

PRAYER OF THE HEART:  
SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD\*

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*1. Introduction*

The deepest sadness and the greatest joy in Christian life are caused by an innate *longing for God*, a passionate quest for intimate and eternal communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Such longing brings sadness, because in this life it goes largely unfulfilled. Yet rather than lead to frustration, it can produce an ineffable joy, nourished by the certitude that ultimately nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, that our desire for union with Him will ultimately be answered beyond our most fervent hope. This profoundly spiritual longing is often called "bright sadness" or "joyful sorrow" (*charmolupe*). In Christian mystical experience, it is the impulse that leads, through ascetic struggle and purification, to *theosis* or "deification."

Each of us, without exception, bears within the inner recesses of our being the "image" of our Creator. Fashioned in that divine image, the holy fathers declare, we are called to grow toward the divine "likeness" (Gen 1:26f). In the words of St Basil the Great, the human person "is an animal who received the command to become god,"<sup>1</sup> that is, to become a participant in the very life of God through the deifying power of the divine "energies" or operations of the indwelling Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by St Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration* 43. Cf. Basil's *Treatise on the Holy Spirit* IX.25: the human vocation is *theon genesthai*.

The motivating force behind this sublime vocation is *eros* or *epithymia*, an intense longing or deep affective desire for union with the Beloved. Perverted by sin, that longing becomes narcissistic, and the soul goes whoring after other gods, idols fabricated in her own image. Purified by grace, the soul is re-directed toward the original Object of her love. Like the Prodigal, she turns back home, in repentance and compunction (*penthos*), to discover the Father waiting for her with open arms. The love that inspires her return, however, is a response to the prior love of God. "This is love," the apostle tells us, "not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son as an expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). Acquisition of the divine likeness, then, is predicated entirely on divine initiative. The longing of the soul for eternal life, like that life itself, is a gift of grace, wholly dependent on the object of its affection.

The first prayer of thanksgiving after communion, in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, declares: "Thou art the true desire and the ineffable joy of those who love, thee, O Christ our God, and all creation hymns thy praise forever!" The longing for communion with God is a major incentive to prayer, which may be described as "conversation" with God at the level of the heart. Prayer in the first instance involves praise and glorification of God, and it includes personal supplication as well as intercession on behalf of others. Prayer marked by the intense longing that leads to union with the Divine, on the other hand, requires *silence*. In addition to the scriptures, the liturgy, and other sources of revelation recognized by the Church, Christian mystical tradition has always known another avenue of divine self-disclosure: God reveals Himself in the silence of the heart. In his letter to the Magnesians, St Ignatius of Antioch declared, "There is one God who manifested Himself through Jesus Christ His Son, who is His Word, proceeding from silence."<sup>2</sup> St Isaac the Syrian expressed a similar thought with his familiar statement, "Silence is the sacrament of the world to come; words are the instrument of this present age."<sup>3</sup> Revelation that communicates knowledge of God requires words, as

<sup>2</sup>Mag VII.2.

<sup>3</sup>Letter no. 3. Recall the ancient hymn, sung in Byzantine tradition at the Great Entrance of the Holy Saturday Liturgy: "Let all mortal flesh keep silence. . . ."

do petitions that address needs and conditions of our daily life. Prayer uttered out of the deepest longing for God, however, demands silence.

Yet silence, at least in present times, seems to be the most difficult of virtues to acquire. We fear it, and we run from it in a relentless search for noise and distraction. A stroll on the beach requires the companionship of a Walkman. At the workplace, or waiting on the phone, or shopping for groceries, we expect to be "entertained" by music—any music, so long as it focuses our attention outside ourselves and away from the inner being. Silence means a void, a dreadful emptiness that demands to be filled. What we choose to fill that void with most often produces not only noise but agitation through overstimulation. Sensory overload is addictive. It becomes an escape from the present, from the self, from God. Like any addiction, it is pathological and life-threatening. From the news media to MTV to contemporary works of art, American culture is marked by an insatiable hunger for stimuli that divert our attention from "the place of the heart," the place of inner silence and solitude. To some degree, however, this has always been the case. When Adam was cast forth from the Garden, he lost more than life in paradise. He lost the gift of silence, and with it he lost "the language of the world to come."

In human experience prayer offers the way to recover that language, for authentic prayer transcends human language and issues in the silence of God. It is this intuition, confirmed by ecclesial experience, that led ancient spiritual guides to develop what is called "hesychast" prayer. The term *hesychia* signifies inner calm, stillness, silence. It describes not so much a method as an attitude, a disposition of mind and heart, that facilitates remembrance of God and concentration upon Him to whom prayer is directed.

In its earliest expression, hesychast prayer took the form of jaculatory petitions, single words or phrases fired like an arrow toward God. "*Marana tha!*," "Our Lord, Come!" may be one of the earliest examples, together with Peter's cry as he sank in the waters of the Lake of Galilee, "Lord, save me!"<sup>4</sup> These and similar petitions could be spoken aloud in the church

<sup>41</sup> Cor 16:23, Rev 22:20; Mt 14:30.

assembly or repeated silently by someone praying in solitude. From virtually the time of the resurrection, however, special emphasis was placed on the Name of Jesus, as having unique, life-giving power. "There is salvation in no one else [but Jesus Christ], for there is no other Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."<sup>5</sup> The name "Jesus," given by the angel at the Annunciation, signifies "God is salvation." Therefore it was very naturally taken up and incorporated into such brief, frequently repeated petitions.

Gradually, out of the experience of the desert monastics during the fourth and fifth centuries, there grew a more or less fixed formula that we know as "the Jesus Prayer": "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*"<sup>6</sup> In this classic form, it combines a doctrinal confession ("Jesus is Lord") with a supplication that seeks forgiveness and healing.<sup>7</sup> Because some persons receive the grace by which this simple formula is gradually internalized, becoming rooted in the innermost sanctuary of one's being, it is virtually synonymous with "prayer of the heart."

The Jesus Prayer is often said to have originated in the context of the hesychast movement associated with St Gregory Palamas and Athonite monks of the 13th to 14th centuries. "Palamism," however, must be seen as the culmination of a long tradition which begins with the Holy Scriptures. In one form or another the Prayer was practiced by anchorites of Syria, Palestine and Egypt during the 4th and 5th centuries. It flourished on Mt Sinai under the spiritual direction of St

<sup>5</sup>Acts 4:12. See the monograph by Bp. Kallistos Ware, "The Power of the Name" (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup>*Kyrie Iesou Christe hyie tou theou, eleeson me* [ton harmatōlon]. K. Ware, "The Jesus Prayer in St Gregory of Sinai," *Eastern Church Review* IV/1 (1972), 12 and note 44, locates the origin of the "standard" formula in the "Life of Abba Philemon" from 6th-7th century Egypt, but without the final phrase, "a sinner." It existed in many other forms, the most primitive of which, as he notes, may have been simply invocation of the name: "Lord Jesus."

<sup>7</sup>The Greek term for "mercy" (*eleēson*) is closely related to the word for "oil" (*elaion*). The petition "have mercy on me," like the "*Kyrie eleēson*" that serves as a leitmotif of the Eastern liturgies, is in effect a request that God anoint the individual or community with "the oil of gladness." It recalls the wine and oil applied by the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable (Lk 10:34), with its properties of purification and healing.

John of the Ladder from the 6th century, then on Mt Athos from the 10th century. Only some four hundred years later did the Prayer become the focus of the controversy between Gregory Palamas (d. 1359) and Barlaam the Calabrian. By the 15th century the Jesus Prayer had become the cornerstone of much Russian Orthodox piety, finally inspiring the nineteenth-century classic known as "The Way of a Pilgrim."<sup>8</sup> During the second half of the preceding century, Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain ("the Hagiorite"), together with his friend Macarius of Corinth, enshrined traditional teaching on the Jesus Prayer in five tomes entitled the *Philokalia* (first translated into Russian by Paisy Velichkovsky as *Dobrotolubiye*).<sup>9</sup> The complete collection contains sayings from the fathers on prayer, beginning with Anthony the Great (d. 356) and concluding with Gregory Palamas, thus embracing more than a millennium of Eastern contemplative tradition. The title of the work, "*Philokalia*," signifies "love of beauty." The expression conveys the truth about the divine life and purpose which the heart learns through practice of the Prayer. God is love; but He is also the source of all that is truly beautiful, resplendent with divine glory. Such beauty, the Russian philosophers held, "will save the world."

## *II. The Biblical Foundation of the Jesus Prayer*

In answer to the Pharisees' question as to when the Kingdom would come, Jesus replied, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with observable signs . . . behold, the Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:20-21). While most modern commen-

<sup>8</sup>The most well-known English translation of this work is by R. M. French (London, 1954). Numerous other editions have appeared in recent years. The first four chapters consist of a spiritual biography of a handicapped Russian peasant, who undertakes a spiritual pilgrimage toward (the heavenly) Jerusalem. It recounts his experience with the Jesus Prayer, which he learns to interiorize through constant repetition guided by a spiritual father. The last three chapters ("The Pilgrim Continues His Way") offer an in-depth meditation on the nature of hesychast prayer.

<sup>9</sup>For a useful overview of the respective contributions of Macarius and Nicodemus, see K. Ware, "The Spirituality of the *Philokalia*," in *Sobornost* 13/1 (1991), 6-24.

tators take the Greek expression *entos hymon* to mean "among you," "in your midst"—that is, as present in Jesus' person—patristic interpreters tended to render it "within you." From this point of view, the Kingdom is a mystical reality, a divine gift to be cherished and cultivated within the inward being, in the depths of the secret heart. Access to that inner reality is provided by prayer, particularly continual prayer that centers upon the divine Name.

Such prayer, however, must never be treated as a technique, a christianized mantra, whose use enables one to attain a particular spiritual end. Prayer, as St Paul insists, can never be manipulated, since in its essence it is not a human undertaking at all. "We do not know how to pray as we should," he declares, "but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). True prayer occurs when the Spirit addresses the Father, "Abba," in the temple of the human heart. It is essentially a divine activity. Yet like every aspect of the spiritual life, it demands *synergeia* or co-operation on our part. To attain *theoria*, the contemplative vision of God, one must proceed by way of *praxis*, active struggle toward purification and acquisition of virtue through obedience to the divine commandments.

Prayer, then, is not merely a gift; it is work. It demands patience, persistence and ascetic discipline. It also demands the constant vigilance known as *nepsis* or "watchfulness." The Hebrew sage admonished, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."<sup>10</sup> "Watch!," Jesus commanded His disciples at the close of his apocalyptic warnings. "What I say to you, I say to all: Watch!" (Mk 13:33-37). Such watchfulness raises a bulwark against demonic images (*phantasiai*) or thoughts (*logismoi*), enabling the mind and heart to concentrate on "the one thing needful" (cf. Lk 10:42). More than by any other virtue, we co-operate with God in the activity of prayer through "*nepsis*." This is the attitude of sober vigilance exemplified by the five virgins who welcomed the Bridegroom, and by the maiden who awaited her lover: "I slept, but my heart kept watch."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Prov 4:23, *New American Standard* translation.

<sup>11</sup>Mt 25:1-13; Song Sol 5:2.

Prayer, then, requires our co-operation with the Spirit of God through "a watchful mind, pure thoughts, and a sober heart."<sup>12</sup> With this conviction, the fathers turned to Holy Scripture in order to discern various levels of prayer that can be attained in the spiritual life. A key passage is 1 Timothy 2:1, "First of all, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made on behalf of all." To the patristic mind these represent four stages or orders of prayer, from the most elementary to the most sublime.<sup>13</sup> The apostle first names "petitions" or "supplications" (*deeseis*). These include confession of sins, together with requests for spiritual cleansing and wholeness. Their thrust is basically negative, seeking liberation from all that impedes progress toward perfection. Second, he speaks of "prayers" (*proseuchas*), meaning positive requests for the gifts and fruit of the Spirit, for virtue and the attainment of righteousness. The third order or level consists of "intercessions" (*enteuxeis*). At this stage, one turns from one's own spiritual concerns to focus on the needs of others through intercession; this is in essence a prayer of mediation that seeks another's salvation. Finally, one reaches the level of "thanksgivings" (*eucharistias*), in which the heart rises toward God in joyous adoration, offered in response to His saving grace.

Yet as the fathers insist, the four stages exist simultaneously in the spiritual life. Thanksgiving must be complemented by ongoing repentance and petition for the forgiveness of sin, just as intercessions on behalf of others go hand in hand with prayers for one's self. Beyond these four levels or orders of prayer, however, there is another about which we can say virtually nothing; yet we shall have to return to it when we raise the question of the way hesychast prayer is internalized. This ultimate form or degree is known as *kathara proseuche*, "pure prayer," that issues from the ineffable experience of union with God, in peace, love and joy. Although it defies any attempt to

<sup>12</sup>From the "Evening Prayer to Christ" of the Byzantine Compline service.

<sup>13</sup>Examples of this kind of exegesis can be found in many sources. On the question in general, see esp. *The Art of Prayer*, ed. Igumen Chariton of Valamo (London: Faber, 1966), with an excellent introduction by Kallistos Ware; and *Unseen Warfare* (by Lorenzo Scupoli, ed. by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, revised by Theophan the Recluse), (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978).

express it with words or images (all of which inevitably deteriorate into *logismoi* and *phantastiai*), it is the truest prayer of all, the utterance of the Spirit Himself. As unitive prayer, it is both the goal and the fulfillment of *hesychia*.

A key element in hesychasm is frequent repetition: continual prayer as a means to uninterrupted and ever deeper communion with God. The psalmist declared, "I keep the Lord always before me; / because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved" (Ps 15/16:8). The apostle Paul exhorts his followers to "pray without ceasing" (*adialeptos proseuchesthe*, 1 Thess 5:17), urging them to persevere, seeking constancy in prayer (*tei proseuchei proskarterountes*, Rom 12:12).<sup>14</sup>

Both the object and the content of such repetitive prayer is the divine *Name*. According to Hebrew thought, a name bears or expresses the essence of the person or thing that bears it. By extension, knowing the name of an adversary gives some measure of control over him. The patriarch Jacob wins the struggle with the angel of God, then immediately seeks to learn his name. Although the angel refuses to divulge it, he bestows upon Jacob the new name "Israel," prophetically announcing the salvation of God's elect people (Gen 32:27-29). Jesus gains power over demons by asking their name: "Legion is my name," he/they reply, "for we are many" (Mk 5:1-20). In this same encounter, the demons identify Jesus by name, adding a christological confession which even His disciples are not capable of making: "What is your concern with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" The name reveals one's authentic identity, the innermost reality or truth (*aletheia*) of one's being. Accordingly, Moses seeks to learn the name of God at the theophany on Mount Sinai. As He will with Jacob, God refuses to give His Name. Instead, He affirms the truth of His being: "I AM" (*ego eimi*, Exod 3:13-15).<sup>15</sup> In philosophical language, this is an existential rather than an ontological identification. Nothing is revealed of the divine essence, the inner

<sup>14</sup>The same idea is expressed in Col 4:2, "Be constant in prayer"; and he adds, "being watchful (*gregorountes*) in it with thanksgiving."

<sup>15</sup>The designation "I AM" is the equivalent of "*ho on*," "He who exists." This is another form of the divine Name, invoked in the final blessing of the Byzantine office ("Christ our God, the Existing One, is blessed . . ."), and inscribed on icons of the Holy Face.



being of the Godhead. Rather, God declares that He *IS*: Yahweh is the God who is present and active within human life and experience.

Yet the Name He does reveal to Moses conveys all the truth about God that can ever be known or expressed. "I *AM*," He declares. "This is my Name forever." In the person of the incarnate Son, God continues to manifest Himself as "I *AM*." The revelatory formula "Be not afraid!" is often coupled with the added word, "I *AM*." Translations that render *ego eimi* as "It is I," do a great disservice. They obscure the point that in encounters with Jesus—whether they occur to the disciples on the Lake of Galilee (Mt 14:27), or in the Upper Room on the night of His betrayal (Jn 14:6), or during a resurrection appearance (Lk 24:39, *ego eimi autos*)—the designation "I am" signals a theophany, a manifestation of divine life and purpose. God's being is revealed by His acts, and beyond those "mighty acts" nothing can be known of Him. "I *AM* the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and was and is to come, the Almighty!" (Rev 1:8).

Prayer of the heart focuses upon the divine Name because that Name itself is a personal theophany, a manifestation of God in Trinity. By invoking the Name of Jesus, with faith and love, the worshiper ascends Mount Sinai to stand before the divine Presence. Byzantine theologians developed this image of ascent, the passage of the soul through divine darkness to the uncreated light, on the basis of the primal experience of God as *personal*. Within the "immanent Trinity," the inner life of the Godhead, the three Persons exist in an eternal communion of love, united in a common nature and a common will. Accordingly, the Trinity *ad extra*—the "economic" Trinity which is present and active within creation—reveals itself as three personal realities who bear the "names" of Father, Son and Spirit.

Since the name bears and manifests the reality of the one who possesses it, prayer must address God precisely by these revealed Names. Orthodox Christianity, therefore, is obliged to retain the traditional language of God's self-disclosure, and to refrain from resorting to functional designations such as "Creator," "Redeemer," and "Sanctifier." "Inclusive language,"

while appropriate to eliminate a masculine bias that has affected many of our translations, cannot properly apply to the Godhead. This is not only because God is "beyond gender." It is primarily because functional "names" such as these, so prevalent in church usage today, lead inevitably to confusion and distortion, that is, to "heresy." (However unpopular the label "heresy" might be, it remains a useful term insofar as it implies a serious distortion of the most basic elements of revelation). Eastern tradition opposes "inclusive" or "functional" designations for God for the fundamental reason that the three divine Persons share a common will and activity. The Father is Creator; yet He is the author of redemption and sanctification. The Son is Redeemer; yet He is the agent of creation and the mediator of sanctifying grace. The Spirit is Sanctifier; yet He is the *spiritus creator*, who actualizes within ecclesial experience the redemptive work of the Son. As St Gregory Nazianzus declared, the Persons of the Godhead can only be distinguished in terms of their *origin*: the Father is eternally "ungenerated," the Son is eternally "generated," and the Spirit eternally "proceeds" from the Father (through the Son). Prayer, then, cannot properly address God with "functional" language, since such language inevitably obscures the revealed identity of each divine Person.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Masculine "names" have traditionally been attributed to the first two divine Persons, and, by association, to the Spirit as well. This usage is preserved today by Orthodox and many other Christians, and is defended on grounds of revelation: in the Old Testament (rarely), but especially in Jesus' own teaching, God is made known as "Abba," Father; the Logos becomes incarnate as a male; and the Son and the Spirit come forth from the Father, who is identified as the "source" (*pēgē*) or "principle" (*archē*) of all life, both created and uncreated. In antiquity, with very little knowledge of reproductive biology and a patriarchalist environment, the acts of "generation" and "bringing forth" ("causing to proceed") were understood as uniquely male functions. Today there is growing appreciation for the maternal aspects of God's relation to the world and human persons—and Orthodox theologians themselves are actively exploring the implications of feminine images used of the Spirit in early Syriac Christianity. If orthodox Christians of all stripes insist on retaining masculine names for God, it is because Scripture itself employs such gender-specific designations. God is indeed "beyond gender"; and all such gender-related names must be seen as analogies. But the limits of human language are not expanded by shifting analogies away from the biblical images, to speak both of and to God as "Mother." This carries pagan overtones (e.g., Isis and other "goddesses" of the mystery religions) that seriously distort God's self-disclosure as it is given in the biblical witness.

The name addressed by prayer of the heart is thus a *personal* name, one that reveals both the identity and the purpose of the One who bears it. Most frequently this is a name of the Son of God, the "Second Person" of the Holy Trinity. The child born of the Virgin receives the name "Jesus," "God is salvation"; yet He is also designated "Emmanuel," meaning "God is with us" (Mt 1:23; Isa 7:14). As the risen and exalted One, He receives the Name above every name: "Kyrios" or "Lord," the Name of God Himself (Phil 2:10-11). To St Paul, even the title "Christos" or Christ, which originally signified "the Anointed One" or "Messiah," has the force of a proper name: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19-20). In each case, the name conveys not only the personal identity of the incarnate Son; it also designates His divine "operation" as savior, revealer, ruler or liberator. To invoke the Name is to invoke as well the saving power inherent in that Name.

Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, a widely respected spiritual leader (and newly canonized saint) of nineteenth-century Russia, held that the Prayer of Jesus, focusing on the Name, is a "divine institution," established by the Son of God Himself.<sup>17</sup> He grounds this assertion in Jesus's extraordinary promise made to His disciples in the Upper Room on the night of His Passion (Jn 14:13f): "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." Later on Jesus adds: "If you ask anything of the Father in my name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (16:23f). In a similar vein, the author of Hebrews exhorts his listeners: "Through [Jesus] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb 13:15). Confession of the name of Jesus is here identified as "a sacrifice of praise," offered by human lips in gratitude for the life-giving sacrifice accomplished by our great High Priest on the altar of the Cross. A generation later such power had been attributed

<sup>17</sup>See the opening chapter of his remarkable little book, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (London: Watkins, 1952): "Praying by the prayer of Jesus is a divine institution . . . instituted by the Son of God and God Himself," pp. 2-3.

to the Name of Jesus that the unknown author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* could declare, "The Name of the Son of God is great and without limit; it upholds the whole universe."<sup>18</sup>

The New Testament also records the ancient linkage made between the divine Name and the appeal for "mercy." St Luke recounts Jesus' parable in which the tax collector casts his eyes to the ground and beats his breast, imploring, "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" (Lk 18:13). The blind man identified by St Mark as "Bartimaeus" ("son of Timaeus") defies the attempts of the crowd to silence him and cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mk 10:47). From here it was only a short step to formulate the familiar petition, "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Thus the New Testament itself can be considered the primary source of both corporate liturgical worship and individual devotion. The *Kyrie eleeson* of the communal Liturgy has as its counterpart personal invocation of the Name of Jesus, coupled with the petition, "have mercy on me!"

### III. *The Hesychast Way of Prayer*

Hesychasm (*hesychia*) may be described as a tradition of prayer, based on inner discipline (*askesis*), that leads to contemplation of the divine Presence. Although certain streams of that tradition are associated with a vision of the Uncreated Light, its true aim is to establish communion, in the depths of the heart, with the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Hesychasm seeks ultimately to attain *theosis* or "deification," through participation in the "energies" or operations of God. These consist of divine attributes, such as love, wisdom, justice, beauty. Attainment of this sublime end involves us in an "antinomy," the apparent paradox of *synergeia* or co-operation with God. On the one hand, human effort is necessary, to respond to divine grace with faith and ascetic effort. This engages us in "unseen warfare" with sin and temptation, principalities and powers. On the other hand, grace remains a free gift, totally independent of any merit or accomplishment on

<sup>18</sup>*Similitudes* 9.14.

our part. "Synergy" consists of divine initiative and human response. The human element, however, is limited to repentance, a constant turning back to God with a broken and contrite heart.<sup>19</sup>

The apostle Paul declared the body to be "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 Cor 6:19). Hesychast tradition knows that temple to be "the place of the heart." According to biblical thought, the heart is the center of all life, somatic, psychic and spiritual. It is the organ of reason, intelligence, and therefore of knowledge of God. As such it is the most intimate point of encounter between God and the human person.

Hesychast prayer is grounded in a theology of the heart. The recently canonized Bishop Theophan Govorov (1815-1894), known as "the Recluse," expressed the essence of the hesychast way in the following simple yet profound assertions:

The heart is the innermost person. Here are located self-awareness, the conscience, the idea of God and of one's complete dependence on Him; and all the eternal treasures of the spiritual life.

[True prayer] is to stand *with the mind in the heart* before God, and to go on standing before Him ceaselessly, day and night, until the end of life.<sup>20</sup>

Here there is neither enthusiasm nor quietism,<sup>21</sup> but total sobriety, with a complete integration of the spiritual faculties. Yet once again, although attainment of this state of integration demands an ongoing struggle against the "passions," the inclina-

<sup>19</sup>Hesychast tradition understands repentance to involve "guarding the heart": "Be attentive to yourself, so that nothing destructive can separate you from the love of God. Guard your heart, and do not grow listless and say: 'How shall I guard it, since I am a sinner?' For when a man abandons his sins and returns to God, his repentance regenerates him and renews him entirely." St Isaiah the Solitary (5th century), "On Guarding the Intellect" [text 22], *The Philokalia* vol 1 (ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware), (London & Boston: Faber, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>20</sup>Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*, pp. 190 and 63.

<sup>21</sup>On the difference between "quietism" and the "quiet" or "calm" of *hēsychia*, see K. Ware, "Silence in Prayer: The Meaning of Hēsychia," *Theology and Prayer*, ed. A. M. Allchin (Studies Supplementary to Sobornost, no. 3), (London: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1975), p. 21f.

tions of the fallen self, it remains wholly dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. The quality and intensity of prayer that leads to abiding communion with God are bestowed only by the Spirit. Prayer of the heart is a *charismatic* prayer in the genuine sense of the term. "We do not know how to pray as we ought. . . ." But the Spirit, as a free gift, makes prayer possible. "The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us," Paul affirms (Rom 5:5). And the chief work of the Spirit is to quicken authentic prayer within us. In the words of the great seventh century Syrian mystic, Isaac of Nineveh:

When the Spirit takes up His (in Syriac, Her) dwelling place in a man, he never ceases to pray, for the Spirit will constantly pray in him. Then neither when he sleeps nor when he is awake will prayer be cut off from his soul; but when he eats and when he drinks, when he lies down or when he does any work, even when he is immersed in sleep, the perfumes of prayer will breathe in his heart spontaneously.<sup>22</sup>

How does one acquire such prayer? The answer, once again, lies more in the dynamic of "longing," in a spiritual attitude of love for God and the intense desire to commune with Him, than it does in the acquisition of "techniques." There are, however, certain steps one can take to create the outer and inner conditions that facilitate genuine prayer, including prayer of the heart. These include achieving a certain measure of silence and solitude, to hear the voice of God and become aware of His presence.

The *Apophthegmata patrum* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, include a familiar story of St Arsenius (354-450) that stresses the importance of silence and solitude for acquiring inner prayer. Arsenius sought from God the way to salvation, and a voice replied, "Flee men! Flee, keep silent, and be still, for these are the roots of sinlessness."<sup>23</sup> This does not, however,

<sup>22</sup>*Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (tr. A. J. Wensinck; Amsterdam, 1923; 2nd ed. Wiesbaden, 1967), p. 174.

<sup>23</sup>Arsenius, 1.2.; PG 65 88BC. Cf. St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* 27 (PG 88 1100A), quoted by K. Ware, "Silence in Prayer,"

imply rejection of others or isolation for its own sake. Nor does it mean that one no longer listens to others or seeks communion with them. Silence and solitude are inner qualities that imbue all speech and all personal relationships with peace and attentive love. They serve to cultivate a level of spiritual transparency that enables the voice of God to be heard and His presence to be felt, whatever the ambient conditions might be.

With regard to the Jesus Prayer itself, however, two points need to be stressed above all. First, we cannot force the prayer. As a gift of the Holy Spirit, it cannot be manipulated. Any attempt to use the Prayer as a mantra, or to exploit it as a psychological tool for relaxation or for any other proximate goal, will inevitably lead to spiritual shipwreck. And second, to progress along “the way of hesychast prayer,” it is imperative that one be continually guided by a spiritual master. Today we are faced with a dearth of *startsi*, spiritual elders who can guide the seeker by virtue of their own experience with prayer and ascetic discipline. To a limited extent, books can serve as a substitute: hence publication and translation of the *Philokalia*, *The Art of Prayer*, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and many other important works that convey the distilled wisdom of centuries of experience. Books, however, need to be used with discretion. Even if their content is *nihil obstat* in the eyes of God, it is always possible for the reader, because of sin, weakness or ignorance, to misconstrue and misuse their wisdom. Any serious quest for attainment of prayer of the heart needs to be guided by an authentic spiritual elder.

This said, however, it is possible—and highly desirable—for any Christian to make sober and genuinely pious use of the Jesus Prayer. Without attempting to “produce” prayer of the heart, one can nevertheless incorporate the usual formula, or a shorter version of it, into personal prayer at any time and under any circumstances. Even when it is called upon occasionally, the Name of Jesus manifests its grace and healing power.

When they speak of the actual internalization of the Jesus

p. 13: “Close the door of your cell physically, the door of your tongue to speech, and the inward door to the evil spirits.”

Prayer, the spiritual masters usually distinguish three stages: oral or verbal, mental, and prayer of the heart. The novice (like the Russian pilgrim) begins with frequent, unhurried repetition of the prayer, adopting a regular rhythm which may or may not be associated with breathing.<sup>24</sup> One may, for example, form the words "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," while inhaling, then exhale with "have mercy on me, a sinner." Posture can also be an important factor in acquiring a fruitful rhythm and intensity of prayer. Often it is recommended that one sit on a low stool and fix both the gaze and the mental attention literally on the place of the heart, the center or left side of the chest. Pain can often occur as a result of the cramped position. This can have a positive effect insofar as it concentrates attention. If it becomes a hindrance or burden, or is ever sought for its own sake, then it should be avoided as a temptation or even deception (*plane*). As in all things, discernment in this regard is crucial.

The Russian Pilgrim was instructed to pray the Jesus Prayer frequently, finally several thousand times each day. This is more than most people can manage; it can even be dangerous if it expresses an unconscious compulsion, a need born of "religiosity" rather than sobriety and a genuine desire to commune with God. Here the crucial element is moderation.

Often one finds that use of a *chotki* or prayer cord helps considerably in focusing attention and establishing a rhythm of repetition.<sup>25</sup> While it can be used carelessly, like conversation beads, it should be integrated into the practice of prayer consciously and with respect. Like prostrations and the sign

<sup>24</sup>Far too much has been made of the role of the breath in hesychast prayer. While coordinating the prayer with the breath can be useful for some, for others it is a distraction and an obstacle. This, too, needs to be decided with the guidance of an experienced teacher. St Theophan the Recluse notes: "The descent of the mind into the heart by the way of breathing is suggested for the case of anyone who does not know where to hold his attention, or where the heart is; but if you know, without this method, how to find the heart, choose your way there. Only one thing matters—to establish yourself in the heart." *The Art of Prayer*, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup>The Orthodox prayer cord is usually made of black wool thread, tied in a chain of complicated knots and ending with a cross. It often contains 100 knots, but that is variable. One seldom uses it to count the number of prayers said. Rather, it serves to focus the mind through a bodily gesture and adds the faculty of touch to the experience of prayer.



of the cross, it permits involvement of the physical body in the activity of worship.

Gradually as the Prayer is repeated, it begins to transcend the verbal level and root itself in the mind. One continues to pray with the lips. But the Prayer seems to take on a life of its own, whether one is awake or asleep. Many experiences are known such as that of a Roman Catholic contemplative sister who slowly regained consciousness after a serious automobile accident. Before she actually came to, those around her saw her lips forming the words of the Jesus Prayer. "I slept, but my heart kept watch . . ."

Once the Prayer is imprinted on the mind, it appears to "pray itself" spontaneously. The writers of commercial jingles understand all too well the psychological mechanism involved here. With the Prayer, of course, there is a far deeper dimension, one that embraces the entire being, suffusing mind, heart and body with a sense of peace and joy. This is the bright sadness that radiates from the faces of saints depicted in authentic iconography. It is not merely the psyche's response to petition. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit, that calls forth compunction and penitence, love and devotion for God, and at times, the cleansing, healing grace of tears.

The authors of the *Philokalia*, and countless others with them, know of a still deeper level of prayer called *kathara proseuche* or "pure prayer." This ultimate stage is reached when the Prayer literally "descends from the mind into the heart." There, as the voice of the Spirit Himself, it makes its dwelling place within the inner sanctuary. Then the Prayer is no longer "prayed" as a conscious, deliberate act. It is received, welcomed and embraced as a manifestation of divine Presence and Life. The Prayer now associates itself with the rhythm of the heart, producing without conscious effort a ceaseless outpouring of adoration and thanksgiving. From prayer of the lips to prayer of the mind, it has become "prayer of the heart."

But once again, such prayer is a gift and must always be respected as such. Many have actively sought it, through heroic "praxis," in the hope of being blessed with the divine vision and knowledge known as "theoria." Some have been granted the gift almost at once. After only three weeks, St

Silouan of Athos was so blessed. St Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) struggled and implored God for years before he received the gift of pure prayer. And many saints, of course, never do. That determination, like salvation itself, must be left entirely in the hands of God. Nevertheless, there is virtue in seeking the gift, whether or not it is accorded, as long as it is sought out of love for God and longing for union with Him, and not for the sake of the experience itself. In this regard, discernment of one's motives can also be made most surely and most effectively through the guidance of a spiritual teacher.

#### *IV. The Fruit of the Jesus Prayer*

The depth and authenticity of prayer are known by its fruits. We can gauge the truth of our own prayer by the effects it has on our personal life and relationships. With respect to the Jesus Prayer, we can conclude by noting four such effects.

In the first place, practice of the Prayer promotes what is referred to today as *centering*. Within the spiritual life, this means focusing on "the one thing needful" (Lk 10:42). Yet this ability to "center" is itself a gift, one granted in a relationship of "synergy" between God and the human person. Mary of Bethany welcomes Jesus into her home and places herself at his feet in the position of a disciple. While her sister Martha busies herself with domestic affairs, Mary seeks what is essential. She centers upon the Word of God, and receives an invaluable legacy, "the good portion that will not be taken away."

The Prayer of Jesus can serve to focus thought during periods of meditation. Once it becomes an integral part of worship, regardless of its degree of internalization, it produces an ability to concentrate, to center, that provides depth and richness to all prayer.

A second purpose of the Prayer, and fruit borne by it, is acquisition of the *memory of God*. Great mystics of the Christian East from Diadochus of Photice (5th century) to Gregory of Sinai (14th century) used the expression "Memory

of God" as equivalent to invocation of the Name of Jesus or "Prayer of the Heart."<sup>26</sup> The concept of "memory," in Hebrew thought as well as Greek, signifies more than recollection, the recalling of a person or an event. "Anamnesis," as its use in the Liturgy suggests, signifies "reactualization." Through the anamnestic quality of the Liturgy, the saving events of Christ's death and resurrection are rendered present and "actual" in the experience of the worshiping Church. Repetition of the Prayer of Jesus can have this same anamnestic effect. By it, one "remembers" God in the sense of rendering Him present; or rather, one opens the mind and heart to His presence, otherwise obscured by thoughts, images, and other distractions. To preserve the memory of God is to hold oneself continually in God's presence, with fear and trembling, but also with the certitude that Jesus remains with us "until the end of the age."

Practice of the Prayer of Jesus can also bear fruit of *self-sacrificing love*. We are becoming aware today that much self-sacrifice within the Church is the result of religious addiction, a compulsive need to help, heal and save others, however appropriate or inappropriate our actions might be. Self-sacrifice can in reality be the unconscious sacrifice of one's family, of friends, and of one's well-being, all in the name of "fixing" or "rescuing." These are destructive behaviors; and often our own discernment is not adequate to distinguish them from genuine expressions of *diakonia*. Yet the fact of such compulsive behaviors should never be allowed to obscure Christ's call to take up one's cross, to go the extra mile, to sacrifice one's own interests out of love and concern for another.

In ways that are not explainable but are a constant in Christian experience, invocation of the Name of Jesus can bring order, harmony and clarity of vision out of our inner chaos. It can restructure our unconscious priorities, so that love is no longer self-serving but is freely offered from "a pure heart and a sober mind." Perhaps the Prayer decreases our level of anxiety by causing both mind and heart to surrender to Him who is the Wisdom, Word and Power of God. But this kind of reflection can lead us into sterile "psychologizing." It would be more accurate to say that the love which

<sup>26</sup>See K. Ware, "The Jesus Prayer in St Gregory of Sinai," p. 17.

issues from practice of the Prayer is a fruit of the Spirit, together with "joy, peace . . . and self-control" (Gal 5:22). Both a "gift" and a "fruit," that love itself is the power of God, for reconciliation, growth and healing in every personal relationship.

The fourth effect or fruit of the Prayer of Jesus leads us back to where we began, to the concept of *longing*. Longing for God, the intense inner desire of the heart that seeks eternal union with Him, is the driving force and the sanctifying grace of the spiritual life. It provides the courage and strength to assume the ascetic way toward *theosis*, the vision of God and participation in His divine life. Repetition of the Name of Jesus enhances that longing, again by centering upon what is essential.

In his first Mystical Treatise, St Isaac of Nineveh declared,

The highest degree of silence and inner calmness (*hesychia*) is reached when a person, in the intimate depths of the soul, converses with the divine Presence, and is drawn in spirit to that Presence. When the soul is transfigured by the constant thought of God, with a watchfulness that does not fade either by day or by night, the Lord sends forth a protecting cloud, that provides shade by day and sheds a radiant light by night. That light shines in the darkness of the soul.

That transfiguring Light is the presence of the Holy Spirit Himself, bestowed in baptism, but constantly renewed through the exercise of inner, contemplative prayer. The Prayer of Jesus is a gift, superficially accessible to all, but internalized in the hidden depths of the heart by only a few. If one feels called to pursue "the hesychast way," it is important to remember that ceaseless prayer must never be sought for its own sake, not even for its perceived spiritual benefits.

Received with thanksgiving as an expression of divine love, the Prayer of Jesus can be offered up as a "sacrament" of the divine Presence. Through it, "God is with us," in an intimate and unique way, to bless, guide, heal and transform the "secret heart" from stone to flesh and from flesh to spirit.

But like every sacramental aspect of life in the Body of Christ, the Prayer can be true to its purpose only insofar as it serves to glorify God, and to increase both our faith and our joy in His unfailing presence with us.

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