

On Practicing the Jesus Prayer

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

The correct practice of the Jesus Prayer proceeds naturally from correct notions about God, about the most holy name of the Lord Jesus, and about man's relationship to God.

God is an infinitely great and all-perfect being. God is the Creator and Renewer of men, Sovereign Master over men, angels, demons and all created things, both visible and invisible. Such a notion of God teaches us that we ought to stand prayerfully before Him in deepest reverence and in great fear and dread, directing toward Him all our attention, concentrating in our attention all the powers of the reason, heart, and soul, and rejecting distractions and vain imaginings, whereby we diminish alertness and reverence, and violate the correct manner of standing before God, as required by His majesty (John 4:23-24; Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:29-30; Luke 10:27). St. Isaac the Syrian put it marvelously: "When you turn to God in prayer, be in your thoughts as an ant, as a serpent of the earth, like a worm, like a stuttering child. Do not speak to Him something philosophical or high-sounding, but approach Him with a child's attitude" (Homily 49). Those who have acquired genuine prayer experience an ineffable poverty of the spirit when they stand before the Lord, glorify and praise Him, confess to Him, or present to Him their entreaties. They feel as if they had turned to nothing, as if they did not exist. That is natural. For when he who is in prayer experiences the fullness of the divine presence, of Life Itself, of Life abundant and unfathomable, then his own life strikes him as a tiny drop in comparison to the boundless ocean. That is what the righteous and long-suffering Job felt as he attained the height of spiritual perfection. He felt himself to be dust and ashes; he felt that he was melting and vanishing as does snow when struck by the sun's burning rays (Job 42:6).

The name of our Lord Jesus Christ is a divine name. The power and effect of that name are divine, omnipotent and salvific, and transcend our ability to comprehend it. With faith therefore, with confidence and sincerity, and with great piety and fear ought we to proceed to the doing of the great work which God has entrusted to us: to train ourselves in prayer by using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. "The incessant invocation of God's name," says Barsanuphius the Great, "is a medicine which mortifies not just the passions, but even their influence. Just as the physician puts medications or dressings on a wound that it might be healed, without the patient even knowing the manner of their operation, so also the name of God, when we invoke it, mortifies all passions, though we do not know how that happens" (421st Answer).

Our ordinary condition, the condition of all mankind, is one of fallenness, of spiritual deception, of perdition. Apprehending—and to the degree that we apprehend, experiencing—that condition, let us cry out from it in prayer, let us cry in spiritual humility, let us cry with wails and sighs, let us cry for clemency! Let us turn away from all spiritual gratifications, let us renounce all lofty states of prayer of which we are unworthy and incapable! It is impossible "to sing the Lord's song in a strange land" (Ps. 136:5), in a heart held captive by passions. Should we hear an invitation to sing, we can know surely that it emanates "from them that have taken us captive" (Ps. 136:3). "By the waters of Babylon" tears alone are possible and necessary (Ps. 136:1).

This is the general rule for practicing the Jesus Prayer, derived from the Sacred Scriptures and the works of the Holy Fathers, and from certain conversations with genuine men of prayer. Of the particular rules, especially for novices, I deem the following worthy of mention.

St. John of the Ladder counsels that the mind should be locked into the words of the prayer and should be forced back each time it departs from it (Step XXVIII, ch. 17). Such a mechanism of prayer is remarkably helpful and suitable. When the mind, in its own manner, acquires attentiveness, then the heart will join it with its own offering—compunction. The heart will empathize with the mind by means of compunction, and the prayer will be said by the mind and heart together. The words of the prayer ought to be said without the least hurry, even lingering, so that the mind can lock itself into each word. St. John of the Ladder consoles and instructs the coenobitic brethren who busy themselves about monastic obediences and encourages them thus to persevere in prayerful asceticism: "From those monks who are engaged in performing obediences," he writes, "God does not expect a pure and undistracted prayer. Despair not should inattention come over you! Be of cheerful spirit and constantly compel your mind to return to itself! For the angels alone are not subject to any distraction" (Step IV, ch. 93). "Being enslaved by passions, let us persevere in praying to the Lord: for all those who have reached the state of passionlessness did so with the help of such indomitable prayer. If, therefore, you tirelessly train your mind never to stray from the words of the prayer, it will be there even at mealtime. A great champion of perfect prayer has said: 'I had rather speak five words with my understanding ... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue' (I Cor. 14:19). Such prayer," that is, the grace-given prayer of the mind in the heart, which shuns imaginings, "is not characteristic of children; wherefore we who are like children, being concerned with the perfection of our prayer," that is, the attentiveness which is acquired by locking the mind into the words of the prayer, "must pray a great deal. Quantity is the cause of quality. The Lord gives pure prayer to him who, eschewing laziness, prays much and regularly in his own manner, even if it is marred by inattention" (The Ladder, Step XXVIII, ch. 21).

Novices need more time in order to train themselves in prayer. It is impossible to reach this supreme virtue shortly after entering the monastery or following the first few steps in asceticism. Asceticism needs both time and gradual progress, so that the ascetic can mature for prayer in every respect. In order that a flower might bloom or the fruit grow on a tree, the tree must first be planted and left to develop; thus also does prayer grow out of the soil of other virtues and nowhere else. The monk will not quickly gain mastery of his mind, nor will he in a short time accustom it to abide in the words of the prayer as if enclosed in a prison. Pulled hither and thither by its acquired predilections, impressions, memories and worries, the novice's mind constantly breaks its salvific chains and strays from the narrow to the wide path. It prefers to wander freely, to stroll in the regions of falsehood in association with the fallen spirits, to stray aimlessly and mindlessly over great expanses, though this be damaging to him and cause him great loss. The passions, those moral infirmities of human nature, are the principal cause of inattentiveness and absentmindedness in prayer. The more they are weakened in a man, the less is he distracted in spirit when praying. The passions are brought under control and mortified little by little by means of true obedience, as well as by self-reproach and humility—these are the virtues upon which successful prayer is built. Concentration, which is accessible to man, is granted by God in good time to every struggler in piety and asceticism who by persistence and ardor proves the sincerity of his desire to acquire prayer.

The Russian hieromonk Dorotheus, a great instructor in spiritual asceticism, who was in this respect very much like St. Isaac the Syrian, counsels those who are learning the Jesus Prayer to recite it aloud at first. The vocal prayer, he says, will of itself turn into the mental.

"Mental prayer," he continues, "is the result of much vocal prayer, and mental prayer leads to the prayer of the heart. The Jesus Prayer should not be said in a loud voice but quietly, just audibly enough that you can hear yourself. It is particularly beneficial to practice the Jesus Prayer aloud when assailed by distraction, grief, spiritual despondency and laziness. The vocal Jesus Prayer gradually awakens the soul

from the deep moral slumber into which grief and spiritual despair are wont to thrust it. It is also particularly beneficial to practice the Jesus Prayer aloud when attacked by images, appetites of the flesh, and anger; when their influence causes the blood to boil. It should be practiced when peace and tranquillity vanish from the heart, and the mind hesitates, becomes weak, and—so to speak—goes into upheaval because of the multitude of unnecessary thoughts and images. The malicious princes of the air, whose presence is hidden to physical sight but who are felt by the soul through their influences upon it, hearing as they mount their attack the name of the Lord Jesus—which they dread—will become undecided and confused, and will take fright and withdraw immediately from the soul. The method of prayer which the hieromonk suggests is very simple and easy. It should be combined with the method of St. John of the Ladder: the Jesus Prayer should be recited loud enough that you can hear yourself, without any hurry, and by locking the mind into the words of the prayer. This last, the hieromonk enjoins upon all who pray by Jesus' name.

The method of prayer propounded by St. John of the Ladder should be adhered to even when one is practicing the method which was explained by the divine St. Nilus of Sora, in the second homily of his monastic constitution. The divine Nilus borrowed his method from the Greek Fathers, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Sinai, and simplified it somewhat. Here is what St. Nilus says: "Experience will soon confirm as correct and very beneficial for mental concentration the recommendation of these holy fathers regarding restraint in breathing, i.e. that one should not breathe with great frequency." Some, without understanding this method, exaggerate its importance and restrain their breath beyond reasonable measure, thereby injuring their lungs and at the same time inflicting harm upon their souls by assenting to such a mistake. All impulsive and extreme actions are but obstacles to success in prayer, which develops only when nurtured by the tranquil, quiet and pious disposition of both soul and body. "Whatever is immoderate comes from the demons," says St. Pimen the Great.

The novice who is studying the Jesus Prayer will advance greatly by observing a daily rule comprising a certain number of full prostrations and bows from the waist, depending upon the strength of each individual. These are all to be performed without any hurry, with a repentant feeling in the soul and with the Jesus Prayer on the lips during each prostration. An example of such prayer may be seen in the "Homily on Faith" by St. Symeon the New Theologian. Describing the daily evening prayers of the blessed youth George, St. Symeon says: "He imagined that he was standing before the Lord Himself and prostrating himself before His holy feet, and he tearfully implored the Lord to have mercy upon him. While praying, he stood motionless like a pillar and bade his feet and the other parts of his body to stay still, especially the eyes, which were restrained from moving curiously in all directions. He stood with great fear and trepidation and denied himself sleep, despondency and laziness." Twelve prostrations suffice in the beginning. Depending upon one's strength, ability and circumstances, that number can be constantly increased. But when the number of prostrations increases, one should be careful to preserve the quality of one's prayer, so that one not be carried away by a preoccupation with the physical into fruitless, and even harmful, quantity. The bows warm up the body and somewhat exhaust it, and this condition facilitates attention and compunction. But let us be watchful, very watchful, lest the state pass into a bodily preoccupation which is foreign to spiritual sentiments and recalls our fallen nature! Quantity, useful as it is when accompanied by the proper frame of mind and the proper objective, can be just as harmful when it leads to a preoccupation with the physical. The latter is recognized by its fruits which also distinguish it from spiritual ardor. The fruits of physical preoccupation are conceit, self-assurance, intellectual arrogance: in a word, pride in its various forms, all of which are easy prey to spiritual deception. The fruits of spiritual ardor are repentance, humility, weeping and tears. The rule of prostrations is best observed before going to sleep: then, after the cares of the day have passed, it can be practiced longer and with greater concentration. But in the morning and during the day it is also useful,

especially for the young, to practice prostrations moderately—from twelve to twenty bows. Prostrations stimulate a prayerful state of the mind and mortify the body as well as support and strengthen fervor in prayer.

These suggestions are, I believe, sufficient for the beginner who is eager to acquire the Jesus Prayer. "Prayer," said the divine St. Meletius the Confessor, "needs no teacher. It requires diligence, effort and personal ardor, and then God will be its teacher." The Holy Fathers, who have written many works on prayer in order to impart correct notions and faithful guidance to those desiring to practice it, propose and decree that one must engage in it actively in order to gain experiential knowledge, without which verbal instruction, though derived from experience, is dead, opaque, incomprehensible and totally inadequate. Conversely, he who is carefully practicing prayer and who is already advanced in it, should refer often to the writings of the Holy Fathers about prayer in order to check and properly direct himself, remembering that even the great Paul, though possessing the highest of all testimonies for his Gospel—that of the Holy Spirit—nevertheless went to Jerusalem where he communicated to the apostles who had gathered there the Gospel that he preached to the gentiles, "lest by any means," as he said, "I should run, or had run, in vain " (Gal. 2:2).