

## “PRAY CONSTANTLY”

In his First Letter to the Corinthians St. Paul urges us to “pray constantly” (1 Thess. 5:17). A prayer form developed very early in Christianity by the Desert Fathers strives for this: the Jesus Prayer. In this newsletter we will look at one of the oldest forms of prayer in Christianity, one that dates back almost to Christianity’s very beginnings.

In the Catholic Church today we have 3 forms of what might be called “bead prayers,” i.e., prayers that involve the use of beads. They are the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and the Jesus Prayer (strictly speaking other chaplets and novenas which use beads exist but the above mentioned can be referred to as the “Big Three” of bead prayers). While the Jesus Prayer is well-known in the Christian East, many Roman-Rite Catholics are not familiar with it. So this article will serve as an introduction to a devout and ancient aspect of Christian prayer. A classic of Christian spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way* explains this devotional prayer superbly (you might want to consider this for your Christian Library). An excellent translation by Helen Bacovcin with a forward by the Servant of God Fr. Walter Ciszek S.J. is readily available. This article will make references to this work to help explain it.

In her introduction to *The Way of a Pilgrim*, Helen Bacovcin introduces us to the “pilgrim” in this fashion: “Are the cares of this world weighing you down? Do you feel rejected or abandoned or unfairly treated? Have you come to the crossroads of your life and do you not know which way to go? Do you have goals that seem to be at a standstill? Are you seeking direction for your life? Whatever your need, let me introduce you to someone who knows a wellspring, a source where all good abounds, and all questions are answered. The simple, anonymous Russian peasant has the key and knows the secret

entrance to the Heart of God, where all riches reside, and where love and compassion reign. The Pilgrim is eager to show you the way.”

The origins of the Jesus Prayer go back to the Desert Fathers who sought to live St. Paul’s injunction to “pray constantly” by constantly invoking the divine name of Jesus Christ. By constantly invoking the divine name of Jesus the Desert Fathers were able to strive for “purity of heart” which is so essential to the Christian life (Purity of Heart is essentially the asceticism of the renouncement of self modeled on our Lord’s words to *deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Me*). So the Desert Fathers would constantly invoke the name of Jesus. Invoking the name of Jesus was considered particularly effective in combating temptations and the passions. The Desert Fathers believed strongly that at the name of “Jesus” the demons would take flight in much the same way as they fled when our Lord cast them out in the Gospels.

In particular, the origins of the Jesus Prayer go back to the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Recall that while the Pharisee proudly tells God of all his spiritual accomplishments, the Publican stays at a distance, barely raising his eyes to God and prays; “Oh God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Because this prayer rose from the depths of the Publican’s heart, it is also referred to as the “Prayer of the Heart.” The Desert Fathers would constantly pray this prayer whether engaged in prayer itself, or in manual labor or evening taking a refreshing walk. By repeating this prayer they strove always to be in God’s presence through his divine name. Also they believed strongly that this prayer contained in itself the entire Gospel in miniature.

So the essential part of the prayer consists in praying, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me a sinner.” Variations of this exist such as, “Lord

Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me a sinner,” “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy upon me a poor sinner,” and the really abbreviated form, “Jesus, mercy!” The prayer itself is said on prayer beads that come in several types. The most common one is the prayer beads containing 100 beads. Others include one of 130 beads and one of 33 beads representing the 33 years of our Lord’s life on earth. In many monasteries the monks use cords made of wool as a means of preserving monastic silence (the wooden beads tend to make a clicking sound when they hit each other which doesn’t happen when wool is used – hence these are referred to as “prayer ropes”). As the Rosary is divided into “decades” starting with an Our Father and ending with a Glory Be, the Jesus Prayer rope or beads likewise is divided into segments. The Greek ones tend to be units of 25 or more Jesus invocations while the Russian ones often have units of 10 similar to the rosary’s decades of 10. At each division a special bead is used to invoke the Blessed Mother. The prayer used here can be varied but a typical one would be “Oh Most Holy Mother of God, O Theotokos (God-bearer) pray for me a poor sinner.”

In praying this prayer you simply finger the beads repeating this to yourself but slowly. Because this is prayer from the heart, it should arise from the heart. The object is not to get in so many invocations but the union with God effected by this heartfelt prayer. Quality, not quantity counts. You can pray this sitting down in a quiet place, or when talking a walk or even riding the bus or the subway. A person well versed in this prayer will soon be praying this spontaneously in many different circumstances even without the assistance of the beads so that one then carries out St. Paul’s admonition to “pray constantly.” Now lets go back to our Pilgrim for a moment. This account is a true story. The Pilgrim is an anonymous Russian peasant who lived in the mid 1800’s. Helen Bacovcin describes him thus:

“The Pilgrim’s account is both informative

and entertaining and can be read on more than one level. It is touching simply as a narrative of a man whose life style is very different from yours and mine. Fortune does not smile at him, for he has lost both his material possessions and his family; he has no home of his own and a handicap prevents him from earning a living, so he wanders from one end of his vast country to another. On the spiritual level the story is a real treasure. The Pilgrim is deeply in love with his God and never tires of communicating with Him. Through this constant communion with his Lord and Master he gains much wisdom and understanding; he learns that true riches are of the spirit and accessible to all. He knows as few of us do that a wholehearted response to the message of the Gospel is the only one that makes sense and satisfies the very core of our being. He knows that to give God one’s all means in the truest sense to gain all. He knows that the cost of discipleship will never begin to measure up to the rewards here and hereafter. He knows the secret of interior freedom and what it means to have one’s hunger and thirst satisfied. He knows the beauty of each creature. He knows the deep, abiding joy and peace which surpass all understanding. Yes, he knows how **ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL** God is in His love and mercy to all His children but especially to those who unconditionally open their hearts to Him.”

Pope Francis has told us that we are to “Wake up the world” with the Gospel. May this anonymous Pilgrim, who has lost everything that the world considers important, but has gained all inspire us to “wake up with world.” This simple “Prayer of the Heart” can go a long way to accomplish that. ✠