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A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

"Prayer of the Heart"

(Part I)

Those who wish to enrich and intensify their prayer life will find a very valuable practice in the tradition of the Eastern Church: the so-called "prayer of the heart" or "Jesus prayer".

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it is worth clarifying that this form of prayer is part of the rich treasure of the Universal Church, although it is practiced mainly by the faithful of Orthodoxy. It is by no means a foreign practice that comes from the forms of meditation of other Eastern religions; it is genuinely Christian. It is now being introduced more and more into the Roman Catholic Church as well. Indeed, the prayer of the heart can respond fruitfully to our longing for silence and recollection.

St. Paul exhorts us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). In fact, constant prayer is a wonderful way for the heart to be transformed under the influence of the Holy Spirit; it is also a powerful weapon against the spirits of evil.

The origins of the prayer of the heart are found in Sacred Scripture and are related to what we know as "ejaculatories". Practicing Jews, for example, also used to frequently repeat the Shema Israel (Hear, O Israel).

Between the 3rd and 6th centuries, Egyptian monks systematized this form of prayer, also arriving at a classical formula, after many preceding formulations. This classic formula is: "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me."

This prayer has a wonderful content and is essentially Trinitarian. Thus writes Metropolitan Seraphim Joanta:

"The Jesus prayer is also a profession of Trinitarian faith. In it, we confess Jesus as the Son of God and the true God; we also confess God the Father as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and, albeit indirectly, we also confess the Holy Spirit, for no one can

say that Jesus is God unless moved by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). In fact, it is the Holy Spirit Himself who prays in us and for us, and He does so with unspeakable groanings (cf. Rom 8:26). The prayer of Jesus, like any other prayer, is a prayer in the Holy Spirit".

In the prayer of the heart we implore God's compassion... Its last part-"have mercy on me"-is based on the words that the tax collector, bowing his head and beating his breast, uttered in the parable that Jesus tells us: "*O God, have mercy on me a sinner*" (Lk 18:13).

The rise of the prayer of the heart occurred between the 12th and 14th centuries on Mount Athos. This island, close to Greece, is populated exclusively by monks, who live in monasteries or hermitages.

From Mount Athos, the prayer of the heart also reached Russia, where it spread widely. It flourished there in the 16th century. Later, in the 19th century, the prayer of the heart experienced a new and intense diffusion, through the so-called "staretz", teachers on the spiritual path, who transmitted to people the treasure of their experience with this prayer.

The prayer of the heart also found its expression in literature. One of the best known books on this subject is "The Russian Pilgrim", written by an anonymous author.

It could be providential that now this prayer is spreading also in the West, because this West, which used to be Catholic, seems to be dying of spiritual hunger. Not a few people are therefore looking for forms of Eastern meditation, wanting to go into themselves and find silence. However, from our Christian perspective, these Eastern meditations have their problems, because they are open to the influence of other religions, which, besides having valuable elements, still contain many errors and can therefore lead to confusion.

The prayer of the heart, on the other hand, if practiced properly, is a great help and can lead us to the threshold of contemplation. Therefore, it is a highly recommended practice, especially for those who would like to intensify their prayer life. Tomorrow we will continue with some concrete guidelines in this regard...

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