



The Jesus Prayer and Desperation

At the monastery I visit, the brothers have a rule that includes one hour of saying the Jesus Prayer while doing nothing else. Of course they strive to pray at all times, but for at least one hour each day each monk stands before the icons in his cell and says the Jesus Prayer.

When I visit the monastery, I also try to practice this rule. (Gentle snickers are appropriate at this point.) I admit that I have experienced very brief moments of something that smells like a cousin to transcendence, but mostly it is a battle of self discipline that I lose several times within the hour until I finally give up and sit on the edge of my bench-like bed telling God I'm sorry for the last ten or fifteen minutes. There doesn't seem to be any energy to pray that I have learned to tap into.

However, when I am on vacation or at a conference, I experience something very different. I take long walks when I am away from home; and when I do, I say the Jesus Prayer. Although I still do not experience consistency in my prayer, I do experience something else. I experience a kind of desperation that becomes a fervent energy to pray.

When I'm at home (and certainly at the monastery), the temptations I experience are usually of a subtle nature. I don't recognize a train of thought as dangerous right away. However walking the shopping district of Boulder, Colorado, or downtown Chicago, or any city center, I am immediately bombarded with multiple easily-recognizable deadly tempting thoughts. Fear caused by such thoughts so easily gaining traction in my mind and producing almost immediate passionate responses in me creates a desperation that in turn energizes prayer. I find myself internally shouting the Jesus Prayer as I walk as fast as I can.

In my experience, desperation is a key. I think that if I more carefully paid attention to my inner life, I would probably recognize the danger of subtle thoughts sooner. And in turn, I would probably find energy to cry out to God for help in contexts that are actually conducive to Communion—like my own office at home or in my cell at the monastery. Baby steps, baby steps, baby steps. Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.

May God grant us all something like desperate prayer, that even in the quietness of our own prayer corners, our hearts would shout out fervently for mercy.