

# SUNDAY THEOSIS #2-26

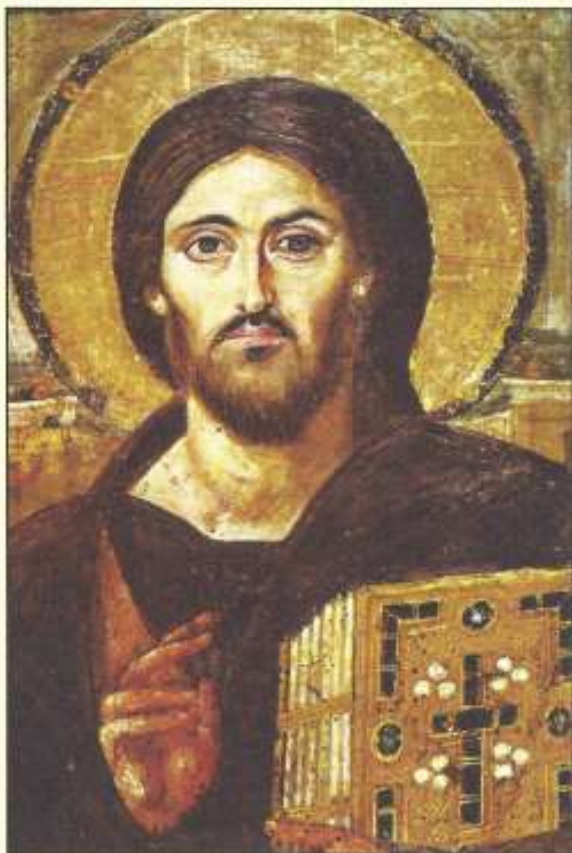
## Hearts Afire: A Personal Encounter with Jesus

By Deacon Ed Kleinguetl

### The Jesus Prayer

A living faith includes a personal, interior experience of the Divine Presence. Thus, encountering Jesus in prayer becomes an important part of the spiritual journey. This companionship becomes the fiery furnace that transforms our lives, turning them ever further away from self and toward love of God and neighbor. The Jesus Prayer is a simple, yet powerful tool to experience the Divine Presence within the silent recesses of our hearts. In effect, it places Jesus at the center of our lives as Our Lord.

The following is an overview of the prayer itself:



<b>Breathing</b>	<b>Prayer</b>	<b>Observation</b>
Inhale	Lord, Jesus Christ	A profession of faith: Acknowledging Jesus as Lord, the center of our lives, and as the Son of God.
Exhale	Son of God	
Inhale	Have mercy on me	A desire for repentance and reconciliation: Acknowledging who we are ("a sinner") and our request of Jesus ("mercy"). In addition, the prayer is grounded in humility - which is considered the foundation for attaining all the other virtues. Humility is part of the movement away from self. Thus, we begin this movement within our own prayer.
Exhale	A sinner	

This prayer acknowledges a complete surrender to God, allowing Jesus to lead us on the spiritual journey to the Father. As Pope Francis writes, "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith."

The Jesus Prayer is the only contemplative prayer tradition that approaches God with such a profound sense of humility. In today's world there seems to be a loss of respect for God.

This prayer focuses on the relationship between Creator and creature, acknowledging the great difference between them, and asking for the one thing most needed by us, mercy. We need not ask for anything more since Jesus tells us: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." Thus, all we truly need is God's mercy.

The Jesus Prayer is performed without mental forms or focusing on images such as icon. It is solely intended to experience the presence of God. The breathing is meant to be natural, such that the prayer takes root in the heart even when the practitioner is not conscious of it. This is sometimes referred to as unconscious or self-activating prayer, which reflects an increased desire for God. This is discussed further below.

### Practicing the Jesus Prayer

The following is a practical discussion on how to pray the Jesus Prayer:

#### 1. Posture

Position your body comfortably, spine erect, using either a chair or cushions.

#### 2. Grounding

Be aware of your physical senses. Close your eyes and gradually become aware of the physical senses of your body. Feel them as they flow through you.

#### 3. Opening Your Awareness to God's Presence

Open your awareness to feel the presence of God all around. Feel that presence within. Breathe in the Divine with every breath. Breathe God out and let yourself rest in His presence. Begin slow, steady breathing with deep, natural breaths. Release outside thoughts and distractions.

#### 4. Moving from the Head to the Heart

We are very experienced in having thoughts in our heads. Slowly move thoughts to the heart. With every breath, allow the sphere of energy within to slowly sink from the head to the heart. This may be very difficult at first; slowly allow the energy within to become heavier and heavier, sinking to the heart one inch at a time. Center yourself in your heart. (This is the reason the Jesus Prayer is also sometimes called "Prayer of the Heart.")

#### 5. Beginning the Words of the Prayer

When a basic rhythm of breathing, inhalation and exhalation, has been established, seek to synchronize your breathing with the reverent repetition of the prayer. Slowly say the words of the prayer from the heart: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Let your heart repeat these words slowly, over and over again, feeling God's pres-

ence within. Desert Father St. John Climacus writes: "The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of distractions from the very start by a single thought." In this case, that single thought is the use of the Jesus Prayer.

## 6. Attentiveness

When your attention wanders, be patient. Thoughts and distractions are likely to emerge in one's consciousness during the Jesus Prayer ("Twitter-feed"). Slowly refocus on the prayer, releasing the thoughts. "The goal is not to suppress the thoughts during prayer, but only to ignore them, to let them be and to let them go – and to prefer Jesus, to choose Him anew whenever we wander."

Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO provides the best analogy for thoughts. He describes human consciousness as a river and our thoughts as boats going down the river. Suddenly in prayer, we realize that we are on one of these boats. Keating writes: "If you find yourself on a boat, just get off. There should be no self-recriminations, no sighs, no annoyance that you had a

thought. Any such reflection is another thought, another boat."

We should not judge ourselves for having a thought. Just gently let it go and return to the prayer. Remember the intention: to enter into prayer, to cultivate the relationship with God. God is more interested in our intention than whether we do the prayer perfectly (which we cannot). Gently we bring ourselves back to attentiveness (head in the heart, rhythmically breathing, and the slow repetition of the prayer: Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner).

Consider the Four "R's" related to interior stillness:

- Do not **Resist** the thought; we are human beings and rational thought is part of who we are. It was a gift from our Creator.
- Do not **Retain** the thought. Once you realize your mind has wandered, gently let go of the thought. If you find yourself on a boat, simply get off.
- Gently **Return** to the prayer.

• Do not **Regret** the thought. The purpose of the prayer is intention; to build a relationship with the unseen God and God knows this intention. Regret is another thought, another boat going down the river. Regret is also a demon that can result in despair and discouragement, anything to prevent us from continuing our prayer.



The repetition of the prayer should not be a monotonous attempt to gain God's attention, essentially trying to wear down God, but an attempt to change oneself by clearing one's mind of everything except Jesus. The goal is to make this prayer so connected with one's breathing that it becomes, as the experienced fathers say, truly rooted in our hearts and continues as unconscious or self-activating prayer.

Also with regard to distractions, the "enemy" who despises prayer will do anything to disrupt our efforts. Assaults come from the left ("vain thoughts and sinful imaginings") and from the right ("edifying memories" or "beautiful thoughts") are all meant to disrupt us from our prayer. Keep in mind what is important to God. He is pleased when we persevere in our prayer, that we stay the course no matter how intense the distractions may become.

## 7. Concluding the Jesus Prayer

When you are ready, allow yourself to come back to this place. Let the feeling return to your hands, feet, and face. Take a deep breath and slowly open your eyes again. This prayer was intended for a monastic to perform in his or her cell. Accordingly, each person chooses when to conclude his or her prayer. The prayer is not completing a specified number of repetitions. Its importance is simply spending time in silence with Jesus.



## 8. Using a Prayer Rope

Eastern Catholic monastics often use a prayer rope to count the number of recitations of the Jesus Prayer. Tradition has it that St. Pachomius (292-348), an Egyptian and early Desert Father, invented the prayer rope as an aid for illiterate monks to accomplish a consistent number of prayers and prostrations in their cells. Prayer ropes come in varying lengths; however, ropes with 100 beads (usually with a knotted cross on the end) and 33 beads are the most common.

*To be continued...*

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