our prayer should be like breathing, our mind and heart praying – steady and calm, without being told to do so.



WHAT IS PRAYER?

First, let's talk about two things that prayer is NOT!

Prayer is NOT making a wish. Lots of people – adults and children – sometimes think that praying is almost the same as closing your eyes before you blow out the candles on your birthday cake! But prayer should never be confused with superstition or “luck.”

Prayer is also NOT “making a deal” with God...promising to “be good” or act a certain way if our prayer is answered the way we want it to be.



Can you think of why it would be foolish to think about prayer in these ways?

Now, let's start to learn what prayer really is!

Prayer is the language of our Faith.

From your very first words of baby-talk, language is one of the most important things you learn. Why do you think your family was so happy at your first words? How much more useful is your language today?

You probably know someone who didn't learn English as a child...maybe you spoke another language first. Depending on the age we learn a language, we may never be comfortable with it or think of it as our own, even after using it for many years. Many people continue to think and have dreams in their first language for their whole lives.

Language also grows as you do. As you've gotten older, you've gotten better at expressing yourself. If you think about prayer as a very special language used when talking to God, you can see how important it is to start learning when you are young. You must try to improve as you grow so you can express yourselves to God as the person you are.

There are two ways to get better at a language: to read and listen to it as it's used by more experienced people, and to use it yourself until you become comfortable. We want to make sure we will always be comfortable with the language of prayer and that it comes naturally to us.

You know by now that language can be one of our most useful tools, but it can also hurt or punish. God Himself shows us this in Holy Scripture. What is one time that God used our human language as a punishment?

When did He use it in a most helpful way? _____

Prayer is the way we communicate with God.

Spoken or written language is just one way we have of communicating. What's the difference between just talking and communicating? Do you always listen to people who are talking to you? Do you always hear what they are really saying?

If communicating were just talking, it would be just about impossible to “pray without ceasing!”

“Communicate” comes from a Latin word that means “common”; that grew into other words meaning “fellowship” and “to do something together.”

Can you think of any other words we use that come from the same base word? Give some time for answers.

How are they all related?

People can talk to themselves, but in order to really communicate four things are needed:

- A message
- Someone wanting to send the message
- A way to send the message
- Someone to receive the message



When we pray, we want to send a message to God. As we learn more about prayer, we’ll talk more about what the message might be and ways God has given us, through His Church, to send our message. The most important thing to remember right now is that **GOD IS ALWAYS READY TO RECEIVE OUR MESSAGE.**

We use spoken language to pray but there are other ways we send our message.

We use our bodies and faces to communicate silently every day, sometimes without thinking about it or realizing we are doing so. We call this “body language.” Sometimes our body language shows the world what we really mean, even if our words say something else!

Another way we communicate is through our attitudes and actions. What if you’ve been asked to do chores at home but you go off with your friends instead? Or you may do the chores, just not as well as you could have, or with lots of pouty body language. What are you communicating? What if you ask someone older to help you with a difficult math problem and they explain it to you while they sigh out loud and roll their eyeballs, how do you feel?

Remember, actions sometimes speak louder than words!

Our body language, our attitudes and our actions are very important ways we communicate. When we use them to communicate love to those around us and to do our best at all times, we show God that we are living as He wants us to and that we are thankful for all He has given us. They help us to “pray without ceasing.”

How does this relate to Orthodox Monastic Life?

Within the Holy Orthodox Church monastics devote their entire lives to praying without ceasing. Men are monks; women are nuns. Monastics give up the worldly life, so that they can dedicate themselves entirely to God through prayer, fasting, obedience, and good works. You may be thinking that we all are taught to pray, fast, obey, and do good works, and you’re right. But monks and nuns work hard to perform these spiritual tasks constantly and more strongly than we can. They fast more often and more strictly than we do, they obey the will of God by humbly obeying their spiritual elders. They may teach or

care for the sick or needy, and they pray for us, even when we “forget:” or are too tired or are “too busy” or just can’t find the words within ourselves.

Prayer is the first and most important job of the monastery. Monks and nuns spend several hours a day in church, praying the services of the Church. They also spend time in personal prayer. They work to master prayer without ceasing by learning to pray in their hearts at all times. Many monastics are able to pray the Jesus Prayer in this way, repeating it hundreds of time.

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

You may think that giving up worldly responsibilities and living in a religious community makes it easier for monastics to concentrate on prayer. But actually, their task may often be more difficult. They still have many of the same responsibilities and problems that we all face. Can you think of another problem that would affect the life of a monastery?

Many, many great saints of the Church have come from the monastic life. When we pray, we should always remember these men and women of God who keep us in their prayers constantly.

A special tool used by monastics to focus their prayers is a prayer rope. We may also use this tool in our own personal prayer life. Prayer ropes are not to be worn as jewelry or to “show” people that we pray. They are personal tools that guide us.

Final Thought from the Church Fathers: Prayer is a conversation directly with God, being always with God, having one's soul united with Him and one's mind inseparable. A person becomes one with the angels and unites with them in perpetual praise and longing for God.
-St. Symeon of Thessaloniki

