

## The Prayers for the Dead

The Orthodox Church has always had and kept in its worship prayers for the sleeping. That is why it is the duty of those who remain in life to pray in the communion of love for those who are asleep, that God may show His mercy and forgiveness towards them. According to this teaching, the cult of remembering the dead has developed in our Church. In the past centuries, no one has questioned this teaching and this practice among Romanians, all knowing and feeling that this has always been part of the teaching and practice of the Church, being based on Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.

The cult of the dead must be kept as a precious treasure, but the people should know that the prayers for those who are asleep also have an order of importance: the Holy Mass, the service of requiem (Parastasis) in which the central place is occupied by the prayers of release said by the priest, followed by the private prayers for the sleeping and all forms of almsgiving.

Those who, in their proselytizing, seek to cause the righteous believers to abandon the cult of the dead, and with it the ancestral faith, criticize this cult, based, they say, in texts from the Holy Scripture. It is thus claimed that, for the sleeping one, his life is sealed and his condition is decided definitively by God. So it can no longer be an intervention or a change in his existence. The texts invoked are the following: **And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us**" (Luke 16:26); "And the door was shut" (Parable of the 10 Virgins, Matthew 25: 1-13). "What He destroys, no one builds again, and no one who closes it can open it" (Job 12:14. See also Isaiah 22:22; Revelation 3: 7). Did God strengthen the abyss, did God close the door? Is it true that no one can close the abyss or open the door, except God, can someone stop God from doing this? To think so would be to deny the omnipotence of God. God has always been more merciful and forgiving than righteous. God can do as much as He wants, but He does not want as much as He can. God's mercy does not contradict His justice, nor does it destroy it, for man is the creature of His hands, and the crown of creation. The texts quoted above are a praise of God's omnipotence. They do not contradict the prayers of the living for those who have passed into eternity so that God may improve them through His love, in response to the love of those who pray for the sleeping, for their eternal existence. Also, those who pray for the sleeping know that it is not by their own power that the existence of those moved to the Lord can be changed for the better, but by the mercy and omnipotence of God.

Another category of scriptural texts invoked, which seeks to combat prayer for the dead, is this: "The night is coming when no one can work" (John 9: 4). "It is not the one who mentions You who is dying. And in hell who will praise you?" (Psalm 6: 5). "Will you work miracles for the dead? Or will the dead rise and praise You?" (Psalm 87, 11. See also Psalm 113, 25; Isaiah 38, 18; Acts 13, 36). We notice from all these scriptural texts that it is not a question of the prayer of the living for the dead, but of the fact that the dead can no longer change their situation through their own efforts. This has always been the teaching of the Church, but those who bring these texts back into discussion do so only to confuse the ignorant.

Then some Old Testament texts are brought into discussion to show that it is forbidden to touch the dead and therefore it is not appropriate to give him any honor. " **Whoever touches a human corpse will**

**be unclean for seven days.**" (Numbers 19:11). "Thou shalt not go into the house of mourning, neither shalt thou go to mourn nor weep; for I have taken away from my people My peace, mercy, and repentance, saith the Lord. And the great and the small shall die in this land, and they shall not be buried... The bread of mourning shall not be broken for them as a comfort for the dead, nor shall the cup of comfort be given to them to drink after their father and mother." (Jeremiah 16: 5-7). We notice in the first text that it is a sanitary prescription, but which does not prevent the bodies of the dead from being touched. Otherwise who would have buried the dead? (See in this sense: I Kings 31, 13; II Kings 2, 5-6; III Kings 17, 19 ff.). From the second text invoked we realize the working method of those who proselytize. They take truncated texts from Holy Scripture, without context, only to confuse the weak and make them leave the Church. Thus the above-mentioned text is clarified by context (See: Jeremiah 16: 10-11). The misfortune spoken of is foretold because the Jewish people had forsaken God and worshiped idols. The text talks about breaking the bread of mourning and about the cup of mercy. So it was the custom of the Jews to set a memorial table for the dead. But at the same time they foreshadow and foretell the Holy Liturgy, with the Holy Sacrifice, which is performed for both the living and the dead.

By using another category of scriptural texts, those who are against praying for the dead want to persuade us that any intervention by us to help the dead is useless, because only their deeds matter. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the flesh, whether good or evil" (II Corinthians 5:10). "For God returns to man according to his deeds, and treats every man according to his ways" (Job 34:11). "The power is of God and of You. Lord, be merciful, for thou wilt reward every man according to his works" (Psalm 61:11). "Knowing this, that he is a servant, or a master, that he may do the good works of the Lord, he shall receive them" (Ephesians 6: 8).

I spoke above that God's mercy does not exclude His justice, but neither does justice abolish His mercy. Through the scriptural texts we are urged to behave in such a way that our deeds are good. Divine grace also contributes to our good deeds (Philippians 4:13). So, salvation is also a gift of God, given to those who work hard for good. Therefore, in every work of ours, we must keep in mind the justice of God, because we certainly need His mercy in all our lives. No matter how hard he lives and struggles, man cannot do all things for his salvation, unless he is helped by grace, given by God as a gift. But if we trusted only in the mercy of God and said, as some do, "we must sin, that God may have forgiveness," we would fall into the sin of too much trust in God, a sin against the unforgiving Holy Spirit.

That God did otherwise than show His righteousness, we see it in the example of the workers of the eleventh hour, in the Parable of the Workers in the Vine (Matthew 20: 1-15), and in the example of the thief on the cross (Luke 23:41-43). Were they rewarded for their deeds or for God's mercy? We understand, therefore, that the texts invoked above show God's justice, but do not exclude God's mercy. To those who do not want the dead to benefit from God's mercy, the question of the Lord of the vineyard to the workers who were dissatisfied suits them: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Or is your eye evil, because I am good?" (Matthew 20:15). In the same sense, the Savior also expresses himself regarding the dead: "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will" (John 5:21). So the texts invoked by those who are against prayers for the sleeping, do not stop the connection of the love that must exist between the living and the sleeping. Finally, there is another category of texts that warns us not to trust people in salvation.

No healthy Christian mind could claim that one man can save another or bring him out of hell. It would also be totally wrong to think that someone can do anything in life, because the prayers of their descendants will bring them out of their torments. On the one hand, one falls into the sin of too much trust in God's mercy, a sin against the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, there is a practical problem: along with that sinner, his descendants can die and then he has no one to pray for him. But the help received by the one asleep from those in life, from the Church, does not come as an obligation or as a response to a commandment, but is a gift of love. Then the intercession of the Church goes to God, to lead Him to mercy and forgiveness for those who are asleep. The relationship is not between the living believer and the sleeping one, but between the Christian and the Church in Christ.

The Church's teaching on prayer for the sleeping is well expressed even in the apostolic age. In the following centuries, the Holy Fathers bring numerous testimonies regarding the clarification of this truth. We mention Saints John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Ephraim the Syrian, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, John of Damascus, Simeon of Thessalonica. But we will refer only to the Holy Scripture; those who reject the cult of the dead also reject the Holy Tradition.

We have shown above that the scriptural texts used by those who reject prayers for the sleeping are misinterpreted. In our answer we must take into account the following aspects of the problem:

1. Christ reigns over all, over the living and over the sleeping.
2. As an emperor, he is omnipotent in His kingdom, and in His love He is merciful to all.
3. The Church and Christians, in particular, do not claim the right to change through their own work the torments of hell, but through the Holy Mass, resolutions, prayers and acts of mercy, all based on solidarity and love among all Christians, on the Right Judge to grant mercy and forgiveness towards those condemned, temporarily, so until the Last Judgment.
4. Jesus Christ assured the Church that the intercession and prayers of priests and believers would be fulfilled.

1. Stopping at the first aspect of our answer, we quote the truth so beautifully and clearly summarized by the Holy Apostle Paul: "For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So even if we live and if we die we belong to the Lord. For, to this end Christ both died, and rose, and resurrected, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living" (Romans 14: 8-9). To this we add the following texts: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:23). "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for all live in Him" (Luke 20:38; Mark 12: 26-27). "In the name of Jesus all the knees should bow, of the heavenly, of the earthly, and of those below. And let all the tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2: 10-11). He sacrificed Himself for the sins of all men, that is, of all over whom He rules, whether alive or asleep: "He has given Himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2: 6). "He is the atonement for our sins, but not only for ours, but for the whole world" (1 John 2: 2; Colossians 1:20; John 1:29). So, Christ reigns over all, living and asleep, and His sacrifice was given to all, alive and sleeping.

2. It would be pointless to ask whether God can change the condition of those he rules over. God is omniscient and omnipotent. But for those who will answer precisely from the Holy Scriptures, we show them what they actually know, but do not want to say, that Christ can change for the better the condition of those in hell: "The Lord kills and rises; He descends into hell and is taken out again" (1 Kings 2: 6; Deuteronomy 32: 39). "O Lord, thou hast delivered my soul from hell; thou hast delivered me from

them that go down into the pit" (Psalm 29: 3). "But the Lord shall deliver my soul from the power of hell, when it shall take hold of me" (Psalm 48:16). "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and have the keys of death and of hell" (Revelation 1:18). "Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in the world to come" (Matthew 12:32).

We deduce from this last text that only sins against the Holy Spirit are not forgiven, because those who commit them definitively refuse salvation. These sins are: too much trust in God's goodness (Romans 2: 4-5; James 2: 6); distrust or despair of receiving God's help (Genesis 4:13; Matthew 27: 4-5); heresy (John 9, 40-41); apostasy; the envy of fraternal grace and repentance to the death.

We understand that other sins can be forgiven. When? Either in this age or in the age to come. And if in the next age, that is, after the soul has departed from the body, no one can work for its salvation; it means that this forgiveness of sins is done by the King Christ at the prayer of the Church. Holy Scripture also gives us some examples when the Savior Jesus Christ intervened and changed, temporarily or permanently, the condition of some dead people in hell. Until the Sacrifice and the resurrection of the Lord, all who died went to hell. In the Old Testament conception, death actually meant going to hell (Genesis 37:35). Thus, the Savior took Moses' soul out of hell for a short time, at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17: 3). Christ raises Lazarus for the prayer of his sisters (John 11: 41-44); he raises the daughter of Jairus for the prayer of his father (Luke 8, 41-56), and the son of the widow of Nain for the tears of his mother (Luke 7, 11-16). To all of them, he changed the state of their souls after the second death, for their death would take place after the victory of the Savior Jesus Christ over hell and death. They would no longer go to hell at first, but to happiness, especially since the Savior Jesus Christ himself had intervened in their lives,

3. Believing that the Great King, Lord Jesus Christ, can change the condition and life of men, both during this life and after leaving this life (as evidenced by the above scriptural grounds), the Church prays in the spirit of love for those asleep. We say again that the Orthodox Church has never claimed that only through the power of priests, or only through prayer and good deeds, can souls be taken out of hell. The Orthodox Church recognizes that "One is the Mediator" (I Timothy 2: 5) and the Church prays to Him for mercy and forgiveness. The Church does this "because in one spirit we have all been baptized into one body... And if one member suffers, all members suffer together and if one member is honest, all members rejoice together. And ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (I Corinthians 12, 13 and 26-27).

Behold, as the Apostle so clearly states, the Church always has moments of joy for the saints and the righteous, her members of honor, but she also always has moments of pain for her members of suffering. Those in suffering are also members of the Church, because they were baptized in the spirit, just like us. That is why we work hard for them in love, and "love never fails" (I Corinthians 13: 8). By loving and helping our fellow men as brothers in whatever situation they may be, we have the courage to look up to heaven and call God "our Father." And the Christian virtue of love has not been given a measure or a limit. The Apostle of love says the same thing clearly: "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren; whoever does not love his brother abides in death" (I John 3:14).

The Holy Mass, the bloodless continuation over the centuries of the Sacrifice of Golgotha, is "the price of redemption for all" (I Timothy 2: 6; I John 2: 2). As we see, the Holy Scriptures give us so many

justifications to pray for those who are asleep, trusting us that our prayers, culminating in the Holy Mass, will be fulfilled. If the Church did not pray for the sleeping, it would lose its community character, it would lose its horizontality, it would eradicate to some extent the Sacrifice of Christ.

4. We showed above that the greatest help we can give to those asleep through the mercy and forgiveness of Christ is the Holy Mass. During the Holy Mass we make them partakers of the Holy Sacrifice of Christ. And if this sacrifice has been made for everyone and the Holy Mass is the best time when our prayers are heard, we must always ask for mercy and forgiveness for the dead. The unveiling prayers made by the priests in the ordained services for the dead have their scriptural basis even in the words of the Savior Jesus Christ: "in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). We do understand that the church hierarchy does not do this through its own human power, but through the power and all-encompassing of Christ. "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:20).

In their particular prayers, Christians pray for the happy rest of the souls of their parents, relatives and fellows. And if the prayers are made with warmth and tears, they are heard like the prayer of Jairus, of the sisters of Lazarus, like the tears of the widow of Nain. Our prayers made in faith will be fulfilled by God, for He has assured us that "All things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Matthew 21:22).

Also for those who are asleep, wishing God to pour out His mercy and forgiveness on them, we also perform acts of almsgiving - alms for the soul of the dead, an expression of Christian mercy: to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to dress the naked, examine the sick, receive the stranger, etc. (Matthew 25, 34-36). And the Apostle exhorts the Gentiles to do this: "Do not forget to do good and share what you have, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16; II Corinthians 9: 7-15).

From the above it appears that:

- a. The Holy Scripture does not stop prayers for the dead but, on the contrary, urges the Church to pray and to accomplish community deeds, in love.
- b. Christ reigns over the living and the sleeping and, as king of kings, can change the situation of anyone, alive or asleep. He is a righteous emperor, but also merciful.
- c. Both the hierarchy and the believers have confidence in the Holy Scriptures, that all their prayers, and therefore those for the dead, are heard and fulfilled.

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