

# The Prayer of Jesus

Dorothy Day

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\*Summary: Summarizes *The Way of a Pilgrim* and the Jesus prayer. Quotes the book and recommends it as a spiritual classic. Underscores its application in daily living. (DDLW #883).\*

**THE WAY OF A PILGRIM** (1)deserves to be set beside **The Imitation of Christ, The Practice of the Presence of God and The Spiritual Combat**. And when I read it I thought with joy that here was a teaching on prayer that could be used by the worker on his way to and from work, by the busy housewife, by the mother of many children, by the traveller. This teaching, I thought, had been presented, in a way, by Fr. William Doyle, S.J. in his constant ejaculatory prayers; by the Protestant Frank Lauback, in a little pamphlet on his experience in prayer; by Gandhi who used that simple and primitive prayer of India where in the Name of God is repeated until the very lips and throat become weary. "I have used this prayer to banish fear", Ghandi said; by the author of the Cloud of the Unknowing, who directed us to use some simple word "such a word is this word **God** or this word **Love**" Fasten this word to thine heart, with this word thou shalt smite down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting." Then began men to cry aloud with the Name of Jehovah." Genesis IV.

From the earliest beginnings of recorded history, men called out the Name, as a prayer, with a strong cry and tears, directed towards God in supplications. And in Deuteronomy V, men are told to write down the commandment of love and bind it on their arms and on their brows, and wear it on their hearts, and fasten it to their door posts, and gates, and to say it sitting down and rising up, and going and coming, on all their ways, and teach it to their children. "Thy praise shall be always in my mouth." "Pray without ceasing." "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

The practice of repetitive prayer seems to have come to us from the beginning of prayer in the world, from the time when men first began to reach out toward God.

After I read **The Way of a Pilgrim**, everything I read on prayer seemed to point this same way, to urge along this same path.

In my twenty-seven years as a Catholic I have found very few priests teaching

us how to pray, that is techniques of prayer. It is as though with the recitation of the rosary, at high speed, or the saying of some of the Office (urged by those in what is termed the liturgical movement) our teaching on prayers came to an end. Outstanding exceptions like Fr. Louis Farina of the Pittsburgh diocese, and Fr. Wendell, O.P. come to mind, but generally, if one asked a priest, "Father, teach me to pray", we would be recommended the rosary or the Office. "Pray with the Church. This is the greatest prayer there is." Of course Catholics understand they must say their morning and evening prayers, make the morning offering, the particular examen in addition, and there are novena prayers, and many other devotions, multiplied beyond number until often they become a burden. But the pruned down, utterly simple prayer of the heart, the Jesus prayer, - this I learned through **The Way of a Pilgrim**. Here is the story of the Pilgrim. When he was two and his brother ten years old, they were left orphans and adopted by their pious grandfather. The older brother used to love to run around the village and get into scrapes, but the little child went with his grandfather to Church and listened to the Bible being read. When he was seven years old and his brother fifteen, and already taken to drink, the older boy pushed him off the stove where they slept and injured his arm so badly that he was never able to use it again. Seeing that he would not be fit to work in the fields, his grandfather taught him to read from the Bible, pointing out the letters and words to him. Later on a clerk who used to come to the inn kept by the grandfather, taught him to write. The old grandfather then said, "God has granted you the gift of learning; it will make a man of you, give thanks to God and pray often." When he was seventeen, his grandfather found him a wife, so the two of them could help at the inn, and when he died, he left it to them together with a little money he had saved. This aroused the jealousy of the brother, who stole the money, set fire to the house and ran away, leaving the young couple destitute.

So they borrowed, built a hut and began to live as landless peasants. The wife knitted and spun and sewed and people gave her jobs and she took care of her husband, and while she spun, he would sit and read her the Bible. They often fasted and every night they said many prayers, making many prostrations. Although we had no idea of the inner, heart acted prayer, but prayed with our lips only and made senseless prostrations, turning somersaults like fools, we nevertheless felt the desire for prayer, and the long ones we recited without understanding did not seem tiring; quite the contrary we enjoyed them a great deal. It must be true, as a certain teacher once told me, that secret prayer is hidden deeply in the heart of man, though he may not know about it. Yet, it acts mysteriously within his soul and prompts him to pray according to his power and knowledge."

After two years of this life of poverty and labor, the wife suddenly was taken ill with a fever and died and the husband was left entirely alone. He was so grief stricken that he did not know what to do with himself. When he went into his little hut and caught sight of her clothes, or a scarf he burst into tears and even fell down in a faint. So he sold the hut for twenty roubles and gave away his wife's clothes to the poor, and set out with nothing but his Bible on his long

pilgrimage, from Kiev to Tobolsk and from Odessa to Archangel.

It not known how the story came to be written, except that it was put down under obedience, and the manuscript finally came into the hands of a monk on Mount Athos, in whose possession it was found by the Abbot of St. Michael's monastery at Kazan. The Abbot copied the manuscript and from his copy the book was printed at Kazan in 1884.

The Reverend R. M. French found a copy in the possession of friends in Denmark and Bulgaria and made a translation which was printed by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in England in 1930.

The story begins: By the grace of God I am a Christian, by my deeds a great sinner, and by calling a homeless rover of the lowest status in life. My possessions comprise but some rusk in a knapsack on my back, and the Holy Bible on my bosom.

"On the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, I went to church to hear Mass. The first Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians was read. In it we are exhorted, among other things, to "pray incessantly", and these words engraved themselves upon my mind. I began to ponder whether it is possible to pray without ceasing, since every man must occupy himself with other things needed for his support. I found this text in my Bible and read with my own eyes what I had heard, namely that we must pray incessantly in all places, pray always in spirit, lifting up our hand in devotion. I pondered and pondered and did not know what to think of it.

"What am I to do?" I mused. "Where will I be able to find someone who can explain it to me? I shall go to the churches known for their famous preachers; perhaps there I shall hear something that will enlighten me."

There is always something fascinating about the story of a search, whether it is for a lost person, a treasure, a scientific discovery, or an idea. And this story of a search for the secret "praying without ceasing" is no exception.

I thought as I read how unwilling we are, we Americans, in this day, to look for a spiritual guide or a teacher. The Pilgrim's hunt was rewarded. He found his teacher, after a good deal of wandering and questioning. I must confess that some of the answer he received about praying without ceasing would have satisfied me so that I would not have looked any longer, but it was for something far simpler than the pilgrim was searching. When he found his "staretz" and heard his answer he knew at once that his search was ended.

At the same time that he taught his disciple to pray, the monk gave him a copy of the Philokalia which contained the writings of twenty five holy fathers, including St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Callistus and St. Ignatius.

"We read passages of St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Callistus and St. Ignatius and he interpreted them to me in his own words. I listened to him attentively, overwhelmed with gladness, and did my best to store every detail in my memory.

Thus we stayed up the whole night together and went to Matins without having slept at all.”

Hospitality was only offered for three days at the guest house of the monastery so the pilgrim found work for a peasant, looking after his kitchen garden who gave him a little thatched hut to live in. At first the constant repetition of the prayer tired him very much and he confessed he felt lazy and bored and overwhelmingly sleepy and a cloud of all sorts of other thoughts closed round him. He went to his guide and was reassured. The world of darkness hates prayer and the Enemy will do everything to turn people from it. He urged the pilgrim to persevere. “Whether you sit or stand, walk or lie down, constantly repeat: Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me.”

“Keep to yourself, get up early, go to bed later than usual, and come to me for advice twice a month.”

“And now, I was wandering about repeating incessantly the prayer of Jesus. To me it has greater value than anything else on earth. Occasionally I walked seventy versts (43 miles) and do not feel it at all. When bitter cold pierces me, I say it more eagerly and warm up in no time.”

When I am hungry I begin to call on the name of Jesus more often and forget about food. When I am ill and rheumatic pains set in my back and legs, I concentrate on the Prayer and no longer notice the discomfort. When people do wrong, my wrath and indignation are quickly forgotten as soon as I remember the sweetness of the prayer of Jesus. When I am doing this I am filled with joy.”

I well know the objections that can be made to counting and multiplying prayers. They have been made always to the rosary and seldom a week passes that I do not meet someone who voices an objection to the rosary on the grounds of senseless repetition.

The words of Sister Madeleva in one of her poems comes to my mind. The soul is talking to God, and asking if He does not weary of the repetition, and God replies, “Doth it not irk me that upon the beach, the tides monotonous run? Shall I not teach the sea some newer speech?”

But the very fact of repetition means that the will is directed to God, that there is an attempt to practice the presence of God. The sense of strain that may at first come with it is no reason for giving up. To begin the scales in music, to painstakingly learn to type, - to do any handicraft when the fingers are unused to it, is at first difficult and clumsy, and accompanied with strain.

The litanies are an example of repetition in prayer and they are of incomparable beauty. I remember waking up in Los Angeles to hear a bird singing outside my window and the tune was that of the litany, - **ora pro nobis, ora pro nobis** - the single refrain repeated over and over again.

The song of the three children, “All ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him forever,” is repeated prayer and the exultation of

that song has come down through the ages. It does seem that repeated prayer, this prayer of the heart, is an older and simpler form of prayer, the kind of prayer which holds up the heart and spirit through weary night watches, in times of grave trouble when one is too weary, too distracted to do anything but cry out, **Jesus, Jesus, Jesus**. The Jesus psalter is another example.

“Lord teach us to pray”, we keep on saying with the apostles. And often we reach the end of our lives without having learned.

I am not venturing to review the Philokalis. It is enough for me to introduce the readers of **The Third Hour**, to those who do not already know it, to **The Way of a Pilgrim**.

As for the matter of “breathing”, St. Simeon taught “Sit down alone and in silence. Lower your head, shut your eyes, breathe out gently and imagine yourself looking into your own heart. As you breathe out, say”Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” Say it moving your lips gently, or simply say it in your mind. Try to put all other thoughts aside. Be calm, be patient, and repeat the process very frequently.”

When Paul Claudel alluded to the matter of breathing he wrote, in **Teach us to Pray**, “The discipline I propose involves no dwindling of their being, on the contrary by *dint of full and deep breathing* causing the oxygen to burn up the carbonic acid, it brings about a prodigious acceleration and expansion of our vital rhythm, a renewal of your whole being which helps us to understand what is meant by being born again. We only need to open ourselves afresh to the breathe that created us; and grace, reinforcing our nature, is ready to help us carry out the injunction from Deuteronomy. In the complete giving of ourselves to God it is not a corpse we are offering Him. Love is not merely a yielding, it is our whole being yearning as in the famous passage, ‘His left hand under my head and his right hand shall embrace me.’ God is not only Love, he is energy too. My father worketh till now and I work.”

It is a work, this business of praying, and for us who are engaged in the corporal works of mercy and the work of earning our living by the sweat of our brow so that we feel we have no time to pray, such teaching is a Godsend.

We may not be able to go out like the Pilgrim with knapsack on our backs, with two books and some loaves of bread and walk our forty miles a day. It sounds idyllic, such a pilgrimage, but the heat and dust and sweat and the torment of insects, the pangs of hunger and thirst, - all these distractions go with a pilgrimage. Our riding on subways, packed amidst sweating humanity sitting with aching back and cramped muscles, climbing interminable stairs, - all the journeyings commuters do in the rush of daily life, can be the penance which waters prayer.

I have been writing this in the midst of the care of five children and the cooking of meals and washing of clothes and the attending to the comings and goings of people in our hospice, and I can testify to the joy and peace even the remembrance of such prayer gives, let alone the practice of it.

Peter Maurin Farm

State Island, New York (1) Blackfriars, the Dominican publication in England carried a notice of a little book, *On the Prayer of Jesus*, a collection of writings from the ascetic essays of Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, published in 1952 by John L. Warkins. This pure unwandering prayer of the heart, this prayer of Jesus, had already come to my attention in the shape of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which I read and reread with that delight that meets the discovery of a classic.

Quotations from *The Way of a Pilgrim* are from A Treasury of Russian Spirituality, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1948. Translation by Nina A. Tumanova.