

Saying the Jesus Prayer

By Albert S Rossi

"Prayer is Not Optional"

A layman, at the St Vladimir's Seminary Summer Institute, wrote this sentence as the most important thing he learned all week.

Which Words

The classical form of the Jesus Prayer is,

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

The actual words of our short prayers can vary. We might say the classic version of the Jesus Prayer, or we might say, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." We may say, "Lord Jesus, have mercy." Or, we might say a Psalm verse, or a Bible quote, or some other prayer.

Monks of old said, "Lord, make haste to help me. Lord, make speed to save me," all day long.

The history of the Jesus Prayer goes back, as far as we know, to the early sixth century, with Diadochos, who taught that repetition of the prayer leads to inner stillness. Even earlier John Cassian recommended this type of prayer. In the fourth century Egypt, in Nitria, short "arrow" prayers were practiced.

Abba Macarius of Egypt said there is no need to waste time with words. It is enough to hold out your hands and say, "Lord, according to your desire and your wisdom, have mercy." If pressed in the struggle, say, "Lord, save me!" or say, "*Lord.*" He knows what is best for us, and will have mercy upon us.

Pray Ceaselessly

We are all called to pray without ceasing, says St. Paul in 1 Thess 5:17. The real question is, *how*.

The Jesus Prayer provides one good way to pray constantly. In fact, the Jesus Prayer is the most widespread and most specifically Orthodox spiritual prayer, according to Metropolitan Corneanu.

Our task is to draw nearer to God. St. Isaac of Syria says that it is impossible to draw near to God by any means other than *increasing prayer*.

The Power of the Name

Biblically, knowing a person's name gave power over that person. Name was linked with being. In the Old Testament, God would not disclose His name. In the New Testament, Jesus explicitly gives us God's name,

Father, and tells us to use the name in prayer. Jesus gives us access to the Godhead *through* the name.

Jesus told His Apostles that they hadn't really used His Name in prayer enough. "Hitherto you have asked nothing in My Name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (Jn 16:23).

Hidden Martyrdom

Trying to pray repetitively is an inner asceticism. According to St Ignatius Brianchaninov, trying to pray without ceasing is a "hidden martyrdom."

A casual, but profound, example of this came to a small group of high school students. They were visiting a home for unwed mothers. The woman who directs the home spoke to them for a half hour. Because the woman sensed that the students were wondering about her own faith commitment, she said, "Well, you have been here 30 minutes and I have prayed 15 times." She hadn't been out of their sight, nor out of their conversation. Yet, during the active interchange, this woman found the desire, attention, and time, to shoot 15 "arrow" prayers to God. That's keen vigilance. That's a hidden martyrdom, especially when attempted all day long.

Prayer requires super-human courage, given the atmosphere of the world today. The whole ensemble of natural energies is in opposition. So says Sophrony.

Lions may not eat us for the sake of the Gospel. Rather, our call to martyrdom takes the form of being attentive to the present moment, relying upon God's power always, and doing His will. Our call to martyrdom may not be any easier than death by violence.

Who can Say the Prayer

Clearly, the Jesus Prayer is not only for monks. We are told that the prayer is for cab drivers, social workers, business persons, teachers, professional baseball players (not necessarily used to win a game), psychiatrists. We use the Jesus Prayer to do God's will, not our own bidding. Anyone, everyone can say the Jesus Prayer. The only prerequisites are a keeping of the Commandments, be living member of the Church, and to have a guide.

Bishop Kallistos Ware has sound advice for those who simply can't find a suitable guide. "But those who have no personal contact with starets my still practice the Prayer without any fear, so long as they do so only for limited periods - initially, for no more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time - and so long as they make no attempt to interfere with the body's natural rhythms."

When to Pray

The Jesus Prayer is recommended in the morning, following our prayer

rule, for some period of time, perhaps 10 or 15 minutes. If that is impossible, then sometime before noon, or in the evening. This might be called "formal" use of the prayer. The second form of the Jesus Prayer is the "free" use of the prayer. This means at any and all other times of the day, or night. This is especially true for the semi-automatic tasks such as driving, doing dishes, walking, being unable to sleep, etc. The Jesus Prayer is notably useful in time of extreme concern or upset.

When alone, we might find it helpful to pray the Jesus Prayer, out loud. This can help lower the distraction level.

Prayer of the Heart

The Jesus Prayer is also called the Prayer of the Heart. In Orthodoxy, the mind and heart are to be used as one. St Theophan tells us to keep our "mind *in* the heart" at all times. Heart means the physical muscle pumping blood, *and* emotions/feelings, *and* the innermost core of the person, the spirit. Heart is associated with the physical organ, but not identical with it. Heart means our innermost chamber, our secret dwelling place where God lives.

"The heart is but a small vessel; and yet dragons and lions are there, and there poisonous creatures and all the treasures of wickedness; rough, uneven paths are there, and gaping chasms. There likewise is God, there are the angles, the heavenly cities and the treasures of grace; all things are there." So says St. Macarius.

Someone said the heart is a dimension of interior consciousness, awareness, where we come in touch with an inner space, a space of no dimensions. This consciousness is timeless, the place where tears reside and deep contact with the present moment abide, and from which restful movement comes. Acting out of our heart means to act lightly, with vigor and enthusiasm. When not in that inner awareness, we are restless, agitated and self-concerned.

There is within us a space, a field of the heart, in which we find a Divine Reality, and from which we are called to live. The mind, then, is to descend into that inner sanctuary, by means of the Jesus Prayer or wordless contemplation, and to stay there throughout our active day, and evening. We descend with our mind into our heart, and *we live there*.

The heart is Christ's palace. There, Christ the King comes to take His rest.

The photo at the top of the page is a seventeen year old girl [Bethany] who said that, when this was taken, she felt like she was walking "into the silence of the hills." To reach the field of the heart we need outer, and inner, silence, rather like one might experience while gazing

upon this scene.

Silence

Silence is a choice. We choose the things we want to do. These things, then, order and measure our lives. Someone said that Christians "order and measure" their lives from communion to communion. We might also say the Christians "order and measure" their lives from silence to silence.

Silence, at its best, is God-awareness. We quiet down our outer and inner lives, and listen to God speak. Someone said that when God speaks, His words are like the sound of a flutter of a bird's wings. We need to be attentive if we are to hear anything.

Outer silence is a choice. When my son, in his teen years, rode with me in the family car, we cut a deal. He had the car radio half the time, and I had the car radio half the time. He always chose his half at the beginning of the trip. Like most teens, he wanted his jollies up front. For my half of the ride, I sometimes chose silence, because I like silence. I really didn't do it to cause him pain. He, however, did sometimes have a restless and difficult time of it. Later he did tell me that he enjoyed our quiet evening rides together.

Outer silence calms the senses. By contrast, sensory overload and excitement can be addictive.

Inner silence can usually be achieved only by substituting one thought for another. Hence, the Jesus Prayer overrides our usual compulsive stream of consciousness about our own anxieties. Beginning with this form of prayer, then we might be led to deeper inner stillness, prayer without words. The caution here is that prayer without words is not heaviness, semi-sleep dullness. Rather, wordless prayer is alive, vigorous God-awareness.

A seventeen year old said she learned recently that, "Silence is my friend."

Abba Pastor tells us that any trial which comes to us can be conquered by silence.

Contemplation

Contemplation has been described as clear awareness without words. Contemplation is a "seeing clearly." We lay aside thoughts, not to lead to a vacuum or drowsiness, but to inner plenitude. We deny to affirm. Wordless contemplation is not an absence, but a presence, a God-awareness. The aim is to bring us into a direct meeting with a personal God, on God's terms.

Inner silence, inner stillness, called hesychia, is experienced by wordless sitting, imageless contemplation. When consciousness strays, a phrase

like "Lord Jesus" can be used to bring the mind back, and then the person sits quietly in the presence of the Lord. The desire of wordless sitting awareness is to open oneself to God, to listen to God.

Some teachers suggest that if we are able, we spend a half hour of wordless sitting, begun by asking God to teach us to pray, or a Bible quote. Usually this is best done in the morning, upon rising or before noon. If the person is able, a block of the some quiet time is also recommended for the evening. Hopefully, all this is worked out with the direction of a spiritual guide.

Both the Jesus Prayer and contemplation make us single-centered, concentrating upon the *here* and *now*, focused, one-pointed. The point is God.

Changing the Universe

Every prayer changes the entire universe. Our every prayer, each prayer, actually changes history, the way God created the world, and all else. God is outside time. God is not "waiting up there" for our prayer, and then He acts. All has already occurred in God.

Intercessory Prayer

St Therese, a Roman Catholic saint, had difficulty knowing that God heard her prayers for others. As a youth, she decided to put God "to the test" once and for all. Perhaps only a saint can "test" God. She prayed fervently for the salvation of a callused serial killer of women, Henri Pranzini. Pranzini was caught, found guilty and sentenced to the guillotine. During this time, Therese prayed that he be saved, and that she be given a sign that a conversion took place. Pranzini became more arrogant. Therese persisted. On the execution day, Pranzini walked up the steps, put his head onto the block, still jeering. Then, unexpectedly, he lifted up, grabbed the crucifix hanging from the side of the nearby priest, and Pranzini kissed the feet of Christ three times. Pranzini publicly repented. He then put his head back down onto the block, and the guillotine fell. Therese claimed that her prayers were answered. She claimed that her intercessory prayers saved a hardened criminal.

Is this really the way intercessory prayer works? In a word, yes. How? The answer to that rests somewhere in God's mysterious ways. What we do know, for certain, is that every prayer for someone else is heard, and in God's goodness, answered, for the other person's good. Every single prayer for another helps that other person, and helps us.

The lives of the saints are replete with examples. St Monica, mother of St Augustine, prayed day and night for her son when he was living a wild life. Augustine had, among other activities, fathered a child out of wedlock. Monica was told by her Bishop that "no child of so many tears (prayers) could be lost." Monica's prayers were instrumental in saving

Augustine.

We are each called to pray, ardently, for our children, family, priest, the Church, country, world. We have a noble and royal vocation, to pray and make an untold difference in the entire cosmos.

How Does It Work?

Like swimming, we are to "jump in" and just begin. There is a world of difference between thinking, or talking, about quiet prayer, and actually praying. Like beginning swimmers, we only learn by getting wet.

The Fathers tell us that, often, the first thing that happens is an experience of darkness and resistance. Then, when we persist, peace begins to replace the darkness. The temptations may become more severe, even temptations to stop the praying, but we sin less. The Fathers tell us that, as we continue to pray and live the commandments, go to Church and listen to our spiritual Father, we can expect to become freed from indecision, upset and hesitation. Our will becomes stronger. We can expect to be available to others in ways we otherwise would not have been, and we will become more effective and creative.

Bishop Kallistos Ware says that by spending only a few moments invoking the Divine Name each day, we actually transform all the other remaining moments of the day.

In the beginning, there may be no new insights and no pleasant feelings. Was it a waste of time? Not necessarily. By faith, the Christian believes that spending time *wanting* to pray, and actually praying, does touch a Merciful God. God hears. And, in turn, Divine Truth is known through direct experience, sometimes called intuition. Something is happening, and changing at a deeper level of consciousness, unnoticed.

We can expect invisible, subtle snares, sent from Satan, precisely because we have upscaled our efforts, and are turning to God. In a sense, we rouse the enemy to action. St. John Chrysostom says that when we begin to pray we stir the snake (living within us) to action, and that prayer can lay the snake low.

There is no ascetic effort more difficult, more painful, than the effort to draw close to God, Sophrony tells us.

When we begin to pray, we expend desire and effort. The results are up to God. Real prayer is a gift from God, not the payment for our perspiration.

Prayer works in the Unseen Warfare as a power/gift from Jesus, given as a function of our ability to receive it. We increase our ability to receive by asking for the increase, and God grants it as He sees fit, in His tender, all

sweet and merciful manner.

Not Yoga

Sitting, saying the Jesus Prayer, or in wordless contemplation, is not Yoga or any far Eastern practice. The difference is the Christian encounter with the living God, Jesus.

The postures, techniques and outer form may be similar, but the content is unique in Christian prayer. The content of Christian prayer is Jesus.

Sometimes the difference is likened to a priceless painting. We might admire the exquisite frame of the painting, and rightly so. But the frame is not the masterpiece. The similarities of Eastern Yoga and Sufi practice in prayer are the frame, but Christ is the masterpiece, the insides, of the prayer of the Christian. And, that is all the difference in the world.

Techniques & Psychosomatic Issues

The Orthodox understanding of the role of the body in prayer rests upon a sound anthropology. The body, soul and spirit act as a single unit, not divided or split up. Therefore, the body has a role in prayer.

How we involve the body can be understood in three ways. Sometimes this is called psychotechniques. 1. Breathing, 2. Inner Exploration, and 3. Posture. Across the centuries, these issues have been explosive.

1. Breathing. Bishop Kallistos Ware says that if we pray the Jesus Prayer for short periods, ten or fifteen minutes at the beginning, then there is no problem matching the words of the prayer to our breath. We are to breath naturally, without playing with the rhythm of the breath. On the inhale, we can say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God." On the exhale, we can say, "have mercy on me, a sinner." We are to breath and pray slowly and reverently and attentively.
2. Inner Exploration. Inner exploration usually means following our breath into the nostrils, down into the lungs, around the insides, and out. This is unquestioningly, forbidden. The dangers involved in all this cannot be exaggerated.
3. Posture. The usual position, as recommended by Bishop Kallistos Ware, is a comfortable sitting position in a chair. Sometimes standing is recommended. Usually the eyes are kept closed. Posture can take many forms, as long as the postures are reverent.

Modern serious and enlightened authors, such as Bishop Ware, St Ignatius Brianchaninov and Sophrony all agree that "the fullness of the Jesus Prayer can be practiced without any physical methods at all."

In summary, it can be said that physical methods are optional and not at all necessary. Physical techniques are more suitable for beginners, says St Gregory Palamas. Physical techniques are potentially dangerous, and not to be used without a guide. St Theophan suggests, "Make a habit of having the intellect stand in the heart, but not in a physical way."

Prayer Rope

Orthodox prayer ropes are usually soft and made of wool. The purpose is to help us concentrate, not necessarily to count. In the famous book, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, the pilgrim said the prayer 2,000, then 6,000, then 12,000 times. Is 12,000 Jesus Prayers better than 2,000? *Absolutely not*. Quantity has nothing to do with love, and a living relationship with Jesus. The pilgrim did 12,000, no more and no less, as an act of obedience to his spiritual father, not because he was "making progress." He also prayed much because that was his "heart's desire." Every prayer is an act of love, made to the Author of Love, Who is waiting expectantly for our desire, and our acceptance of His Love.

The Jesus Prayer as Psychotherapy

As medicine, the Jesus Prayer is destructive of the passions and altering of conduct. Just as a doctor places a dressing on a patient's wound, and the dressing works without the patient's knowing how, calling on the Name of God "removes the passions" without our knowing how and why, according to Barsanupius and John.

The Holy Name, when repeated quietly, penetrates the soul rather like a drop of oil, spreading out and impregnating a cloth.

Our modern translation of "mercy" is limited and insufficient. "Mercy" comes from the Greek *eleison*. *Eleison* has the same root as *elaion* which means olive and olive oil. In the Middle East, olive oil provides physical healing for many sicknesses, particularly respiratory. "Have mercy" means to have "healing oil" on my soul.

The Fathers tell us that praying the Sacred Name changes our personality, from overstrain to joy. "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my *Name*; ask, and you will receive, that your *joy* may be full" (Jn 16:24).

The Jesus Prayer functions as therapy, much like healing oil, transforming our personality from overstrain to joy, and by continuing to pray, these changes become permanent.

Results of Prayer

We don't say the Jesus Prayer, or enter wordless contemplation, to get "some benefit." We don't pray to reduce our stress, or strengthen our immune system, or lose weight, or add years to our life. On the contrary, we enter prayer to follow Christ, to become open to Him. *His way is the Way of the Cross.*