



I LIFT UP MY EYES

Pastoral Reflections of Bishop Kurt



SEVEN TIMES A DAY

land that was lost for financial reasons was returned to its original owners as determined by tribes and families.

In the last book of the Bible, Saint John writes seven letters to seven churches. With the number seven appearing in the first and last book of the Christian Bible, its status was secure, and Christians began to find the number seven in many places. For example, the western Christians systemized morality with seven deadly sins and seven correlative virtues. Actually, there were eight deadly sins in the writings of the Eastern monks, but the West modified the list to fit the number seven. In the Book of Proverbs (in the Bible) there is a verse that says, "There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him." Of course, moral writers use that verse to support the seven deadly sins idea, although the list in Proverbs doesn't quite match the list popular today.

We also think of the seven sacraments, or as we say, the seven sacramental mysteries. Even within the mysteries, for blessing the oil of the anointing of

to learn that the number seven was not always fixed for the sacraments. Even in the second millennium there were writers with different numbers, though the number seven was fixed by a council in 1215 AD. Before that council, some considered the anointing of a king to be a sacrament, or the profession of a monk.

Although people look for seven things in the scriptures and in the traditions of our Faith, one place that the number seven is explicit in the Bible is in the longest psalm. King David says, "Seven times a day I praise You for Your righteous decrees." The first monks took this rule from the great psalm to mean that they should schedule seven times each day for formal prayers. In fact, Hippolytus enjoined the duty to pray seven times a day on the early Christians around the end of the second century which is over a hundred years before the first monks. Exactly when the seven times should occur was open to interpretation. In a different verse of the same great psalm, King David says, "At midnight I rise to praise you,

pels, there are many times that our Lord prayed, and no specific number can be assigned. There are times when the Gospel tells us that Jesus prayed, but doesn't tell us what He said, and then there are several times when the Gospel tells us His words.

The first time that we hear about Jesus praying is at His Baptism. According to Saint Luke, the skies were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended, and the voice of God was heard, "when Jesus had been baptized and was praying." Saint Luke also tells us that when the crowds grew too great, "He withdrew to the wilderness and prayed." Also, at the beginning of His public ministry, Saint Mark tells us that Jesus got up in the morning before everyone else and went out in the wilderness to pray. Saint Peter and the others went looking for Him, and when they found Him, they said, "Everyone is looking for You." He responded by setting out for other places. In three of the four Gospels, Jesus goes up on a mountain or hill to pray before His great miracle of walking on the water. Speaking of going up in the hills to pray, Saint Luke tells us that Jesus went up to pray all night in the hills, and then when He came down, He appointed the Twelve. That must have been an agonizing night of prayer because He knew the plan of the Father that Judas would hand Him over for His passion and death, and even more painful, that Judas was destined to be lost. As we sing in our hymns for Good Friday, "Take heed, all you lovers of money. Love of silver drove a man to take his own life."

A few chapters later, Saint Luke tells us that Jesus was praying in a secluded place with His disciples when He asked the big question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Christ of God." About eight days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John up a mountain to pray, and that was when the Transfiguration happened. Some time later, Saint Luke tells us that Jesus was praying and when He finished, the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Then Jesus taught them the "Our Father" or "the Lord's Prayer". Did you know that there are two different versions of the "Our Father" in the Gospels? The version in Saint Matthew is the one everyone knows from the Sermon on the Mount. Almost no one can recite the one in Saint Luke's Gospel by heart.

One of the most solemn mentions of prayer is at the Last Supper. Jesus promises Saint Peter, I have prayed for you so that your faith will not fail, because, Jesus warns, Satan has demanded to have you to sift you like wheat. As Catholics, we are comforted knowing that Jesus prayed for the faithfulness, not only of Peter himself but of his successors. Jesus already told Saint Peter, "Upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Nevertheless, Jesus prayed for Saint Peter in order to actualize His promise. Although every prayer is important, this prayer of Jesus reverberates through thousands of years into our own day. With storms raging in the ocean of modern life, we are careful

The number seven seems to have a mystical significance in our religion. From the beginning, God made the cosmos in seven days. He rested on the seventh day and ordered us to do likewise. It is a strange phenomenon that the most appealing of all the ten commandments, the seventh, is the one that people are the most determined to break. The number seven appears in other places in the scriptures, for example, the seven-branched candlestick that was an important ornament of the tent that contained the Ark of the Covenant. The golden seven-branched candlestick is described in great detail by God in His instructions to Moses. Although the original was lost, no doubt, when the Ark was also lost, the Jews made sure that a replacement was in the Temple up until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Romans memorialized the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem on a victory arch in the city of Rome, and you can see with your own eyes the victory procession including the seven-branched candlestick. In our own churches, we follow many of the artistic prescriptions of the Old Testament, and you probably have a seven-fold candle on or behind the altar in your parish church. When God gave instructions for the construction of the first seven-branched candle stick, many of the details are based on the almond tree. The almond tree also appears elsewhere in scripture, partly because of a pun in Hebrew, and another interesting topic could be the trees in the scriptures—perhaps on another day.

Because of the seven-day week, with a day of rest at the end, God also ordered that the land be allowed to rest after six years of harvest. The Chosen People were commanded to let the land rest for one year out of seven. With our knowledge of chemistry, we can understand now why soil becomes depleted. Our ancestors weren't stupid—they also could see that soil became depleted although they didn't understand the reason. In any case, the people did not follow the admonition of God, and tried to get as much as possible from the land. God says that the reason that he exiled His people to Babylon for seventy years was to make up for the amount of time that they neglected to let the land rest. The Hebrews were not only ordered to let the land rest every seventh year, but after the seventh sabbath year, that is, the forty ninth year, came the Year of Jubilee. So, every fiftieth year was the Jubilee, when debts were forgiven and



"The prayer of a righteous man has great power and effect. Elijah was a man like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit". James 5:16-17

the sick, there are seven epistle readings, seven gospels, and seven prayers after the scripture readings for seven priests. A friend of mine used to joke that the reason Eastern Europeans live such a long time is because it is so difficult to get seven priests together for the anointing. You might be surprised

because of your righteous ordinances." Because of this verse, many Slavs have the custom of getting up in the middle of the night to pray and do prostrations.

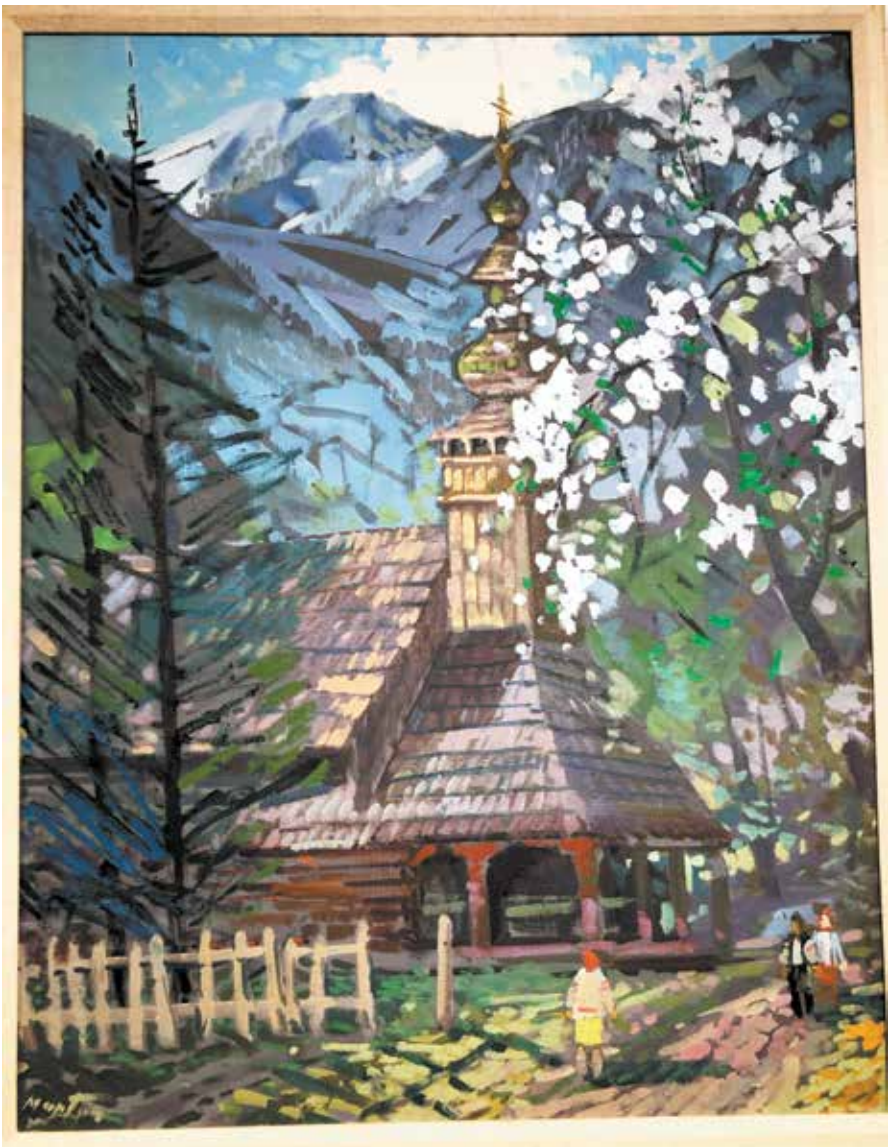
Although the number seven is associated with Christian prayers, how many times did Jesus pray? In the four Gos-

to stay in the boat of Peter and try not to get too close to the side lest we are swept overboard. We have two promises from Jesus that this captain will not lose his ship. There is no promise of salvation if we get on another boat, and even Saint Paul warns of some who “made shipwreck of their faith”.

Although many of the prayers of Jesus must have been painful, the Gospels tell us that He prayed especially during the night before His arrest. He must have thought about each of us and all of our sins for which He would die the next day. In order to get through it, He must have also thought about how very much He loves you and about your beauty and joy in heaven after salvation. Saint Luke the Physician tells us that Jesus was in such agony that He began to sweat drops of blood, and that the Father sent an angel to comfort Him in His sorrow.

Some of the words of Jesus’ prayers in the Garden are recorded by Saint Matthew. In fact, Saint Matthew records them twice, “My Father, if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me, nevertheless, not my will, but your will be done.” And the second time, “My Father, if this cannot pass without my drinking from it, your will be done.” In addition to praying in the Garden, Jesus also spoke to his disciples and said, “Can’t you pray with me for one hour?” It is from these words that the custom came about of praying for one hour in the presence of the Holy Sacrament. Bishop Fulton Sheen did much to promote this practice and I also recommend it to anyone who has the opportunity. Though if you cannot pray in a Church for one hour a day, you can still spend one hour a day with Christ in the Scriptures.

In His final hours, our Lord prayed several times that are recorded in the Scriptures. In His last agony, some of the Lord’s most comforting words are spoken. He said to the repentant thief, “Truly I say to you, this day you will be with Me in paradise.” And Saint Luke also says that He prayed on the cross, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” If Jesus prayed for our forgiveness on the Cross, what do we have to fear? The last two things that Jesus said are both quotes from the Book of Psalms, from the inspired prayers of His ancestor King David. In two of the Gospels, Saint Matthew and Saint Mark, Jesus quotes from Psalm 21 (22), “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” People who don’t read the scriptures for themselves read this as a cry of despair. But if you read the whole psalm for yourself, you will find something else. The Psalm contains prophetic details about Christ’s passion, including, “They divided my garments among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.” Even though Jesus only quotes the first lines, He expected His hearers to know the Psalm themselves. After the darkness, Psalm 21(22) opens up into to a world of light and joy. And feasting, too—it is the psalm we quote when we bless our food. After describing the triumph of good over evil, the Psalm concludes, “Posterity shall serve him. Men shall tell of the Lord to the coming genera-



tion and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn.” Indeed, this Psalm is an exuberant prophecy about Jesus’ conquest of death and even of our celebration of the Resurrection now two thousand years later.

In Saint Luke’s Gospel, Jesus also ends His earthly life with a quote from the psalms of his ancestor King David, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” The rest of the verse says, “you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” Even in His dying body, Jesus gave us an example of praying, and especially praying from the Scriptures. King David said, “Seven times a day I will praise you,” and “at midnight I rise to praise you”. Jesus gave us the example of praying and especially praying from the Scriptures until His last breath. His prayers from His last days, can be our prayers throughout our lives as well, “My Father, not My will but Yours be done. And also, “Into your hands, I commend my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”

+Kurt Burnett

Left: Faithful at wooden church in the Carpathian Mountains. Oil painting from the Eparchy of Passaic Heritage Center.

Bishop Kurt Presents New Stipend Campaign to aid Ruthenian Priests in Ukraine

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