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A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE  
"Prayer of the Heart"  
(Part II)

The prayer of the heart-or Jesus prayer-requires a certain preparation. In this regard, let us listen again to Metropolitan Serafim Joanta:

*"The dispositions for the Jesus prayer are, as for any other prayer, the following: To be at peace with one's neighbor, to be free from excessive worries, a certain disposition of the soul, a quiet place.... No one can pray a pure prayer - that is, a prayer that is not tainted by extraneous thoughts, by external impressions of the senses and memories - as long as he is not at peace with his neighbor. The lack of forgiveness and the presence of discord fill us with negative forces that cloud the heart. The same is true of excessive worry. For this reason, the Hymn to the Cherubim of the Byzantine liturgy of St. John Chrysostom exhorts us to 'rid ourselves of all worldly concerns'. The physical space for prayer is also important. The most appropriate place is the desert, that is to say, a secluded place. Monks and hermits used to retire there at all times. The Savior Himself withdrew at night to a mountain or a solitary place for prayer. Since we live in the world, we must first of all follow the advice of Jesus: 'When you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you' (Mt 6:6). This chamber is the heart, to which we must withdraw in order to give prayer the necessary attention."*

We can certainly have recourse to prayer in order to cope with strong negative feelings, nagging thoughts or specific attacks from the Devil. However, for our daily prayer it is important to be in a state of inner peace. Prayer has to be an instrument that helps us to better walk the path of holiness.

The teachers of the prayer of the heart teach us that our mind, so easily scattered and distracted by external things, must go into the heart, which is the center of the person. Constant repetition of the name of Jesus and concentration on the heart allow the Holy Spirit to penetrate us more deeply and expand His light within us. Since evil thoughts come from the heart (cf. Mt 15:19), this prayer will also help with inner purification and make us vigilant to all the movements of that heart. In this way, one learns to know

one's own heart better, in the Holy Spirit, and thus can counteract evil inclinations and thoughts directly with prayer.

Thus, it becomes evident that the practice of the prayer of the heart is part of the struggle for holiness, along with the reception of the sacraments, the reading of Sacred Scripture, rooting oneself in the doctrine of the Church, and other elements.

Although the classic formula - "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me" - is an aid to enter into the prayer of the heart, other ejaculatory prayers are not excluded. Some simply pronounce the Name of Jesus over and over again; others repeat a brief word from Sacred Scripture; others invoke the Holy Spirit...

What is important for regular practice of this prayer is to keep the same ejaculatory prayer that one has chosen, or to change it only on rare occasions. It is a matter of getting the heart accustomed to the invocation of the Name of Jesus or of another of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.

Regarding the "methodology" of this prayer, it is convenient to choose a posture that allows us to pray in a relaxed way; but one that is not so comfortable as to lull us to sleep. It should also be a reverent posture. The early hours of the morning - after a peaceful sleep - are very appropriate for prayer. The monks of Eastern Christianity prefer the night hours for prayer, because of the unique silence found there.

So, if we are in a good spiritual disposition and take into account external aids as well, we should begin with regular heart prayer. For beginners, it is advisable to start with a few minutes, especially in the mornings. Something that is of great help and is very common among monks is the use of a prayer chain, which is called "komboskini" or "chotki". The large chain usually has one hundred beads or knots, so that the beads can be passed while praying the ejaculatory over and over again in silence. There are also prayer chains with fifty or thirty-three knots.

Of course, at the beginning, the prayer can also be said in a low voice, to facilitate it and to counteract dispersions. But it is advisable that, as soon as possible, we get used to praying it in silence.

If we do not have the specific prayer chain, we can use the rosary in the same way.

When we have practiced the prayer of the heart a little, we will realize that, because of its simplicity, it lends itself perfectly to be prayed anywhere, especially when we have already practiced it. We could say that, with the help of the prayer of the heart, a kind of monastic cell is formed within us, to which we can withdraw even in the midst of much hustle and bustle. We can pray it while driving, while we are in a waiting room and on many other occasions. The prayer of the heart should help us to enter into inner silence, but we can pray it even when we are not in an atmosphere of outer silence.