

A Cold & Shriveled Heart

There is a pernicious idea floating about that faith and feelings go hand-in-hand, invariably. Allow me to explain. As an Orthodox priest, I occasionally hear people say that they cannot pray unless the right kinds of feelings are attendant—as when someone says, “I pray when God moves my heart. But when I feel empty on the inside I cannot pray. So, I wait until my heart is full again and my mind is focused so that my prayer might not be so pretentious.”

Honesty is a good thing: “Here’s the way I feel, and I can’t feel otherwise.” But there are some serious problems with this having to do with the very nature of prayer itself. Pretentious means fake. False. Artificial. Costume jewelry is pretentious. The Hope Diamond is not. The Hope Diamond stands in everyone’s mind as emblematic of all that a gem could ever be. But the difficulty in our prayer is that our moods, even the very best of our moods, are—sorry to say—just like costume jewelry. This is the assumption that the prayer God loves the most is when our minds, hearts, and wills are all in sync, when the words of our praise can be sounded forth from a thankful and Spirit-filled heart. “Great are You O Lord, and marvelous are your works, and there is no word which is sufficient to hymn Your Wonders!”

Yet those who have ever taken up the lifelong fight for prayer learn very quickly that feelings are unimportant to the task. No correlation exists between the height of our feelings and the quality of our prayer. Undoubtedly there will be occasions when the praying heart experiences “the heavens opening up” as did St. Stephen while being stoned (Acts 7:56). But the reality is that our prayer is an oscillating and motley mix of ups and downs, of happinesses and hurts, of God’s tender touch and His hidden absence. Genuine prayer is never static, but a flux involving all emotional states. The Book of Psalms is the Church’s gift to us of the right prayer for each and every condition of the human heart.

Inherent to this oscillating inner flux is the long and extended periods (months and years) when our prayer feels empty and lifeless. And the temptation here is to give up and go on with our lives as merry unbelievers, concluding that the endeavor of faith (in our youth) was all a massive ruse. But the saints each witness that the Lord in His wisdom purposefully sends us these times of "spiritual famine" so that we might learn humility, patience, and not least the lesson of how the Lord is fully sensitizing our hearts to the soft and subtle touch of the Holy Spirit.

During these times of soul-famine, Psalm 133 teaches us about "the dew that falls on Mt. Hermon (Ps. 133:3), meaning that when there is no rain, we glean the "dew from heaven" in order to stay alive. Yes, we will feel thirsty, parched, and panting for the rivers of God's grace. But in these dry and arid times, we learn that the Lord gives us these "little drops" of grace to keep us alive until the heavens open again and the heart becomes a well overflowing with the "living water" of the Holy Spirit (John 7:38).

Prayer thus becomes the test of everything. "For if our prayer is right, then everything is right," says St. Theophan the Recluse. But how sad it is that there are so many who were given the gift of the Holy Spirit in their youth yet failed the test in the desert of adulthood.

Unceasing prayer means praying no matter how we feel, fully or empty, happy or sad. The Lord loves those who endure times of hardship. The Lord loves those who stand before Him and pray, "Lord Jesus, all I have to give you today is a cold and shriveled heart. Forgive me my lack of faith and restore my heart with your grace."

Even so, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

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