

The Jesus Prayer [B] (Emma Cazabonne)

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II) Ontological effects of the Jesus Prayer

The act of repeatedly invoking the Name has a double effect: it makes our prayer more unified and at the same time more inward.



1. Unification

The repeated Invocation of the Name can bring us, by God's grace, from dividedness to unity, from dispersion and multiplicity to singleness.

'To stop the continual jostling of your thoughts,' says Bishop Theophan, 'you must bind the mind with one thought, or the thought of One only.'"**[i]**

To oppose our thoughts, we look upwards to the Lord Jesus and entrust ourselves into his hands invoking his Name; and the grace that acts through his Name overcomes the thoughts which we cannot obliterate by our own strength. This is a positive spiritual strategy, not a negative one: instead of trying to empty our mind

of what is evil, we fill it with the thought of what is good.

The Jesus Prayer, then, is a way of turning aside and looking elsewhere. Thoughts and images inevitably occur to us during prayer. We cannot stop them by a mere exertion of our will. We cannot simply turn off the internal television set. It is of little or no value to say to ourselves 'Stop thinking'; we might as well say 'Stop breathing'. I love quoting Cassian about this: our mind is like a mill, its nature is to grind continually. It cannot stop. So you'd better provide it with good grain.

But while it lies beyond our power to make this inner chatter suddenly disappear, what we can do is to detach ourselves from it by 'binding' our ever-active mind 'with one thought, or the thought of One only'—the Name of Jesus.

Only when we invoke the Name in this way—not even forming pictures of the Savior—shall we experience the full power of the Jesus Prayer to integrate and unify. The Jesus Prayer concentrates us into the *here* and *now*, making us single-centered, drawing us from a multiplicity of thoughts to union with the one Christ.

In his book *True Self/False Self*, Basil Pennington demonstrates how centering prayer and *lectio* can deliver us from our false self and lead us to the unification and authenticity of our true self. I believe this is even more the case with the Jesus Prayer, because of the power active in His Name. The unifying effect is certainly enhanced if you pray the prayer on the breathing rhythm, as body and soul will cooperate.

2. Inwardness

The repeated Invocation of the Name, by making our prayer more unified, makes it at the same time more inward, more a part of ourselves—not something that we *do* at particular moments, but something that we *are* all the time; not an occasional act but a continuing state. In his *Vita*, Thomas Cellano writes about Saint Francis of Assisi: «He *was* prayer». Such praying becomes truly prayer of the *whole person*, in which the words and meaning of the prayer are fully identified with the one who prays. That's why we also call this prayer the prayer of the heart, heart being understood in the Semitic and biblical way, that is, referring to the totality of the human person.

To accomplish the journey inwards and to attain true prayer, it is required of us to enter into this 'absolute center, that is, to descend with our intellect into the heart. This 'union of the intellect with the heart' signifies the reintegration of our fallen and fragmented nature, our restoration to original wholeness.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton writes:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely....I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.[ii]

The heart has a double significance in the spiritual life: it is both the center of the human being and the point of meeting between the human being and God.

Merton again writes:

The easiest way to come to God is to enter into our own center and then pass through that center into the center of God.[iii]

The heart is both the place of self-knowledge, where we see ourselves as we truly are, and the place of self-transcendence, where we understand our nature as a temple of the Holy Trinity. Prayer of the heart, then, is no longer prayer *to* Jesus but the prayer *of* Jesus himself happening in us. And blessed are you if one day you really experience this in praying the Jesus Prayer. Sometimes, God even grants this tremendous gift to us, sinners.

III) Mystical effects of the Jesus Prayer[iv]

The more you pray this prayer, the more you will discover its multiple levels and effects, and the more it will grow and expand in you. Let me mention a few of these levels, as pinpointed by Lev Gillet, a Benedictine monk of the Eastern rite, who signed his books *A Monk of the Eastern Church*.

1. Adoration and salvation

It begins as adoration and a sense of presence. Then this presence is perceived as that of a Savior – Jesus. The invocation of the Name is a mystery of salvation. It brings deliverance with it. His name gives peace.

2. Incarnation

The Name of JESUS is a means by which we can apply to ourselves the mystery of the Incarnation. It brings union. By pronouncing the Name, we put on Christ, we offer our flesh to the Word, so that He might assume it in His mystical Body.

3. Transfiguration

The Name of JESUS is an instrument and method of Transfiguration. When we utter it, we transfigure the whole cosmos into JESUS Christ. This is a way of exercising the priestly ministry that all Christians receive at baptism. By invoking the Name of JESUS upon nature and creation, we give it back its primitive dignity and beauty.

In *The Way of the Pilgrim*, constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer transforms the pilgrim's relationship with the material creation around him, making all things transparent, changing them into a sacrament of God's presence. He writes:

When I prayed with my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvelous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the earth, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake, that they witnessed to the love of God for man, that everything proved the love of God for man, that all things prayed to God and sang his praise. Thus it was that I came to understand what The Philokalia calls 'the knowledge of the speech of all creatures' . . . I felt a burning love for Jesus and for all God's creatures.[v]

In the words of Father Bulgakov,

'Shining through the heart, the light of the Name of JESUS illuminates all the universe.'[vi]

Our ministry of Transfiguration is even more deeply fulfilled in relation to our brothers and sisters. By recognizing and silently adoring JESUS in them, by pronouncing His Name over them, we transfigure them into their most profound and divine reality. And the world will be transformed.

The Prayer transfigures the Pilgrim's relation not only with the material creation but with other humans:

Again I started off on my wanderings. But now I did not walk along as before, filled with care. The Invocation of the Name of Jesus gladdened my way. Everybody was kind to me, it was as though everyone loved me. . . . If anyone harms me I have

only to think, 'How sweet is the Prayer of Jesus!' and the injury and the anger alike pass away and I forget it all.[vii]

4. The Body of Christ

The Name of JESUS is a means of uniting us to the Church, for the Church is in Christ. It is a way towards Christian unity, as we find in His Name the spotless and heavenly Church.

5. The Lord's Last Supper

The Name of JESUS can become for us a kind of Eucharist. It is an interior and invisible offering.

6. The Name and the Spirit

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see a Pentecostal use of the Name of JESUS. If our faith were bigger than a mustard seed, we could renew in us the fruit of Pentecost through JESUS' Name.

We can also experience something of the relation between the Son and the Spirit, and/or between the Son and the Father.

7. Towards the Father

To utter the name of JESUS is to draw near the Father, to contemplate the love and the gift of the Father which centers upon JESUS. It is to feel something of that love and to unite ourselves to it from afar. And it is, as much as a creature is able, to enter into Christ's filial conscience. It is recognizing in JESUS the perfect expression of the Father, uniting ourselves to the eternal orientation of the Son towards the Father, to the total offering of the Son to the Father. For thus is the journey's end.

III) The journey's end

The final objective may aptly be described by the Patristic term *theosis*, 'deification' or 'divinization'. In the words of Sergei Bulgakov,

'The Name of Jesus, present in the human heart, confers upon it the power of deification.'[viii]

The Jesus Prayer, addressed to the Logos Incarnate, is a means of realizing within ourselves this mystery of *theosis*, whereby human persons attain the true likeness of God. The Jesus Prayer, by uniting us to Christ, helps us to share in the mutual

indwelling of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. The more the Prayer becomes a part of ourselves, the more we enter into the movement of love which passes unceasingly between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the Hesychast tradition, the mystery of *theosis* has most often taken the outward form of a vision of light, not a symbolical or physical light, but the divine and uncreated Light of the Godhead, which shone from Christ at his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor and which will illumine the whole world at his second coming on the Last Day. Such is the vision of glory to which we may approach through the Invocation of the Name. The Jesus Prayer causes the brightness of the Transfiguration to penetrate into every corner of our life.

The JESUS Prayer is thus a source of liberation and healing. The warmth and joyfulness of the Jesus Prayer is particularly evident in the writings of St Hesychius of Sinai:

The more the rain falls on the earth, the softer it makes it; similarly, the more we call upon Christ's Holy Name, the greater the rejoicing and exultation it brings to the earth of our heart

The sun rising over the earth creates the daylight; and the venerable and Holy Name of the Lord Jesus, shining continually in the mind, gives birth to countless thoughts radiant as the sun.[ix]

The Jesus Prayer makes each into a 'man/woman for others', a living instrument of God's peace, a dynamic center of reconciliation. The Jesus Prayer is ultimately a way of life in the Spirit, leading us to the Father. May it be so for you, by the Grace of God.

[i] *The Art of Prayer*, p.97.

[ii] Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York: Image Books, 1966, p. 158.

[iii] Quoted by Basil Pennington, in *True Self/False Self*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p.17.

[iv] This part is a summary and abridges version of *The Payer of JESUS*, by A Monk of the Eastern Church, chapter 4.

[v]

The Way of a Pilgrim, p.31-2;41.

[vi] *The Orthodox Church, p.171.*

[vii] *The Way of a Pilgrim, p.17-18.*

[viii] *The Orthodox Church, p.170.*

[ix] *On Watchfulness and Holiness, 7,41,196.*

Read Emma Cazabonne's book: A Light to Enlighten the Darkness: Daily Readings for Meditation during the Winter Season, visit her blog: <http://wordsandpeace.com>, and view her artwork: <http://rocksbyemmanuelle.com>.