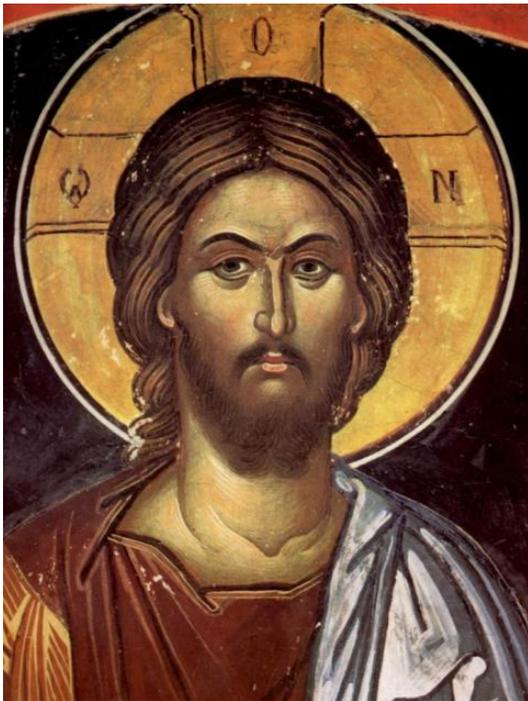


## *Tuning the Heart to God: Practicing the Jesus Prayer*

It was about 2:30 in the morning when I got out of bed last night to pray. I have been doing this since I was pregnant with my first baby, decades ago; I had read somewhere that the middle of the night was a good time to have your daily prayers, with silence before and silence afterward, and no phones to ring. I thought it sounded like a good habit to establish, since I'd be getting up with the baby anyway. Over the years there were three babies, and eventually three teenagers, and now three young-marrieds with babies of their own. Now the household is down to my husband and me again. All these years I've been getting up in the night to pray. It's a necessity now, and I need it like I need food and light.

About fifteen years ago I started to use the Jesus Prayer during these mid-night hours: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." This very simple prayer was



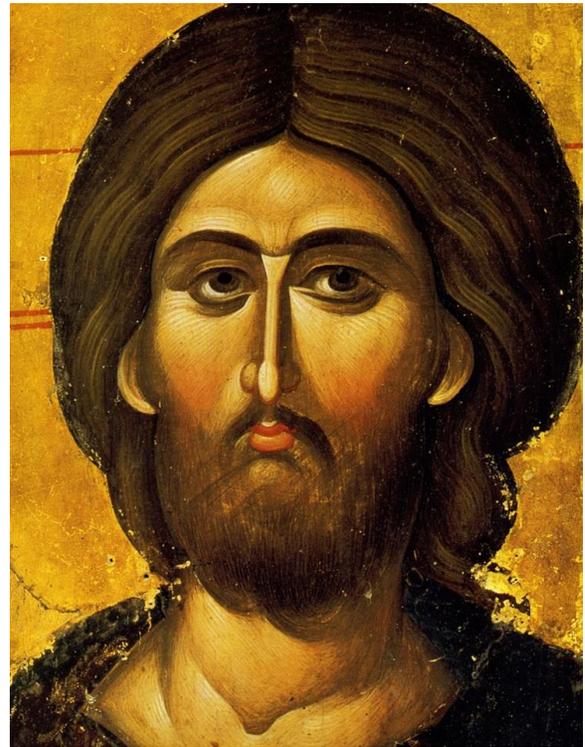
developed in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine during the early centuries of Christian faith, and has been practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Church ever since. It is a prayer inspired by St. Paul's exhortation to "pray constantly" (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*), and its purpose is to tune one's inner attention to the presence of the Lord. But what is that nameless thing, the "inner attention"? When we talk about feeling God's presence, we're accustomed to speak as if such experiences arose from our emotions. Yet when I had my rather dramatic conversion experience, decades ago, it sure seemed more objective than that. At the time, the best way I could describe it was to say that "a little radio switched on inside me," and I became aware of Christ speaking to me. (It wasn't something I heard with my ears,

but by an inner voice, filling my awareness.) I never knew what to make of that "little radio"; it didn't fit our familiar division of people into "head" and "heart." But as I began to read the literature of Eastern Christianity, I found that they were familiar with this "little radio." They even had a word for it: the *nous*. It's a word that recurs throughout the Greek New Testament, but we don't have a good equivalent in English. It gets translated "mind," but it doesn't mean the talkative mind, the one that cogitates and constructs theories. It is a receptive capacity of the intellect; we could call it "the understanding" or "the comprehension." The Eastern Church has always known that the *nous* can be trained to register, or perceive, the voice of God.

That is where the Jesus Prayer comes in. The idea is to spend some time every day practicing the Prayer. You pray it fifty or a hundred times, or more, or less; not robotically but sincerely, speaking to Christ while pulling together your attention to the best of your ability. You get the Prayer going other times, too, whenever you think of it, while waiting at a stoplight or brushing your teeth. This brief, all-purpose, very portable prayer takes root and spreads. In the process, you hone your ability to discern God's presence. He is already there, of course; we just aren't very good at perceiving it. Practicing the Jesus Prayer helps you sharpen your ability to "tune in" to his presence, just as you would practice scales to hone your ability to identify musical pitch.

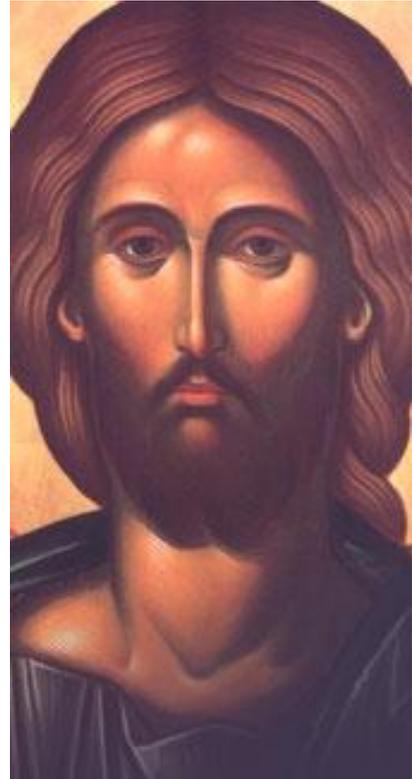
So last night I awoke, as usual, without an alarm—sometime in the middle of the night I

just swim up to consciousness. I went out into the hallway and stood on the worn spot in the carpet, in front of the bookcase, and looked up at the icon of Christ. A blue light was slanting in the window from my study, filtering between the large, heart-shaped leaves of the catalpa tree. Our street, a simple curve on a hilltop, was still. Sometimes, if I wake up later, I hear an early-rising robin robustly anticipating the dawn (and probably annoying all the other birds, who are still trying to get some shut-eye), but last night it was too early even for him. I looked into the face of Christ, illuminated softly now by candlelight. I made the sign of the cross. I said some preliminary prayers, including the Lord's Prayer and the Nicene Creed, and recited Psalm 51, the prayer that David offered when he repented for seducing Bathsheba and murdering her husband.



I've heard that you should "warm up your heart" before beginning the Jesus Prayer, and these preliminaries help do that; the Creed reminds me of the majesty of God, while Psalm 51 reminds me of my neediness, my damaged, greedy condition. After that, I began repeating the Jesus Prayer in my mind, over and over, in an unhurried way: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." (The words can be varied a bit; I use a shorter version, while the standard form is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." My husband uses an even longer version, praying, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner," the last phrase an echo of the tax collector's prayer in Jesus' parable.) I aim to say this prayer a hundred times, and keep track by moving my fingers along a prayer rope, a loop of

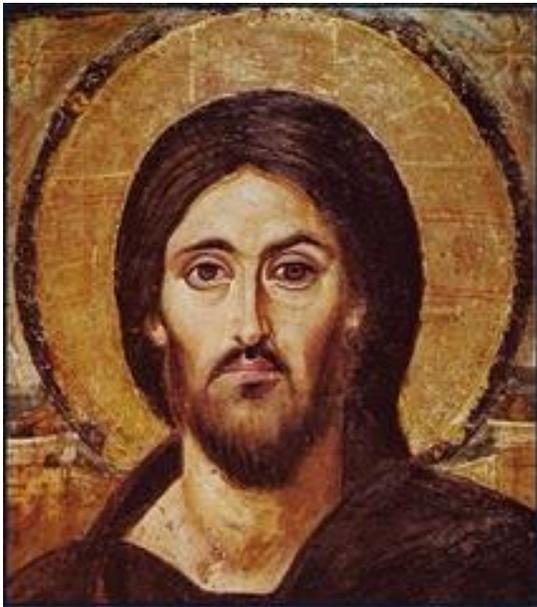
silken cord tied with a hundred elaborate knots. When my mind wanders—which it does, believe me, over and over every night—I back up a few knots and focus in again. This practice of saying the Jesus Prayer is accurately termed a spiritual discipline; it's a disciplined learning process, like learning to play the cello. It takes perseverance and focused attention. For a cellist, the tedium of practicing scales must appear so distant from the final goal, when that beautiful, dark music will spill forth fluidly. Yet, one day, the cellist will pick up her bow, and she and the instrument will have become one. So I keep on asking Christ for mercy, working the Prayer deep into my awareness. I say it a hundred times at night, and throughout the day I set it going in my mind as often as I remember (hopefully, at least once an hour). But it is the focused mid-night prayer time that really enables it to root down deep. And gradually I am coming to see that it is true. It really is possible to sense the presence of God—continuously. I hasten to add that I *don't* sense it continuously. To be completely honest, I don't want to. I'd rather slide away into thinking about things that attract me, or anger me, or frighten me, and behave as if I can deal with them on my own. Apparently I think I can pull down a window shade between God and me, and do things the way I want to without him finding out. That's ridiculous, of course; if I turned my back on him and ran away as fast as I could, wherever I stopped he would have beaten me there. "Whither shall I go from Your Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there!" (*Psalms 139:7-8*). But he is loving and very patient, and when I'm ready to turn and look at him again, I find that he has been continuing all that time to hold me in his steady gaze. Then the Prayer rises up inside, and makes a connection like a lamp plugging into a socket.



This prayer is not designed to generate fancy mystical experiences or soppy emotions. Yet it works away steadily inside, gradually building a sure connection with the Lord. Where the Lord enters in, there is light; I can see many ways that he has changed me over the years, illuminating and dispelling reflexive lying thoughts and fears. My part was just to keep showing up, day after day, for these quiet sessions with him. The Prayer's goal is to help you keep always in touch with the presence of God. Some of you are already saying, "This is for me. This is what I've always wanted." You know what I mean by "the presence of God," because you've felt it yourself. And whether it was on one or two memorable occasions, or regularly over the years, you agree that it is intoxicating. When I try to describe it, I find I use the word *beauty* more often than any

other. You know what I'm talking about, and you're eager to hear more. But some of you feel sad when you hear people talk of such experiences. You've never felt anything you would describe as "the presence of God." You wonder why you've been left out. Has God rejected you? The first thing I want to tell you is this: the very fact that you want to know God's presence means you're already sensing *something*. Think about it. How many people never give God a second thought? How many people sleep in on Sunday morning, and never open a Bible or send up a prayer? But you're not like that; you really want to be closer to the Lord. My hunch is that you are already sensing something of God's presence, or you wouldn't care.

Here's a homely analogy: picture yourself walking around a shopping mall, looking at the people and the window displays. Suddenly, you get a whiff of cinnamon. You weren't even hungry, but now you really crave a cinnamon roll. This craving isn't



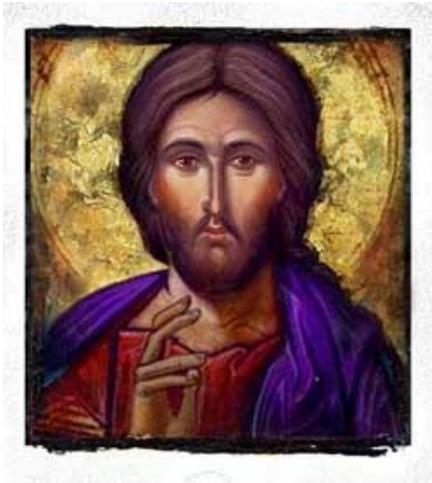
something you made up. There you were, minding your own business, when some drifting molecules of sugar, butter, and spice collided with a susceptible patch inside your nose. You had a real encounter with cinnamon— not a mental delusion, not an emotional projection, but the real thing. And what was the effect? You want more, *now*. And if you hunger to know the presence of God, it's because, I believe, you have already begun to scent his compelling delight. So, if you're one of those people who think that you've never had an experience of God, ask yourself: Why do you even care? Why do you spend time praying? Why do you bother to read the Bible, or books about prayer? The

world is full of ways to waste your time. But if you picture yourself giving up on prayer, you feel hollow, desolated. All this must be doing *something*, even if you can't put your finger on it. The Prayer can help you learn to perceive that something, and do so more consistently and accurately.

There's one motivation for taking up the Prayer that I would discourage, though. Somehow in our day, the concept of "spirituality" has gotten unhitched from actual communion with God—and the fear and trembling authentic contact evokes—and come to be regarded almost as a hobby. Folks who seek spirituality rather than God can give off whiffs of superiority, as if they think they're more elevated than ordinary folks. Once when I was speaking about the Prayer, a man in the audience commented, "Somehow this seems different from what I usually hear about spirituality. I think the main thing is that it doesn't have that element of narcissism." The spiritual path of the Jesus Prayer is

not one that lends itself to narcissism. The effect of the Prayer is to knock you down in your own mind. Then you discover that it is safe to be knocked down, safe to be humble, because God's love is everywhere, filling the world with his light and life. The Prayer will make you into a child. "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (*Mark 10:15*). When defensiveness falls away and humility flows in, you become able to love others with the love that God has for them, and even "count others better than yourselves," as St. Paul urged the Philippians (*Philippians 2:3*).

The Prayer trains you to adopt the stance of humility, because that is the posture from which you can best see his face. It's like trying to see a star out your window on a



summer night. The leaves of the trees and the neighbors' roofs block your view, but if you lean over just right and crane your neck, you can see it. The Jesus Prayer teaches you how to "lean just right," combining joy, trust, penitence, and gratitude, so you can find yourself in his presence. Till now we've been talking about learning to sense God's presence, but his plan for us goes even further than that. We don't merely encounter Christ or imitate him, we don't merely become *like* Christ; we actually become one with him, saturated body and soul with his life. It will be for us as it was for St. Paul: "For to me to live is Christ"

(*Philippians 1:21*), and, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (*Galatians 2:20*). Have we gotten used to taking such words as pious metaphor? In the Jesus Prayer tradition, they're simple Bible truth. The whole point of salvation is restored union with God. What could "union with God" mean, in practice?

In the Eastern Christian tradition, union with God is the goal for everyone. It is God's will for every Christian, and, through their preaching of the gospel, for every human being. The purpose of this earthly life is to be saturated with the life of Christ. Everything flows from that, every work of art and act of courageous witness, every theological insight and every effort to help the poor. The idea is that God will fill people with his Son's life, and then they will accomplish his work in the world. This process of assimilating the presence of God is called *theosis*. *Theos* means "God," and as a cloth soaks up water by osmosis, we are saturated with God through *theosis*. This indwelling presence heals, restores, and completes us, preparing each of us to take up the role in his kingdom that we alone can fill. Progress in *theosis* is a gift of God, not won by any effort, of course. But you can make yourself available to such a blessing by practicing spiritual disciplines, such as observing the fast days in the church's calendar and saying the Jesus Prayer. Such resources are like the workout machines in a health club, the ones every serious

athlete will use. People who are making progress share some common characteristics, too: good self-control when it comes to the appetites, absence of anger, ample humility, kindness, and diligence in prayer. But some folks have a more sober quality, while others are full of joy; there isn't any one personality type. If anything, the indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he was ever able to be before.

The Jesus Prayer has been passed on face-to-face, from one Christ-loving person to the next, down the generations from the time of the Desert saints. It is learned in a community of fellow believers, all of whom are aware of their need and sin, trying daily to resist temptation better and love God more. It should be individually coached or tutored by a spiritual mother or father who knows you through and through, who loves you, holds you accountable, and is able wisely to adapt the classic teaching to your unique struggles. In short, the Jesus Prayer is meant to be learned in the midst of a living community, where you can see numerous examples of what it looks like when ordinary people are doing it and encouraging each other. When you can see real folks doing it, it is a lot easier to grasp, and seems a lot more possible.

*Theosis* is a vast and daunting goal even to imagine, so there's something distinctively, sweetly Christian about using a prayer that is so simple. There have been plenty of other religions that taught convoluted mystical procedures for union with God, but for Christians it is as straightforward as calling on our Lord and asking him for mercy. As you form the habit of saying this prayer in the back of your mind all the time, it soaks into you, like dye into cotton, and colors the way you encounter every person and circumstance you meet.

I am hardly an expert on the Jesus Prayer, but I'd like to help you understand it at least as far as I do. Too many of us spend our days feeling that God is far away, occupied with more important things. But Jesus told us that isn't true; God is so familiar with our bodies that "even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (*Matthew 10:30*); he is so familiar with our thoughts that he "knows what you need before you ask him" (*Matthew 6:8*). I hope that through the Jesus Prayer you, too, may learn how to tune that "little radio" to the voice of God, and discover the joy of his infinitely loving presence.



*Frederica Mathewes-Green*

Excerpted from her book, *The Jesus Prayer: the Ancient Prayer that Tunes the Heart to God*