

Life of the Spirit

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PRAYER WITHOUT CEASING

BY

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Sine intermissione orate (I Thess, v, 17)



THE following notes have been suggested to the writer by the reading of *Récits sincères d'un pèlerin à son père spirituel*, a French translation¹ of a MS. found on Mount Athos and published at Kazan in 1882. They are set down here as they may be not without interest to others. Of this book Professor Arseniev writes (*Mysticism and the Eastern Church*): The experience of the old Oriental Fathers, those guides to the ascetic mystical life, as they are collected in the *Philokalia*, spring into fresh life in that remarkable monument of Russian folk mysticism of the middle of the nineteenth century. . . The Candid Narrative of a Pilgrim to his Confessor . . . is by a man of great capacity for intense inward prayer. This pilgrim is possessed by the sweetness of inward prayer and thereby his life is transfigured'. The Pilgrim heard one day, the words of the Epistle of St Paul to the Thessalonians read in church, 'Pray without ceasing', and failing to understand how this could be possible, gave himself no rest until he met a monk who not only explained them but taught him how to recite the 'Jesus Prayer', an ejaculation repeated 'without ceasing'.

The practice of ejaculatory prayer is of course of great antiquity. In India the repetition of the mystical syllable OM, or the name of some god, or a phrase from the scriptures was long in use among Hindus and Buddhists. A certain magical power was attributed to such a name and formulas and their recitation supposed to effect a union between the devotee and the object of his worship. The *Prasna* and *Mandukya* Upanishads treat at some length of the meaning and virtue of OM and its repetition. Thus the prayer of ejaculation from its earliest appearances had been simplified from a short sentence to a single name or even syllable.

It is tempting to speculate as to how much of the Vedantist philosophy reached Egypt and Greece, notably by means of the sages who visited Plotinus and endeavoured to persuade him to return with them to India. There are many witnesses to this form

¹ *Irenikon*, Tome IV. There are two English translations, one from *Irenikon*, published Burns Oates and Washbourne, and one from Russian, S.P.C.K.

of continual prayer in the desert. From the *Vita Antonii* of St Athanasius we know that 'he prayed continually, for he had heard "Pray and let it not be tedious to you"'. Abba Epiphanius taught 'It is right for the monk who hath made himself to be remote from the world to be occupied with prayer to God unceasingly'—and he also said: 'Know thyself and thou shalt never fall. Give thy soul work, that is to say, constant prayer'. Of another of the Fathers, Abba Sisoës relates, 'Now this man's manner of life was marvellous and a certain man used to say about him, "I once wished to count the prayers which he made, and I saw that he did not cease to pray either by day or by night"'. Cassian says that he had the tradition of the frequent repetition of the verse, *Deus in adiutorium meum intende* from those who *antiquissimorum patrum residui erant*, and St Augustine writing to the widow Proba says, *Dicuntur fratres in Aegypto crebras quidem orationes, sed eas brevissimas et raptim*, and adds, characteristically, *absit enim ab oratione multa locutio, sed non desit multa precatio, si fervens perseverat intentio*.

In his Rule for Monks St Benedict sums up and preserves for all time the ancient monastic tradition, and it is at first sight astonishing that the whole of his teaching on prayer could well be written on the back of a postcard. He lays down that prayer should be *instantissima, brevis et pura*, which certainly suggests ejaculation, as does his advice to the monk, *Orationi frequenter incumbere*, to give himself frequently to prayer. Prayer, he tells us in fine, should not be loud-voiced but be made with tears and compunction of heart. Abbot Marmion in his book, *Le Christ, Idéal du Moine*, understands the expression *instantissima oratione* to mean ejaculatory prayer, saying that this prayer, *qui doit si frequemment intervenir le long de nos journées, ne sera pas nécessairement longue: se réduisant, le plus souvent à un simple élan vers Dieu; à nue étincelle spirituelle, elle ressemblera passablement par la forme à ce qu'on a appelé, en ces derniers siècles l'oraison jaculatoire*.

He alludes too in another place to the use of short phrases from the Liturgy and notably the verse *Deus in adiutorium* already mentioned and to which St Catherine of Siena was devoted. The use of some definite formula is of the greatest value in occupying and steadying the mind and imagination. A passage from one of Abbot John Chapman's letters is worth recalling in this connection. Writing to 'a literary man' (letter xvii) and treating of contemplation, he says: 'So to keep the imagination quiet, the best thing is to keep it in tune with the will and higher intellect, by very simple "acts". The mere *imagined words* give the imagination food; by sticking to them (the same act or many, as you like) the imagination may even get lazy, or almost mesmerised (for a short time usually). It is the *imagined sounds* which fill the imagination and (I suppose) other filmy images connected with them. That is

why very expressive words are best; either expressive in sense (as "O God, I want thee and nothing but thee"), or by beauty of sound (say, some verse of the Psalms, *Exultabunt labia mea cum cantavero tibi, et anima mea quam redimisti*, is an excellent "tag"), because there is association of ideas between such sounds and the almost imperceptible clinging of the will to God'.

With the foregoing by way of introduction, we come to the consideration of the Jesus-prayer itself, well known and widespread in what was once holy Russia and the Christian East. In the West and Latin Christendom it is curiously unknown. This may be accounted for by the fact that it was introduced into Italy by Pelagius or Marinus, a Greek monk and one time spiritual master of St Romuald, a vestige of this remains in the Camaldolese form of rosary; and by St Nilus first living near Monte Cassino and then at Grottaferrata. The Vallambrosians have or had once the same tradition from their founder, St John Gualbert, who had visited St Romuald at Camaldoli. Neither of these two congregations of monks however flourished outside Italy owing to the then preponderant prestige of Cluny, hence their influence was little felt in the West.

As for the form and method of the Jesus-prayer, the instruction given to the pilgrim by the hermit whom he met is as good as any. 'Continual interior prayer to Jesus is a constant and uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus with the lips, in the mind, and in the heart; it is the realisation of his constant presence and the asking for his grace, during all our occupations, always and in all places, even during sleep. This prayer is composed of the following words: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" Whoever uses this prayer finds in it so great a consolation and so insistent a need to repeat it constantly, that he cannot live without it, and without its resounding in him, so to speak, of its own accord'. Advice as to the manner of recitation is quoted from the writings of St Simeon the New Theologian, 'Sit by yourself alone and in silence. Lower the head and shut the eyes, breathe gently and imagine yourself looking into your heart. Withdraw into the heart all the thoughts of your mind. Draw in your breath and say: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" Say this softly with the lips, or say it mentally. Strive to put away all other thoughts. Be still, be patient, and repeat it as often as you can'. The pilgrim describes how he became gradually proficient, repeating with the intaking of the breath, 'Lord Jesus Christ', and breathing out 'have mercy on me!' This he did at first many times a day then for an hour at a time and finally nearly all day long. He then associated the prayer with his heart-beat, pronouncing for each beat a word of the prayer, which thus ended by becoming spontaneous, 'resounding within him, so to speak, of its own accord'. The use and control of the breath is so much insisted upon by Indian ascetics that the linking of the ejaculations with the breath-

ing and beating of the heart, seems to suggest an origin further east than the deserts of Egypt and Palestine; the finding as it were a physical basis for a spiritual or supra-physical action as in the practice of Yoga.

Another resemblance to Indian asceticism is the stress laid upon the necessity for a spiritual master; the pilgrim is warned that this inward prayer cannot meet with success unless he has the direction of an Elder. Just as in India, the Guru was of the first and last importance, so we find Nicephorus, the monk, writing: 'During the practice of the inward activity of the heart, a genuine and well-informed director is required. If such a one is not at hand, then diligently seek one'. Thus, too, Macarius of Optino, the famous *staretz* of the last century, writes in his letters of direction: 'The first requisite condition is access to an experienced spiritual director; absolute obedience to him comes next'. He underlines, too, the importance of humility and purity of heart. The same advice regarding humility, it may be noted in passing, was given to Seraphim of Sarov when as a young man he went into the wilderness: 'Humble your mind until your heart burns and resounds with the Jesus-prayer. Pray constantly'.

Many excellences have been claimed for this kind of prayer, among others St John the Karpathanian writes that when the clause, 'Have mercy on me (a sinner)', is repeated, to every such repetition God's voice answers secretly, 'Son, thy sins are forgiven thee'. The form, too, has been considered specially adapted to constant use, the reason given being that it is composed of two parts. In the first the soul is led to the life of Christ, which as the Fathers teach, contains the whole Gospel in brief, and in the second, it is faced with its own sinfulness, helplessness and need for grace and mercy, it is the justifying prayer of the publican wherein humility calls upon the divine compassion and draws down a blessing. 'Only those who always feel like the publican at prayer, or the prodigal on his way home, can practise it (the Jesus-prayer) with impunity', writes Macarius of Optino. 'It is good only for the man whose heart sorrows deeply and whose mind is free from worldly chatter; for the mouth that feeds on pig-swill may not feed on the holy name.' The pilgrim encourages his companion to practise the prayer as frequently as possible, adding that, 'At the end of a certain time you will experience in your heart a subtle and delightful sweetness, with which it will be enkindled and softened'. This is a strange echo of Richard Rolle's fire and sweetness.

One is inevitably reminded of the hymn, *Jesu dulcis memoria dans vera cordi gaudia: sed super mel et omnia eius dulcis praesentia*. The mind concentrating upon the name of God, *memoria*, is comforted and enlightened and thus persevering finally lays hold of the Master's feet, as it were, realising his intimate presence in the secret places of the soul, that Kingdom of God that is within. Mr Huxley in his, *The Perennial Philosophy*, has

pointed out a curious parallel to this idea in the Buddhist scriptures, it occurs in the Surangama Sutra and is as follows: 'Moreover whoever recites the name of Amitabha Buddha, whether in the present time or the future time, will surely see the Buddha Amitabha and never become separated from him'.

Not the least virtue of the prayer, indeed, is that it centres upon the divine name, which gives to it the fragrance and savour experienced by those who devote themselves to it: *mel in ore, auri melos, dulcia cordi iubila*. English readers will find themselves here on more familiar ground since the devotion to the name of Jesus was so much a mark of our own mystics. 'For thou shalt think joy to hear the name of *Jesu* named', writes Rolle, 'sweetness to speak it, mirth and song to think on it. If you think on *Jesu* continually and hold it stably, it purgeth sin, it kindleth thy heart, it clarifieth thy soul, it openeth heaven, it maketh contemplative men. Have *Jesu* often in mind; for all vices and phantoms it putteth from the lover of it.' Much more, too, especially in his meditation on the words, *Oleum effusum nomen tuum*. A last quotation perhaps will not be out of place from the *Cloud of Unknowing*, in the 27th chapter, 'Of the special prayers of them that be continual workers in the work of this book', the author writes, 'and if they be in words, as they be but seldom, then be they in full few words: yea and the fewer the better. Yea, and if it be but a little word of one syllable, methinks it is better than one of two, and more according to the work of the spirit; since a ghostly worker in this work should evermore be in the highest and sovereignest point of the spirit. And therefore it is written that *short prayer pierceth heaven*'.

It need hardly be added that the ways of God with souls are infinitely various, that no two souls are alike either in their gifts or the circumstances in which they find themselves. The science of prayer built as it is upon the general experience with its gradations and classifications must needs present a norm or average. The country must be mapped out, but the paths of the many wayfarers are diverse, no two the same. God works in each soul perfecting it according to its own special character, drawing out its latent potencies, making use even of its very vices and frailties. Most of all perhaps is this the case with prayer, *alii sic, alii vero sic*, each traveller goes his own road, each man speaks to his God in the language of his own heart. Nor is the same soul constant in this, but changes with greater knowledge, greater experience and under the impulse of grace. Always the Spirit breathes where he wills, his attractions and outpourings are not for measure or calculation. He is the Lord of his own gifts, giving and withholding as it pleases him, and how it pleases him. *Sit nomen Domini benedictum*.