

THE WAY OF PRAYER

by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

The prayer of Orthodox Christians was primarily formed in the liturgy of the community rather than inside the walls of monasteries or in the hearts of individual saints. It is the liturgy that provided the regular expression and rhythmical pattern for adoration and intercession. Liturgy is not identical to prayer, even though it is the source and an essential part of prayer. Prayer accompanies every aspect of life and liturgy. The cycle of weekly services, the daily routine of morning prayer and evening song, and the unceasing invocation of the name of Jesus are as intimately connected and as integrally life-giving for the individual at prayer as blood cells are to a body. In this way, liturgy spills over and into the daily life of Orthodox Christians.

Prayer is the touchstone of a person's spiritual life. It discloses the true stature and authentic condition of one's life. Prayer is what ultimately reveals who we are in relation to God and other people. If we can pray, then we can talk to others; if we know how to pray, then we also know how to relate to others. Prayer is a mirror of the inner life. This applies equally to those who have chosen to consume their lives entirely in prayer and to laypersons, both men and women, whose life ought to be infused with prayer. Prayer is not the privilege of the few but the vocation of all. Prayer may be what monastics are preeminently designed to do, but it also constitutes the fundamental expression of the human relationship to God and to other people as well as to God's natural creation. As such, prayer is truly universal.

There are many different ways of praying. Yet prayer cannot be experienced by means of a detached perception or external connection, in the way that objects are experienced. Prayer must be personally lived or "touched," as Saint John Climacus (579-649) would prefer to say in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. We do not learn to pray from manuals or prayer books. Prayer cannot even exist in itself: it exists—as the English term denotes—only as the activity of someone at prayer. Simply put, a "prayer" is a praying person. It is not a text, but a living human being; not a book, but a burning heart. "Prayer" is a relationship word; it can never be thought of in abstraction, isolated from others or from God. Prayer presupposes and aims at mystical connection or sacramental encounter. Unless this is clearly understood, all talk about prayer tends to falsify what is at stake.

This means that prayer must be inclusive of others, of all, and of the entire world. However, it is especially inclusive of God as the divine "Other." Saint John Climacus observes that faith in God is prayer's wing, proof, and self-verification. It is this openness to others that informs prayer at all times. Prayer is always a dialogue. When it involves silence, it is not a mute or sterile silence, but rather one that begets God. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 45:11). Silence implies a keen sense of listening, of expectancy, of anticipation. Prayer implies concern for what is going on inside us and around us. To quote once again from Saint John of the Ladder (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28, 6), "Silence exposes those who are truly able to love."

The dialogical character of prayer means that God is able to speak, and the human heart is able to hear, through everyone and in everything. Prayer can never presume; prayer can never demonstrate or result in prejudice. To presume or exclude is the denial of prayer. On the one hand, God speaks unpredictably inasmuch as He surprises us with what matters in life, things that normally lie far beyond our petty interests and needs. On the other hand, God's voice is quite predictable, as we know well that responding "to the least of our brothers and sisters" (Matt. 25:40) is tantamount to responding to God,

How unfortunate it is that we have reduced prayer to a private act, an occasion for selfish complaint. In prayer, our concerns ought to be the concerns of others, of the world, and especially of those who cannot protect themselves. Otherwise, prayer becomes more than exclusive; it becomes divisive, which is the literal meaning of the term "diabolical." Authentic prayer reveals a sense of togetherness, not as a comfortable feeling of self-complacency but rather as an experience of at-onement or reconciliation with all humanity and all of God's creation. The *Macarian Homilies*, a late fourth-century spiritual classic, states that "those who pray truly and in silence, edify everybody everywhere." The cosmic significance of prayer and its universal force in the world have important qualifications, not least for the understanding of the role of believers in our age. For there can never be love for one person or group of people and not another. As the Christian Gospel puts it, to say that we love God when we do not love our neighbor is to be proved liars (cf. 1 John 4:20). This mutual interdependence of all humankind, as of all creation, is crucial in appreciating the wide-reaching effects of our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions.

The foremost purpose of prayer is self-purification. "First of all," claims Evagrius of Pontus (346-99) in his masterpiece *On Prayer*, "pray to be purified from your passions." Unpurified, prayer becomes false piety, or quite simply false prayer. Self-regarding prayer is sinful prayer; or, more precisely, it is not prayer at all. In fact, the Desert Fathers and Mothers insist that not only is purity a prerequisite for prayer; purity actually is prayer. They speak of stripping ourselves of all that is unnecessary or superfluous, of all that prevents or delays us from connecting with our Creator, with our inner world, and with the rest of the world.

This is why the sequence of prayer recommended by the Church Fathers is: thanksgiving, confession, and petition. It is a suggestion that serves to underline the priority of looking outward toward others rather than focusing inwardly on ourselves:

Before all else, let us first list sincere thanksgiving on the scroll of our prayer. On the second line, we should place confession and heartfelt contrition of the soul. Finally, let us present our petition to God. This has been shown to be the best way of prayer, revealed to someone by an angel.

(St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28, 6)

Although the author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* refers to this sequence as being revealed "by an angel," in fact it is not unprecedented in the spiritual classics, including

Evagrius of Pontus in the fourth century, Abba Isaiah of Scetis in the fifth century, Barsanuphius and John in the sixth century, and Isaac the Syrian in the seventh century. Our concerns and preoccupations should not take center stage at the time of prayer. We should first allow a period of silence, when our personal interests and anxieties settle somewhat from the intensity of our daily routine, and then allow space for the needs of the world to rise to the surface of our hearts. Just as love arises from prayer, so, too, does prayer derive from silence.

Moreover, in the Orthodox tradition, prayer does not constitute a stage—whether preliminary or ultimate—in the spiritual life; rather, it is a pervasive activity that permeates all stages and all aspects of life. Prayer presupposes a life that is fully integrated with the life of the world rather than something that happens at a particular point in our daily or weekly routine. Our aim in reciting prayers on given occasions, and retiring for prayers at particular moments, is to advance from the stage of saying prayers to the point of becoming prayer. To adopt the words of an early theologian, Origen of Alexandria (175-254), "The entire life of a saint is one great, unbroken prayer." Our goal is to become fiery flames of prayer, living prayers, comforting those in despair and warming those in need.

THE JESUS PRAYER

The whole teaching about prayer and the entire discipline of prayer may be condensed into a short formula, commonly known as the Jesus Prayer. It is a prayer that was solemnized in the classic writings of *The Philokalia* and popularized through more contemporary works, such as *The Way of a Pilgrim*, the anonymous nineteenth-century story of a Russian wanderer in search of "unceasing prayer," and J. D. Salinger's 1955 and 1957 stories from the *New Yorker*, published separately under the title *Franny and Zooey*, where members of the Glass family discuss the importance of education and the role of contemplative prayer.

The words of this brief prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"—are sometimes simply reduced to "Lord, have mercy." It is a perfectly simple prayer and should not be turned into an unduly complicated exercise. In this respect, the Jesus Prayer can be used by anyone inasmuch as it is a concise arrow-prayer that leads directly from our heart to the heart of God via the heart of the world. Due to its brevity, it provides a practical means of concentration and freedom from distraction. Consequently, it enables one to repeat the name of God spontaneously at all times and in all places, thereby actualizing the living presence of the divine person, who is named and thereby invoked. It is a way of taking seriously Saint Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5:17).

While the roots of the Jesus Prayer may be traced back to Scripture (Exod. 3:14 and Phil. 2:9-11), its sources are already adumbrated in the fourth-century desert tradition. However, it assumes particular importance in the sixth and seventh centuries with the Palestinian and Sinaite schools of spirituality. The formula itself is first found in the tenth century but is established in the fourteenth century with the tradition of Hesychasm; at that time, it is brought from Mount Sinai by Saint Gregory of Sinai (ca. 1255-

ca. 1337) to Mount Athos, where it is symbolically preserved to this day for the whole world. Nevertheless, while the Jesus Prayer has been nurtured and cradled in monastic circles through the centuries, it has always been regarded not as a privilege of the monks but rather as the treasure of all those who wish to experience the fruit of prayer.

The Jesus Prayer is one way—albeit a powerful and tested way—of preserving the power of silence in prayer. Learning to be silent is far more difficult and far more important than learning to recite prayers. Silence is not the absence of noise but the gift or skill to discern between quiet and stillness. It is the power of learning to listen and the wisdom of learning to know. Silence is a way of being fully involved and active, of being fully alive and compassionate. In prayer, when words end in silence, we awaken to a new awareness and watchfulness. Silence shocks us out of numbness to the world and its needs; it sharpens our vision from the dullness of complacency and selfishness by focusing on the heart of all that matters. Silence is a way of noticing more clearly, of paying attention, and of responding more effectively.

Then, through silence and prayer, we no longer ignore what is going on around us; and we are no longer stuck in what merely concerns us. Then we can commit to a countercultural way, whereby we are no longer victims of our society's ways and norms, passively accepting or obsessively pursuing what is either fashionable or acceptable. This is because we recognize that we are all intimately interconnected and mutually interdependent. We come to know that nothing is self-contained, that there is no autonomy in our world. We appreciate that there can only be a distinction between a sense of responsibility and a lack thereof. Through the Jesus Prayer, one develops a greater sense of awareness and attentiveness to the world within and around.

Source: His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering Mystery*, Doubleday, 2008, pp.73-81