

commodation of continuing differences of principle. It can only come about by a growing interior accord of separated Christians in penitence, reparation, faith and prayer with the prayer of our Lord, " *ut unum sint.*" "

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THE PRAYER OF JESUS

THE liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church is known and appreciated by the Catholic West. Less known are its non-liturgical devotions. One such devotion, 'the prayer of Jesus,' has for centuries been encouraged in the Eastern Church, though, leaving the freedom of choice in spiritual ways to her faithful, she never imposed it or ascribed to it any particular merits (a practice unknown to the East). With this proviso the Prayer can be compared with the Rosary in the West; and as its roots go back to the early, undivided Church, it could be claimed by the West no less than by the East.

'*Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.*' This invocation has behind it volumes of spiritual writings and centuries of ascetico-mystical tradition. It is known as 'the art of mental prayer.'¹

¹The practice of the Prayer of Jesus is found as early as the fourth century. To mention only a few of those who wrote on it: Saints Antony, Evagrius of Pont, pseudo-Macarius of Egypt (fourth century); Neilus of Sinai, Marc the Ascetic, Venerable Diodochus, Isaak the Syrian, John Climax, Hesychius (fifteenth centuries); Symeon the New Theologian (mystic of the tenth century), is followed by a new interest in this prayer, and a controversy arose about it in the fourteenth century; the main advocates of it are Gregory of Sinai and the Archbishop of Salonica, Gregory Palamas. In Russia, the prayer is taught by Abbot St. Nilus of Sora in the fifteenth century; and St. Densetrius, Bishop of Rostov, in the seventeenth century. A monk, Paissy Velichkovsky (+1794), re-discovered this way of prayer, and he exercised great influence in the monasteries of South Russia, Mount Athos and Roumania. To him and his followers is due the revival of the ascetico-mystical tradition and writings in Russian monasteries, especially in Optino (famous thenceforward for its spiritual directors) and Valaam in Finland. St. Seraphim, the hermit of Sarov (+1833), practised and taught this prayer. The monks of Optino and the famous Bishop of Vladimir, Theophan 'the Recluse' (+1894), edited, in Russian, volumes of ancient writings on the Prayer of Jesus. Of its practice by a layman, a peasant, an interesting document remains in the booklet, *The Sincere Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father* (translated by R. M. French, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, S.P.C.K.). As late as 1938, the monks of Valaam published *The Discourses on the Prayer of Jesus* in two volumes.

Many seem to have built their whole spiritual life on the prayer of Jesus, though it cannot be regarded as detached from the rest of the Christian life: Bible reading, sacramental grace, practice of the Commandments and theological virtues. In monasteries it was combined with special ascetical practices. Beginners in the use of the prayer abstained from devotional reading in order to concentrate, and the prayer replaced private psalmody in the cell, outside the services. Some kept it as a unique rule. It was repeated with beads several thousand times and was accompanied by prostrations. This acted as the first ascetical exercise of the will in obedience to the rule imposed by one's spiritual father, teaching also control over the body.

A certain bodily technique was practised and recommended by the masters of the prayer: immobility, regular breathing, fixing the eyes upon 'the heart,' etc. (St. Ignatius Loyola gave somewhat similar advice.) These 'physical' exercises were allowed only to those who had an experienced director to help them. All the fathers emphasised, however, that such methods were only 'crutches' to support the body and soul while one is gaining control of oneself. The aim was to purify the body and to make it an instrument of prayer. 'Know ye not that ye are the temples of God and the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?' (I Cor. iii, 16).

The invocation was repeated vocally as well as mentally; its purpose was *recollection*. To avoid mechanical repetition one modified words from time to time, but not too often. For instance: 'Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me; Son of God, have mercy upon us; by the prayers of thy pure Mother and all the saints,' etc. Some found it sufficient to call out: 'Jesu, Jesu.' This need be no 'vain repetition,' though we are prone to distraction; for the words call us back and, showing our instability, they increase our love and awe of God.

The vocal was replaced gradually by the mental use of the prayer; when one began to learn the habitual *custody of heart*. 'Keep thy heart with all diligence for out of it are the issues of life' (Prov. iv, 23). The prayer of affection grows stronger when the mind is 'looking down into the heart,' thus bringing about the unification of thought and feelings. The constant repetition of the prayer 'with one's mind,' 'in one's heart,' brings with it a state of total abandonment to God, of rest and *quiet* (*hesychia*). The union of the chief inward powers begins: recollection of mind, sobriety of heart, watchfulness of will.

Is this a prayer for monks who alone can dedicate their whole time to it? The prayer of Jesus is in fact widely practised by lay

people of the Orthodox Church. So simple is it that no learning is required for remembering it. It can rest on the lips of the sick too weak to say a *Pater*. In the mission fields the catechumen can learn it quickly in any tongue. An appointed number of invocations may be repeated first thing in the morning, during the day and in the evening. Many go about with their usual work repeating this prayer. Housework, ploughing, factory labour are not incompatible with it, and in fact the drudgery of some forms of manual work can be a help to concentration. It is possible, too, though more difficult, to join intellectual occupations with this continual prayer. It saves one from many uncharitable, vain words or thoughts: it sanctifies one's daily toil and relationships. The words become familiar; they seem after a time to flow of themselves. More and more they bring one into the *practice of the Presence of God*. With it grows our love and fear of offending God and of losing his nearness. Gradually, the words may seem to disappear; a *silent*, speechless *vigil* with a profound peace of heart and mind is sustained through the bustle of daily life. But in cases of distractions, temptation, tiredness or aridity it is useful to recur again to the vocal invocation. In sudden danger, or waking at night, one notices that the first conscious thought becomes that of God, as often as not in the words of the prayer of Jesus. 'I sleep, but my heart waketh' (Songs v, 2). The act of prayer has passed into a state of prayer. Like every spiritual way, this one needs fidelity, perseverance, courage. But this continual memory of Jesus Christ deepens in us and throws a new light on one's whole life. It becomes linked with the remembrance of the Calvary and of the Last Supper; our communion and the sacrifice of the altar penetrate the heart, mind and will offered to the incessant invocation of the name of Jesus. On the other hand, we can apply this Name to people, books, flowers, to all things we meet, see or think. The name of Jesus may become a mystical key to the world, an instrument of the hidden offering of everything and everyone, setting the divine seal on the world. One might perhaps speak here of the priesthood of all believers. In union with our High Priest, we implore the Spirit: Make my prayer into a sacrament.

The habit of incessant prayer often provokes 'spiritual tears.' Much has been written on this 'Weeping'—there is almost a 'theology of tears.' Waters of repentance and regeneration, they take away from the soul bitterness and aridity as rain softens the soil; they have been even compared to second baptism. A soul, humbled and simplified by tears is more apt to cling to God: so a crying child seeks repose in the love of his mother. Such 'weeping,' physical and visible, or hidden in the soul, may be a result of self-examination,

or may be stirred by thoughts of the divine goodness, long-suffering, etc.; it may be a direct act of the will. But there is a stage when we have no more mastery over the tears. It is then a spiritual 'gift of tears'; and here we touch the contemplative and mystical aspect of the prayer of Jesus.

The fathers spoke with great severity against the curiosity and vanity of the beginners who strive after mystical states that are outside their own powers and are pure acts of grace. They warned against speaking of unfamiliar spiritual experiences. (Are there not too many 'psychological' books on mystics in our own day?) Yet everyone was encouraged 'to strive after ceaseless prayer,' so that 'whether we wake or sleep we should live together with him' (I Thes. v, 17, 10). All were exhorted to 'covet earnestly the best gifts' (I Cor. xii, 31). As long as men did not expect union with God as a result of their own effort, they were shown the way to 'most excellent prayer.'

Vigilance has to increase with the growth of prayer life. Difficulties do not diminish. The wrestling is no more against 'flesh and blood,' but 'against the rulers of the darkness' (Eph. vi, 12). The fathers left a clear-cut teaching on dealing with these assaults. They knew the tempting force of mental images dangerous to all, but especially to a solitary ascetic. Despondency and despair or a haughtiness, leading to treacherous consolations of false saintliness, were studied by these men with a deep penetration. The great teachers of the East discouraged experiences of allocutions, fragrant odours, visions. In all such cases an experienced director is of a particular value, and humility and spiritual sobriety will teach a man the 'discernment of the spirits.'

Three types of inner life were distinguished by the fathers: that of the beginners—mainly consisting in the practice of virtues (*praxis*), the 'middle way' of suppression of passions (*apatheia*), and of contemplation (*theoria*); finally, the 'perfect way' of those approaching the prayerful, experimental knowledge of God (*theologia*). In purely mental prayer one follows, roughly, these stages from purification to union; (a) the memory of our sin and nothingness before God, thoughts of death, Last Judgment and eternity; (b) concentration on the life of Jesus in some details or on the whole economy of the incarnation and redemption; (c) a more and more rapturous intellectual contemplation of divine properties; his omniscience, almightiness, mercy, justice. In ever strengthening awareness of the Presence, self disappears to an extent that even the thought of one's unworthiness troubles one no more. The soul is laid bare before God in adoring peace. All rules of prayer should be dropped at such

moments; the Spirit leads the soul where he wills. But this is not quietism. The uninterrupted, quiet adoration of God, and in him the pity and love of all mankind, exclude all human passion. In this sense it is an 'insensibility'—but one can rightly speak of it as 'the fire of the *apatheia*.'

The body which was first presented as a temple becomes now a 'living holy sacrifice' (Rom. xii, 1). With the Apostle, some have experienced the reality of becoming praying members of Christ. 'Not I but Christ in me' (Gal. ii, 20). Could we not say that the prayer which by its wording was the prayer *to* Jesus becomes here the prayer *of* Jesus?

This mystical prayer, this 'sacrament of silence,' belongs to things of which 'it is not lawful for a man to utter' (II Cor. xii, 4). We are given to understand that here one comes to know the inexpressible reality (apophatic theology). There is a certain 'darkness' in the blazing divine light. 'In Thy light we shall see light' (Ps. xxxvi, 9). The Orthodox mysticism has always laid great stress on the experience of God and Christ as light. One of the most ancient hymns (known also in the West) sings of 'the gladsome Light.' This light is linked with the revelations of the 'glory' (*doxa*) in the Old Testament, which was seen also by the disciples on the face of Christ, and was experienced by St. Paul. The contemplation of the 'uncreated light' is compared with the vision on Mount Tabor—the light of the Transfiguration. Man becomes a participant of this luminous world. Remaining by nature a creature he seems to come into a life of union (*henosis*) with God, and to receive of these 'great and precious promises . . . that he might be a partaker of divine nature' (II Peter i, 4). Thus, a certain 'doctrine of deification' is rooted in the Word of God as well as in mystical experience. As if, 'with face unveiled, contemplating the glory of the Lord we are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (II Cor iii, 18).

Few receive such graces. But a road of ceaseless prayer is opened to all. We have nothing to fear: no illusions will prevail so long as we keep before us the touchstone: the love of God and of our neighbour wherein 'hang all the law and the prophets' (Mt. xxii, 40).

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