



The Power of a Mother's Prayer

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As someone who studies motherhood and theology and who has five children myself, fellow Orthodox mothers often ask me if I can point them to prayers for mothers for their children, since few of our prayer books include prayers on this subject. While I do have a few prayers I pass on, I also recommend that they read Saint John Chrysostom's thoughts on prayer and motherhood.

Saint John of the fourth century is a frequent source for reflection on family life in the twenty-first. His reverence for family rings clear across the centuries, and this is true especially in his appreciation for motherhood. Saint John elevated motherhood to something beyond the mundane, daily care of children and into the realm of spiritual significance. Directing his remarks at mothers, he said, "I mean, the children being born, provided they receive proper care and are brought up to virtue by your attention, prove a basis and occasion of complete salvation for you; and in addition to your own virtuous acts you will receive a great reward for your care of them" (Homily on Hannah, Old Testament Homilies by Robert Hill). Thus Chrysostom saw motherhood as a salvific opportunity, as a vocation that can lead to the heavenly reward.

Saint John was particularly moved by the vision of motherhood he saw in Hannah, the mother of Prophet Samuel in the Old Testament (1 Samuel 1-2). He admired the power of Hannah's spontaneous prayer when she visited the temple eager to have a child. He wrote of the intensity of the prayer she prayed in her quest for motherhood and in her later dedication of her child to the Lord.

In praising Hannah's spontaneous prayer, Saint John contrasted it with more typical, less mindful prayer: "I mean, while we all pray, we do not all do it before the Lord: when the body is lying on the ground and the mouth is babbling on, and the mind wandering through all parts of the house and the market place, how will such people be in a position to claim that they prayed before the Lord?" (Homily on Hannah, Old Testament Homilies by Robert Hill)

In short, Hannah provides the model for all types of prayer, not just a mother's prayer. Most prayer is half-hearted, barely present, whereas Hannah's prayer is fully present, felt in her body and her soul. Yet, Saint John also saw a special role for prayer by mothers. His specific instruction to mothers is that they should consecrate their children through prayer. As a mother and a theologian, I find this to be an important reminder of the importance of my prayers for my own children.

Though the Orthodox Church lacks many composed prayers for mothers, and though the addition of such prayers would be welcome, Hannah's tale shows that mothers have taken prayers for their children into their own hands for millennia—and that the Church has celebrated this initiative. This is why I point mothers to Saint John: he reminds us that our spontaneous prayers as mothers are powerful on their own. Whatever words we choose, it is our sacred responsibility as mothers to bless and consecrate our children by praying for them.