

Research Paper  
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### Within Walls: Silence, Solitude, and Prayer

Monasticism, for one without prior knowledge, implies a certain sense of seclusion. It is associated with remote locations, protected and privileged grounds, chants and rituals that are only known to the community within, and, in general, a world on its own that is not easily accessed by an outsider. One of the features – or myths, depending on the circumstance discussed – that shrouds monasticism is its silence; yet, another of its distinguishing elements, the prayer – especially unceasing prayer, is precisely what breaks this silence. These two modes of existence penetrate each other, existing within the walled space that is the monastery.

This paper attempts to examine the relationship between silence, solitude, and prayer, especially their interaction within different levels of space. The prayers in question will be specifically the Jesus Prayer, which is a meditative prayer commonly practiced in Eastern Orthodox churches, as well as the Prayer of the Heart, which is considered the ultimate form of prayer that is unceasing and brings the devotee closest to God.

Writings about the Jesus Prayer can be traced back to the desert hermits of Egypt from the fifth century. Although Abba Isaias, or St. Isaias the Hermit, a monk that has lived first in Egypt and later in Gaza, does not give such prayer the specific name of Jesus Prayer, he starts out by setting the nature and purpose of such “secret

meditations". He writes that secret meditation offers "untroubled prayer" and "preserves the mind free of distractions<sup>1</sup>", the act of which happens within the heart.

From the start, the key to the performance of such meditations has been its internal and personal nature and retreat into silence from the distractions of the outside world.

From the sixth century onwards, hermitic texts have started naming such meditations the Jesus Prayer. For such prayers, silence has become a mental state that is both the condition and the end of spiritual activities. In the words of Theophan the Recluse, to maintain the spiritual state is to "dwell within and worship secretly in the heart" and to "enter within yourself, stand enclosed in the heart".<sup>2</sup> It would seem that the heart has been designated as a virtual space for the act of praying, which is separate from other mundane activities. The fact that the devotee needs to step within a space to preserve its peace and quiet indicates the clear boundary of such space, showing that the spiritual is kept distinct from the physical. For monastics, this may seem redundant given that they have already entered a walled sanctuary, separating monastic life from worldly life. Yet, in Eastern Orthodoxy, the monastic life is not simply a life of spiritual devotion, but entails chores and labors that help sustain the monastery and its greater religious community. Although physical labor is regarded as an act of obedience, the ultimate goal for a monastic is the free communication with God and the salvation hereafter<sup>3</sup>, and this can only be achieved through the pure prayer of the heart. It is for

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Ware, 76.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Ware, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Liudmila Naidenova, 75.

this reason that the saints and hermits of earlier times have called for the necessity of erecting a spiritual wall, separating the monastic from the holy.

Being the simplest form of prayer, the Jesus Prayer is uttered incessantly in the heart even while the hands are at work.<sup>4</sup> Here, a contrast exists between inner silence and outer activities, where mundane sound does not perturb spiritual meditation. Theophan the Recluse credits this state as an ideal state on the path to a “systemic interior order”, which is difficult but possible to achieve.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, here silence in the outer mundane world is not required as a condition for inner peace; the purpose of the prayer is to internally dispel these distractions and “bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only.” For the Jesus Prayer, the idea of unitarity and solitude features prominently. Not only is this prayer dedicated to one person alone, but it requires the devotee to be entirely in his or her private space, needing “attention in the heart”. The Jesus Prayer, being in the heart – the most sacred sanctuary behind both the monastic and the spiritual walls, would logically be expected to offer a state of inner silence. However, Theophan the Recluse instructs that the Jesus Prayer “in itself is not inner but outer prayer”, recited to arrive at inner prayer.<sup>6</sup> He also describes a similar process in which God’s omnipresence encourages the worshippers to dispel any conjured image of Himself, because He is precisely in all things.<sup>7</sup> A similar argument could be made about the silence in a monastic context, which is by far the omnipresent

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Ware, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Ware 98.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Ware 101.

element. Various saints have written on “the effortless enjoyment of a sober and quiet heart” and the joy of being “serenely silent”, which are more easily achieved when the Jesus Prayer is bound to each breath.<sup>8</sup> If such silence can constantly exist within the heart, then it would not be implausible so suggest that each utterance reinforces the silence at heart, until it ultimately loses shape and becomes the inner peace that is the goal for monastics. Here, in this state of silence, devotees enter the inner world that has been the pursuit of all previous prayers.

In contrast to the peace and quiet acquired by the devotee on his or her individual journey to the most intimate of all spiritual spaces, the monastery is by no means a solitary place. Although secluded from the outside, monastics very much live among each other. Yet, the task of monastics is to treat their companions “as though they were not present”<sup>9</sup>, knowing only their abbot as intermediary between the two worlds. Theophan the Recluse describes solitude as self-enforcing, that “even behind closed doors one can wander about the world, or let the whole world invade one’s room”, and that such activities only serve to intensify seclusion.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, this teaching for the general public seems contradictory to that which he gives to the monastics, which calls that “see that your thoughts do not wander outside the walls of the monastery”.<sup>11</sup> Theophan later reasons that monastics battle passions in the mind, which is more difficult than battling passions in their concrete form as community

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Ware 103.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Ware 250.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Ware 252.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Ware 253.

dwellers do. Therefore, having a physical wall in fact strengthens the spiritual fortitude of its inhabitants not by secluding distractions, but by transforming them into abstraction and making it a battle of the mind.

Far from being a secluded haven that rules out distractions from the outside world, monasteries are subject to their own fluxes of silence and sound, seclusion and interaction. In the juxtaposition of the mundane and the spiritual, monastics face the reconciliation between external activity and internal seclusion for the ultimate goal of being “alone amid the noise of the world”.<sup>12</sup> Within the monastic wall and the wall of the heart, one is finally able to exercise the most private and holy devotion to God, and as Paul once said, to “pray without ceasing”.

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy Ware, 256.

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