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## The Jesus Prayer and Monasticism

### I. Introduction

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

So goes one variation of the Jesus Prayer, also known as Prayer of the Heart. This prayer is, for the Orthodox, among the most profound and mystical prayers. Its appeal? To start, it is simple, for it is accessible to all Christians. It is moreover complete; it “holds in itself the whole gospel of truth”.<sup>1</sup> Third, it directly invokes the name of God—“Save me, O God, by Your name” (Psalm 54.1). Finally, it disciplines. Monastics recite it continually—ideally spontaneously—so as to internalize it, thereby achieving Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The Prayer is undoubtedly unique. What’s more, for our purposes, it also bears directly on this seminar’s theme: spirituality and the senses. In particular, understanding the Jesus Prayer reflects on a central puzzle, a paradox in the monastic approach to the sensory and the spiritual, borne on the foggy connection between these opposites. The problem is simple. Why would the monastic lifestyle use such deep sensory engagement—hymns, bells, chants, incense, candles, icons, kneeling, standing, bowing, making the “sign of the cross”, the taste of Holy Communion, etc—to facilitate spiritual enlightenment?

The Jesus Prayer, I will argue, helps us to understand this contradiction in worship. The Prayer contrasts the sensory. It is contentless, beyond imagination and image. It is the invocation of Jesus’ name—pure meaning, *logos*. Understanding the prayer is moreover worthwhile simply due to its widespread usage in the Orthodox church. But the prayer, despite its brevity, is complex, and this paper will not attempt to provide a complete analysis. At any rate, this essay is in two part. First, it presents a discussion of the prayer as a monastic activity; that is, what does one need to know in order to have a basic understanding of the attitude monks have towards the prayer. Once that is done, we can move onto the second

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<sup>1</sup> *The Way of the Pilgrim* pp. 20. This important work will be briefly discussed in section ‘II’.

part and analyze the prayer more closely, paying particular attention to how the Prayer functions as an invocation.

## II. Reciting the Jesus Prayer

*..I will glorify Your name forevermore.*

Psalm 86:12

In *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an anonymous 19th century personal account of a mendicant's spiritual journey across Russia, the narrator recounts his quest to "pray without ceasing" as per Paul's instructions. For many Christians, this classic is the salient association with the Jesus Prayer. The narrative beings as our soon-to-be pilgrim learns of Paul's injunction and afterwards worries about the practicality of following through. Inspired by the holy spirit, he becomes determined to learn to pray unceasingly. He first frequents a number of churches hoping that they will provide the necessary guidance on how to cultivate unceasing prayer, but he quickly becomes disillusioned from the lack of practical instruction on how to pray unceasingly, despite the constant affirmation of his quest from the various preachers. Soon, however, he meets an elder monk who teaches his the Jesus Prayer and lends his a copy of the *Philokalia*, a classic text containing the "science of constant interior prayer, set forth by twenty-five holy Father."<sup>2</sup> The combination of the *Philokali*, the elder's guidance, and the Holy Spirit eventually allow our pilgrim to receive the gift of unceasing prayer. The following excerpt recounts a turning point in his early attempts to pray unceasingly the Jesus Prayer:

Early one morning the prayer woke me up as it were. I started to say my usual morning prayers, but my tongue refused to say them easily or exactly. My whole desire was fixed upon one thing only—to say the prayer of Jesus, and as soon as I went on with it I was filled with joy and relief. It was as though my lips and my tongue pronounced the words entirely of themselves without any urging from me. I spent the whole day in a state of the greatest contentment. I felt as though I was cut off from everything else. I lived as though in another world, and I easily finished my twelve thousand prayers by the early

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<sup>2</sup> pp. 7

evening...Every day following I went on in the same way with my calling on the name of Jesus Christ, and that with great readiness and liking.<sup>3</sup>

True, this account is anonymous and perhaps therefore not wholly reliable. Yet it nonetheless shows what it is like to train oneself in the Jesus Prayer, or, at the very least, it shows how such training is hoped to unfold. But what exactly is the nature of the training? The discipline? The Jesus Prayer is best understood as a journey, and here we find the narrator about midway along. So what does it mean for a Prayer to be a journey? One way of seeing this, and the way favored by the Orthodox fathers, is as a tiered progression, through which one moves closer and closer to total contemplation.

Broadly speaking—and necessarily so, since exact descriptions of the journey differ from father to father—one begins this journey with a prayer of the lips—an external prayer. It is quite literally said over and over again. And in this sense it still lacks the mystical powers that make the Jesus Prayer distinctive from other prayers or chants that likewise proceed by means of disciplined repetition. That is to say, in this early stage, the Jesus Prayer is a local coloring of a universal religious phenomenon: the mantra. St. Augustine writes on the practice of frequent repetition of short prayer:

It is said that the brothers in Egypt have certain prayers which they recite often, but they are very brief, and are, so to speak, darted forth rapidly like arrows, so that the alert attention, which is necessary in prayer, does not fade and grow heavy through long-drawn-out periods.<sup>4</sup>

In these early stages of recitation it might be useful—perhaps for many necessary—to accompany the prayer with psychosomatic techniques to facilitate the process. For one, the practitioner might sit on the floor, a stool, or a meditation bench, perhaps in a dark room. It is common—and the *The Way of a Pilgrim* recommends this—to have an elder or someone experienced in the Jesus Prayer to guide you along.

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<sup>3</sup> pp. 11

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Wong pp. 39. From Augustine's Letter to Proba. Here, Augustine is not talking about the Jesus Prayer, since it is a 6th Century development. Church fathers in Augustine's times—particularly those from whom the Jesus Prayer would develop—would normally recite snippets of scriptures, usually from a Psalm.

One is moreover encouraged to use a rosary or prayer beads to keep track of how often the Prayer is said, disciplining oneself neither to say it too many times in a day nor too few times.

With this discipline, the practitioner moves onto the next stage. Here the activity becomes spontaneous, slipping from conscious engagement but nevertheless demanding attention. This is where we find the pilgrim in the excerpted quote above. Here, the prayer is internalized to the extent that it loses the property of appearing external. That is to say, though the prayer is simple and familiar, the words of the Jesus Prayer are unmistakably part of an external linguistic structure that is to a degree impersonal. It is at this stage the the words become the practitioners own. Here the prayer rides on the breath. One inhales *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God* and exhales *have mercy on me, a sinner*. "...the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Romans 8:26)

In the end, the prayer becomes one of the heart; in other words, it's recited by the spirit, not the mind. It is imageless and totally contemplative. It is recited automatically. It has a "Tetris Effect", something like a spiritual ear-worm or divine background music. It is said here to be recited on the heartbeat. Our pilgrim describes life deep into the journey of the Jesus Prayer:

...I spent the whole summer in ceaseless oral prayer to Jesus Christ, and I felt absolute peace in my should. During sleep I often dreamed that I was saying the prayer...All my ideas were quite calmed of their own accord. I thought of nothing whatever but my prayer. My mind tended to listen to it, and my heart began of itself to feel at times a certain warmth and pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, I would like to briefly clarify the topography of this journey. By emphasizing that the progression in reciting the Jesus Prayer is tiered, I might have given the false impression that it is something like an ascent up a succession of plateaus: up then flat, up then flat. On the contrary, and this is vividly evident in *The Way of a Pilgrim*, it is more like a rocky ascent—a journey of ups and downs in the name of Jesus. Temptations and sin can impede progress, even set one back. Steady discipline leads to progress.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Way of a Pilgrim* pp. 11-12

### III. The Jesus Prayer: an analysis

*I will strengthen them in the Lord, and they shall walk up and down in his name.*

Zechariah 10:22

Given our preliminary understanding of what the Jesus Prayer is, we may now move onto an analysis of the Prayer qua invocation of Jesus's name. We may start by considering the notion of a "name" and how it relates to the named; this is a Biblical theme from Genesis to the Gospels. We see this famously in Genesis 32:29 when Jacob's name-change signifies a significant change in his life. We find this theme also with Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and Saul to Paul. It is moreover not uncommon for clergy members to receive new names—consider the Pope. To know a person's name is to know something important about that person. (This helps to explain why it would be an affront to utter the tetragrammaton during worship, thereby implying that one is to some extent familiar with God's unknowable, mystic nature.) What is most important to note is that in all these cases the name is to a large degree associated with the spiritual nature of that person. On a non-spiritual, totally sensory level, the pairing of person and name is totally arbitrary, or at least one's name does not determine anything beyond the mere sensory world. When can thus infer that in each of the 4 cases above, the name-change was prompted by some spiritual matter, thereby underscoring this relation between name and spirituality.

So why does it matter that the Jesus Prayer is first and foremost an invocation of Jesus' name? Why does this separate it from mere recitations of scripture? Recall that one important step in the discipline of the Jesus Prayer is the internalization of its words. The words are to become so familiar, so ingrained in one's mind that one's actions are colored by the words. So in a sense, they become one's own. And, as we have seen, the spiritual nature of the named is bundled up in the name itself. Therefore, the spiritual nature of Jesus is internalized by the practitioner, thus uniting Christ to the Christian.

The effects of invoking the Name can be tremendous. Much of our understanding of the world is centered around our linguistic capability; to a significant extent what we think and how we think is limit-

ed by the concepts we can make intelligible in words. Given a divine, mystical relation between the connection behind the name Jesus Christ and the world manifest around of, an understanding of the former can significantly alter one's attitude towards the latter. For instance, given a constant awareness of the name Jesus Christ through unceasing repetition of the Prayer, one should see the world around oneself in a new light. This certainly seems to be the case for our Pilgrim:

...I began to have from time to time a number of different feelings in my heart and mind. Sometimes my heart would feel as though it were bubbling with joy; such lightness, freedom, and consolation were in it. Sometimes I felt a burning love for Jesus Christ and for all God's creatures. Sometimes my eyes brimmed over with tears of thankfulness to God, who was so merciful to me, a wretched sinner. Sometimes my understanding, which had been so stupid before, was given so much light that I would easily grasp and dwell upon matters of which up to now I had not been able even to think at all. Sometimes that sense of a warm gladness in my heart spread throughout my whole being and I was deeply moved as the fact of the presence of God everywhere was brought home to me. Sometimes by calling upon the name of Jesus I was overwhelmed with bliss, and now I know the meaning of the Words "The kingdom of God is within you."<sup>6</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

*...And the Word became flesh.*

John 1:14

If one thing is to be said, it is that the Jesus Prayer is words. Simple words. Different words too—the Jesus Prayer on Mt. Athos is effectively the same Jesus Prayer anywhere else in the world. What matters is the relation the practitioner stands in to the meaning of the words, and of special interest is how the words facilitate this relation. Words, unlike icons, are imageless. The simplicity of the Jesus Prayer fur-

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<sup>6</sup> pp. 28

ther guarantees that the activity is non-discursive. It doesn't make any statements; it doesn't paint any pictures. In the end it is fully detached from the sensory. It is a purely spiritual activity, and being spiritual, it is, in a sense, separate from the external, sensory world. The end result is well put by Russian spiritual writes Paul Evdokimov:

It is not enough to possess prayer: we must become prayer—prayer incarnate. It is not enough to have moments of praise; our whole life, every act and every gesture, even a smile, must become a hymn of adoration, an offering, a prayer.<sup>7</sup>

So in asking ourselves, “what is the relation between the sensory and the spiritual?” We can say that the Jesus Prayer is a form of worship that aims to transform the spiritual thereby affecting the sensory.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Wong pp. 46

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