

Introduction to the Jesus Prayer

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Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.

I have often read the Jesus Prayer in prayer books and heard it in Church, but my attention was drawn to it first some years ago in Romania. There, in a small Monastery of Smbata, tucked away at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains in the heart of the deep forest, its little white church reflected in a crystal-clear mountain pond, I met a monk who practiced the "prayer of the heart." Profound peace and silence reigned at Smbata in those days; it was a place of rest and strength --I pray to God it still is. I have wandered



far since I last saw Smbata, and all the while the Jesus Prayer lay as a precious gift buried in my heart. It remained inactive until a few years ago when I read *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Since then, I have been seeking to

practice it continually. At times I lapse; nonetheless, the prayer has opened unbelievable vistas within my heart and soul.

The Jesus Prayer, or the Prayer of the Heart, centers on the Holy Name of Jesus itself. It may be said in its entirety: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner;" it may be changed to "us sinners" or to other persons named, or it may be shortened. The power lies in the Name of Jesus; thus "Jesus," alone, may fulfill the whole need of the one who prays. The Prayer goes back to the New Testament and has had a long, traditional use. The method of contemplation based upon the Holy Name is attributed to St. Simeon, called the "New Theologian" (949-1022). When

he was 14 years old, St. Simeon had a vision of heavenly light in which he seemed to be separated from his body. Amazed, and overcome with an overpowering joy, he felt a consuming humility, and cried out, borrowing the Publican's prayer (*Luke 18:13*), "Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me." Long after the vision had disappeared, the great joy returned to St. Simeon each time he repeated the prayer; and he taught his disciples to worship likewise. The prayer evolved into its expanded form: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner." In this guise it has come down to us from generation to generation of pious monks and laymen.

The invocation of the Holy Name is not peculiar to the Orthodox Church but is used by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Protestants, though to a lesser degree. On Mount Sinai and Mount Athos the monks worked out a whole system of contemplation based upon this simple prayer, practiced in complete silence. These monks came to be known as "Hesychasts". St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), the last of the great Church Fathers, became the exponent of the Hesychasts. He won, after a long-drawn-out battle, an irrefutable place for the Jesus Prayer and the Hesychasts within the Church. In the 18th century when tsardom hampered monasticism in Russia, and the Turks crushed Orthodoxy in Greece, the Neamtzu monastery in Moldavia (Romania) became one of the great centers for the Jesus Prayer. The Prayer is held to be so outstandingly spiritual because it is focused wholly on Jesus: all thoughts, striving, hope, faith and love are outpoured in devotion to God the Son. It fulfills two basic injunctions of the New Testament. In one, Jesus said: "I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father; in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (*John 16:23, 24*). In the other precept we find St. Paul's injunction to pray without ceasing, (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*). Further, it follows Jesus' instructions about how to pray, which He gave at the same time He taught His followers the Lord's Prayer: "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (*Matthew 6:6*). And Jesus taught that all impetus, good and bad, originates in men's

hearts. "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh" (Luke 6:45).

Upon these and many other precepts of the New Testament as well as the Old, the Holy Fathers, even before St. Simeon, based their fervent and simple prayer. They developed a method of contemplation in which unceasing prayer became as natural as breathing, following the rhythmic cadence of the heartbeat. All roads that lead to God are beset with pitfalls because the Enemy (Satan) ever lies in wait to trip us up. He naturally attacks most assiduously when we are bent on finding our way to salvation,



for that is what he most strives to hinder. In mystical prayer the temptations we encounter exceed all others in danger; because our thoughts are on a higher level, the allurements are proportionally subtler. Someone said that "mysticism started in mist and ended in schism"; this cynical remark, spoken by an unbeliever, has a certain truth in it. Mysticism is of real spiritual value only when it is practiced with absolute sobriety. At one time a controversy arose concerning certain Hesychasts who fell into excessive acts of piety and fasting because they lost the sense of moderation upon which our Church lays so great a value. We need not dwell upon misuses of the Jesus Prayer, except to realize that all exaggerations are harmful and that we should, at all times, use self-restraint. "Practice of the Jesus Prayer is the traditional fulfillment of the injunction of the Apostle Paul to 'pray always:' it has nothing to do with the mysticism which is the heritage of pagan ancestry." The Orthodox Church is full of a deep mystical life which she guards and encompasses with the strength of her traditional rules; thus, her mystics seldom go astray. "The 'ascetical life' is a life in which 'acquired' virtues, i.e., virtues resulting from a personal effort, only accompanied by that general grace which God grants to every

good will, prevail. The 'mystical life' is a life in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are predominant over human efforts, and in which 'infused' virtues are predominant over the 'acquired' ones; the soul has become more passive than active. Let us use a classical comparison. Between the ascetic life, that is, the life in which human action predominates, and the mystical life, that is, the life in which God's action predominates, there is the same difference as between rowing a boat and sailing it; the oar is the ascetic effort, the sail is the mystical passivity which is unfurled to catch the divine wind." The Jesus Prayer is the core of mystical prayer, and it can be used by anyone, at any time. There is nothing mysterious about this (let us not confuse "mysterious" with "mystic"). We start by following the precepts and



examples frequently given by our Lord. First, go aside into a quiet place: "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile" (*Mark 6:31*); "Study to be quiet" (*I Thessalonians 4:11*); then pray in secret--alone and in silence. The phrases "to pray in secret alone and in

silence" need, I feel, a little expanding. "Secret" should be understood as it is used in the Bible: for instance, Jesus tells us to do our charity secretly--not letting the left hand know what the right one does. We should not parade our devotions, nor boast about them. "Alone" means to separate ourselves from our immediate surroundings and disturbing influences. As a matter of fact, never are we in so much company as when we pray " . . . seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . ." (*Hebrews 12:1*). The witnesses are all those who pray: Angels, Archangels, saints and sinners, the living and the dead. It is in prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer, that we become keenly aware of belonging to

the living body of Christ. In "silence" implies that we do not speak our prayer audibly.

We do not even meditate on the words; we use them only to reach beyond them to the essence itself. In our busy lives this is not easy, yet it can be done--we can each of us find a few minutes in which to use a prayer consisting of only a few words, or even only one. This prayer should be repeated quietly, unhurriedly, thoughtfully. Each thought should be concentrated on Jesus, forgetting all else, both joys and sorrows. Any stray thought, however good or pious, can become an obstacle. When you embrace a dear one you do not stop to meditate how and why you love--you just love wholeheartedly. It is the same when spiritually we grasp Jesus the Christ to our heart. If we pay heed to the depth and quality of our love, it means that we are preoccupied with our own reactions, rather than giving ourselves unreservedly to Jesus --holding nothing back. Think the prayer as you breathe in and out; calm both mind and body, using as rhythm the heartbeat. Do not search for words, but go on repeating the Prayer, or Jesus' name alone, in love and adoration. That is ALL! Strange--in this little there is more than all!

It is good to have regular hours for prayer and to retire whenever possible to the same room or place, possibly before an icon. The icon is loaded with the objective presence of the One depicted, and thus greatly assists our invocation. Orthodox monks and nuns find that to use a rosary helps to keep the attention fixed. Or you may find it best quietly to close your eyes--focusing them inward. The Jesus Prayer can be used for worship and petition: as intercession, invocation, adoration, and as thanksgiving. It is a means by which we lay all that is in our hearts, both for God and man, at the feet of Jesus. It is a means of communion with God and with all those who pray. The fact that we can train our hearts to go on praying even when we sleep, keeps us uninterruptedly within the community of prayer. This is no fanciful statement; many have experienced this life-giving fact. We cannot, of course, attain this continuity of prayer all at once, but it is achievable; for all that is worthwhile we must ". . . run with patience the

race that is set before us . . ." (*Hebrews 12:1*). I had a most striking proof of uninterrupted communion with all those who pray when I lately underwent surgery. I lay long under anesthesia. "Jesus" had been my last conscious thought, and the first word on my lips as I awoke. It was marvelous beyond words to find that although I knew nothing of what was happening to my body, I never lost cognizance of being prayed-for and of praying myself. After such an experience one no longer wonders that there are great souls who devote their lives exclusively to prayer.

Prayer has always been of very real importance to me, and the habit formed in early childhood of morning and evening prayer has never left me; but in the practice of the Jesus Prayer, I am but a beginner. I would, nonetheless, like to awaken interest in this prayer because, even if I have only touched the hem of a heavenly garment, I have touched it--and the joy is so great I would share it with others. It is not every man's way of prayer; you may not find in it the same joy that I find, for your way may be quite a different one--yet equally bountiful. In fear and joy, in loneliness and companionship, it is ever with me. Not only in the silence of daily devotions, but at all times and in all places. It transforms, for me, frowns into smiles; it beautifies, as if a film had been washed off an old picture so that the colors appear clear and bright, like nature on a warm spring day after a shower. Even despair has become attenuated and repentance has achieved its purpose. When I arise in the morning, it starts me joyfully upon a new day. When I travel by air, land, or sea, it sings within my breast. When I stand upon a platform and face my listeners, it beats encouragement. When I gather my children around me, it murmurs a blessing. And at the end of a weary day, when I lay me down to rest, I give my heart over to Jesus: "(Lord) into thy hands I commend my spirit".

I sleep--but my heart, as it beats, prays on: "JESUS."

