



## From the Prayer of Jesus to Prayer of the Heart

The expressions “Prayer of the Heart” and “Prayer of Jesus” or “Jesus Prayer” are often used as equivalents. They should, however, be clearly distinguished one from the other. According to a person’s degree of spiritual maturity, the “Jesus Prayer” can be either active or contemplative. In the latter case, it becomes a true “prayer of the heart.”

The Jesus Prayer is composed chiefly of the name of Jesus. Athonite monks pray continuously: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!” It can begin with a confession of faith: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God.” The cry for “mercy” is then uttered as a call for God to pour out His grace upon us (“mercy” is closely related to the Greek term for “oil,” which in Hebrew usage was a symbol of blessing). The Jesus Prayer is thus a “verbal icon” of Christ, which communicates to us the deifying grace or energy of the Risen Lord.

This invocation becomes true “prayer of the heart” only under certain conditions. The 19<sup>th</sup> “Spiritual Homily” of St. Macarius of Egypt says this: “When persons draws near to the Lord, they must first do violence to themselves in a strenuous effort to await His grace with unshakeable faith... They must struggle to pray even when they lack ‘spiritual prayer.’ When God sees how just how they persevere in the struggle, even when their heart is not in it, God will grant them the gift of true spiritual prayer, true charity, true tenderness and compassion. In a word, God will fill them with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” ...

This struggle involves us in the active phase of prayer. It is not, however, a “method” that will lead us deeper into the spiritual life. That can only occur when we respond with *humility* to the grace of God. Repeating the prayer constantly has special value insofar as it leads us beyond discursive reasoning and other forms of mental reflection. It leads to simplicity and openness of heart that focuses the soul uniquely on Christ. Humility is the key to this inner movement. It enables us to sense God’s Presence and help, and to welcome His gift of salvation. It promotes confidence in God, trust that He will see us through times of chaos and tumult, that He will be our Light when we walk through darkness, that He will comfort us in times of illness, spiritual struggle and distress. All of this God offers us through the Prayer of Jesus.

Once this prayer has taken root within us, our heart is illumined by a deep confidence, in which we are spared of the former blindness that allowed us to pray only with the lips. Now we welcome prayer as an ineffable treasure. As spiritual guides have so often declared, “the Prayer of Jesus is a joy that elicits a response of thanksgiving.”

At this point in the spiritual pilgrimage, the heart becomes transformed by grace. Nevertheless, God allows us again and again to be tempted, to teach us that it is in Him alone that we can find our strength and the fulfillment of our hope. This is why it is so necessary that we learn to accept our weakness and frailty with a spirit of genuine humility. No one can acquire humility other than by using the appropriate means, means that lead to a humble and broken heart and the elimination of our presumptuous thoughts. For all too often the Enemy discovers the weak points within us, and that allows him to turn us from the way that leads to Life.

Without humility, it is impossible for a person to attain spiritual “perfection.” We learn by trials, and without them, no one can acquire true humility.



That acquisition necessarily involves a “broken heart” and ardent prayer. Such humility allows those who love us to draw near to us and to manifest that love. However great the trials and temptations, they can always become, by the grace of God, the means by which we attain genuine humility and thus gain the Kingdom of Heaven. Those trials may involve our inner life: assault by corrupting thoughts, or surges of pride (which is so often a manifestation of our shame and woundedness). They may also involve attacks against our body: illness, old age, neglect on our part or the part of other people. Sometimes they come, too, from overt attacks by others: by abuse or abandonment. In any case, such trials are needed, in order to lead us into a state of true humility.

It is in that state of humble acceptance of our trials—constantly remitting them into the loving hands of God—that the Prayer of Jesus can become true Prayer of the Heart.