

Prayer of the Heart

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St. Benedict says that prayer should be from the heart. Because of our fallen state, because of our sinfulness, the heart is deeply ambivalent. It is a battlefield. Jesus says: *Out of the heart come evil thoughts*. Hence the heart is the place where we are brought face to face with the power of evil and sin within ourselves. Yet the heart is also the place where we encounter God. It is the locus of the Divine Indwelling, as Paul says: God has sent the spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba, Father!’ Hence, the heart is the place where my prayer becomes, under the Divine Mercy, the prayer of Christ and the Holy Spirit within me. Paul again says: We do not know how to pray; but the Spirit Himself prays within us, crying out: ‘Abba’.

When the Eastern Fathers speak of “prayer of the heart”, it means prayer of the total person, prayer in which the body participates as well as the soul and spirit. But since the heart is the place of Divine Indwelling, prayer of the heart is prayer in which it is not only I who speak, but it is the prayer which Christ and the Holy Spirit are saying within me.

Martin Buber has said that at the last judgment I shall not be asked “Why were you not Abraham? Why were you not Moses? I shall be asked: “Why were you not your own true self?” This is our aim: to become ourselves, to realize the vision that God has of each one of us from all eternity.

There are many ways of entering the heart, but within the Orthodox Church the classic path is the Jesus Prayer. There are two ways in which this prayer may be recited. The first is a 'free way' - making use of all the passing free moments of the day that might otherwise be wasted. The purpose of this is to find Christ everywhere. The second way is more "fixed", using the Jesus Prayer as part of our prayer time, simply trying to concentrate on the prayer as fully as possible to the exclusion of all other thoughts. The purpose is to create silence. This may be connected with the rhythm of breathing to enable the body to take part in the prayer. It is a Christ-centered prayer, a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior. But in addressing Jesus as Son, we point to the Person of His Father. And the Spirit also is present, for Paul tells us that no one can say 'Lord Jesus' except in the Holy Spirit'. Hence the Jesus Prayer is a Trinitarian Prayer. It is a prayer in words; but because the words are exceedingly simple and constantly repeated, it is a prayer that leads through the words into silence. We speak in the Jesus Prayer, but at the same time we listen. And St. Ignatius has called Jesus "the Word that comes out of Silence". Silence is thus not negative; it is not an absence but a presence, not emptiness or void but a fullness. As the Psalmist says: Be still and know that I am God. It can lead us to the point where we are no longer conscious of the subject-object dichotomy, no longer conscious of ourselves as praying to God. John Cassian even says: "Prayer is not perfect as long as the monk is conscious of himself or the fact that he is praying".

Evagrius says that "Prayer is a laying aside of thoughts". It implies a progressive self-emptying, in which the mind is stripped of all visual images and man-made concepts, and so contemplates in purity the realm of God. However, the aim is constructive - that one be filled with an all-embracing sense of the Divine Indwelling. One ceases from our own activity, not in order to be idle, but in order to enter into the activity of God. It entails an attitude of alert attentiveness, of vigilance, and above all of listening. The Psalmist says: "Be still and know that I am God". Hesychia denotes the transition from "my" prayer to the prayer of God working in me.

However, anyone who makes a serious effort to pray inwardly, standing before God with the mind in the heart becomes immediately conscious of his inward disintegration - of his powerlessness to concentrate himself in the present moment. Thoughts move restlessly through his mind like the "buzzing of flies" or the capricious leaping of monkeys from branch to branch. This lack of concentration, this inability to be here and now with the whole of our being, is one of the most tragic consequences of the Fall.

The ancients speak of two main methods of overcoming thoughts. The first is to “contradict” our thoughts, to meet them face to face, attempting to expel them by an effort of the will. Such a method, however, may prove to be counterproductive. When violently suppressed, our fantasies tend to return with increased force. Hence, it is safer to employ the second method. Instead of fighting our thoughts directly and seeking to drive them out by an effort of the will, we seek to turn our attention away from them and to look elsewhere. Our immediate object is not to empty our mind of what is evil or inane but rather to fill it with what is good. John of Gaza says, “Do not contradict the thoughts suggested by your enemies, for that is exactly what they want, and they will not desist. But turn to the Lord for help against them, laying before Him your own helplessness; for He is able to expel them and reduce them to nothing”.

The repeated invocation will help us “let go” of the thought presented by our conscious self. This “letting go” corresponds to what Evagrius meant when he spoke of prayer as a “laying aside” of thoughts - not a savage conflict but a gentle yet persistent act of detachment. Instead of relying on our own power, we take refuge in the power and grace that act through the Divine Name. The “letting go” of evil and trivial thoughts during the saying of the Jesus Prayer, and their replacement with the one thought of the Name, is not passivity but in itself a positive way of controlling our thoughts. The invocation of the Name is certainly a “resting in the presence of God in pure faith”, but it is at the same time marked by an active love for the Savior and an acute longing to share ever more fully in the divine life.

The ancient Fathers give four definitions of Prayer. The first is seen as a solemn request to God. This is expressed in words. Hence it is still on the level of external prayer rather than inner prayer. The second is seen as a standing before God with the mind in the heart. To pray is to stand before God, to enter into an immediate and personal relationship with Him. It is to know at every level of our being that we are in God and God is in us.

These first two definitions lay stress primarily on what is done by the human person rather than by God. But the third definition of prayer shows that it is the divine partner and not the human who takes the initiative and whose action is fundamental. It is not something I initiate but something in-which I share; not something that I do, but something that God is doing in me. True inner prayer is to stop talking and to listen to the wordless voice of God within my heart. As the Byzantine Liturgy expresses it: “It is time for the Lord to act”.

The fourth definition sees prayer as the manifestation of Baptism. God is present and active within each person by virtue of the fact that each is created according to His divine Image. But this image has been obscured and clouded over, although not totally obliterated, by our fall into sin. It is restored to its primal beauty and splendor through the Sacrament of Baptism, through which Christ and the Holy Spirit come to dwell. Although the baptismal Christ and the Indwelling Spirit never cease to act within us, most of us remain virtually unaware of this inner presence and activity. True prayer, then, signifies the rediscovery and manifestation of baptismal grace. To pray is to pass from the state where grace is present in our hearts secretly and unconsciously, to the point of full inner perception and conscious awareness of this activity of the Spirit.

The purpose of prayer can be summarized in the phrase: "Become what you are". Become consciously and actively what you already are potentially and secretly by virtue of your creation according to the divine image and your re-creation at baptism. It is to discover Him who is yours already, to listen to Him who never ceases to speak within you. God's message to anyone who wants to pray is simply: "You would not seek Me unless you had already found Me".

The Jesus Prayer embraces the two chief moments of Christian worship: "adoration" - or reaching out to God with love - and "penitence" - the sense of unworthiness and sin. These two moments are united in a third moment of "mercy" - which bridges the gulf between God's righteousness and the fallen creature. Whoever invokes God's mercy expresses his own helplessness but at the same time voices a cry of hope.

One should not worry too much about expelling thoughts and mental images. Rather, call to mind, not what is to be excluded, but what is to be included. Concentrate upon the Person of the Savior. If your mind wanders, as it undoubtedly will, do not be discouraged. Gently bring it back without anger or exasperation to the living and personal center, Jesus Christ. Such a one has begun the transition from the prayer which I say to the prayer which says itself, or rather, which Christ says in me. Prayer of the heart signifies the point where "my" action, "my" prayer becomes identified with the continuous action of Another in me. It is no longer prayer to Jesus but the prayer of Jesus Himself. The aim of all Christian prayer is that our praying should become increasingly identified with the prayer offered by Jesus the High Priest within us, that our life should become one with His life, our breathing with the Divine Breath that sustains all things. The final objective may be described as "deification" or "divinization".

Some may question whether such prayer of the heart militates against intercessory prayer. However, in invoking the Name of Jesus we enter more fully into Christ's overflowing love for all humanity and the world at large. St. Paul also says that as the Spirit prays within our hearts, He makes intercession for the needs of all. All prayer makes each person into a "person for others" - a living instrument of God's peace, a dynamic center of reconciliation. Hence in prayer we enter into the Heart of God but also into the heart of all peoples.