

ON THE USE OF THE JESUS PRAYER<sup>1</sup>

A MONK OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

WE must remember that by the term 'Jesus Prayer' the Byzantine East refers, loosely enough, to any invocation centring in the Saviour's name itself. This invocation has taken various forms depending on whether it was used by itself, or included in more or less developed formulas. Moreover, it is for the individual to decide on his special way of invoking the name. In the East it has tended to take definite shape in the phrase 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner', but this formula has not been, and is not, the only one. That is an authentic 'Jesus Prayer' in the Byzantine sense, which is a repeated invocation whose core and strength is the name of Jesus. One might say, for example, 'Jesus Christ', or 'Lord Jesus'. The oldest formula, the simplest, and in our view the easiest, is the word 'Jesus' used by itself. It is in this sense that we shall speak here of the 'Jesus Prayer'.

This kind of prayer can be spoken or merely thought. It lies on the borderline between vocal and mental prayer, and also between meditative and contemplative prayer. It can be practised always and everywhere; in church, in one's room, in the street, the office, the factory, etc. One can repeat the name as one walks. Beginners, however, will do well to induce a certain regularity in this practice and choose fixed times and solitary places. Nevertheless, a systematic training does not exclude at the same time the entirely spontaneous invocation of the name.

Before pronouncing the name of Jesus one should first try to recall oneself to a peaceful and recollected state, and then beg the help of the Holy Spirit by whom alone anyone

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can call Jesus Lord (1 Cor. 12, 3). Any other preparation is superfluous. Just as to swim one must jump into the water, so one must, at one go, plunge into the name of Jesus. When the name has been pronounced once, with loving adoration, one has only to cleave to it, to adhere to it, to repeat it slowly, gently, peacefully. It would be a mistake to want to force the prayer, to raise the voice interiorly, to strive for intensity and emotion. When God manifested himself to the prophet Elias, it was not in the storm or the earthquake or the fire, but in the still, small voice that followed it (1 Kings 19). Little by little we must gather all our being about the name, and let it, like a drop of oil, sink and soak silently into our souls. In the actual invocation of the name it is not necessary to say it continuously. Once uttered, the name can be drawn out in moments of repose, of silence and purely inward attention: a bird does the same, alternating between flight and hovering. All tension, all hurry should be avoided. If fatigue is felt, one must break off the invocation and take it up again simply when one feels like it. The goal is not a consistent, literal repetition, but a sort of hiding and resting in the name of Jesus in one's heart: 'I sleep, but my heart watches' (Cant., 5, 2). One must also banish all spiritual sensuality, all striving after emotion. It is doubtless natural that we should hope to obtain results which are in some sort tangible, that we should wish at least to touch the hem of the Saviour's garment and never let him go unless he bless us; but let us not think that an hour during which we have called upon the name without feeling anything, remaining apparently cold and dry, has been an hour wasted and fruitless. The invocation which we thought was sterile will on the contrary be very acceptable to God because, if one may say so, unadulterated, pure of all preoccupation with spiritual delights, and reduced to an offering of the will alone. Besides, in his gracious loving-kindness the Saviour often surrounds his name with an atmosphere of joy, of warmth and light: 'Thy name is an ointment poured forth. . . . Draw me' (Cant., 1, 3-4).

For some, the invocation of the name will be an incident on their spiritual journey; for others it will be more than a phase, it will, without becoming *the* method, be one of the

methods they habitually use; for yet others it will become *the* method around which their whole interior life is built up. To decide arbitrarily, on impulse, that the last will be our case would be to erect an edifice that will collapse pathetically. One does not choose the 'Jesus Prayer'. One is called and led to it by God, if he sees fit. For the best prayer for everyone is, in the long run, that, be it what it may, towards which the Holy Spirit, circumstances, and lawful counsel may lead. What we do say in all seriousness and truth in favour of the 'Jesus Prayer' is that it helps to simplify and unify our spiritual life. Where complicated methods would dissipate and weary the attention, this prayer, consisting of a single word, has a unifying and integrating power beneficial to divided souls whose name and whose sin is legion (Mark 5, 9). Let the name of Jesus only become the centre of a life and it gathers all things together again. One must not, of course, think that the invocation of the name is a short cut which by-passes purifying discipline. The name of Jesus is itself an ascetic instrument, a filter through which may pass only those thoughts, words and acts worthy of the divine and living reality for which the name stands. The increase of the name in the soul means a corresponding decrease in the isolated self, a daily death to the egotism from which all sin flows.

The 'Jesus Prayer' has its stages. It deepens and expands as we find in the name an ever new content. To begin with it should be adoration and a sense of presence. This presence is then experienced as that of a Saviour (for this is the meaning of the word 'Jesus'). The invocation of the name is a mystery of salvation in so far as it brings deliverance. By the very saying of the name we already receive what we need. We receive it from now on in Jesus, who is not only the giver but the gift; not only the purifier but all purity; not only the one who feeds the hungry and refreshes the thirsty but the food and the drink. He is the substance of all good things (if we do not take the word in a strictly metaphysical sense). His name gives peace to the tempted: instead of arguing with temptation, instead of attending to the raging storm (this was, after his good beginning, the fault of Peter on the lake), why not look at Jesus alone and go towards him,

walking on the waves, taking refuge in his name? Let the man who is tempted recollect himself gently and say the name without worry or feverishness, letting that name fill his heart and form a barrier against contrary winds. And if a sin has been committed, then let the name serve for immediate reconciliation. Without hesitation or delay let it be said with repentance and perfect charity and it will become at once a sign of pardon and Jesus will return in homely fashion to the life of the sinner as, when he rose, he returned and sat unaffectedly at the table, where the disciples who had forsaken him gave him fish and honeycomb. Clearly there is no question of rejecting or underestimating the appointed means of penance and absolution that the Church offers to sinners: we are here speaking only of what goes on in the privacy of the soul.

The name of Jesus is more than a mystery of salvation, more than help in need, more than pardon after sin. It is a means whereby we can apply to ourselves the mystery of the Incarnation. More even than the presence, it brings with it union. As we pronounce the name we enthrone Jesus in our hearts, we put on Christ; we offer our flesh to the Word that he may assume it in his Mystical Body; we let the inward reality and power of the word 'Jesus' overflow even in our members subject to the law of sin. We are thereby cleansed and hallowed. 'Place me as a seal on thy heart, as a seal on thy arm' (Cant., 8, 6).

Yet the invocation of the name of Jesus opens to us not only a personal approach to the mystery of the Incarnation. By this prayer we also discover a little of the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1, 23).

The name of Jesus is an instrument, a means of transformation. When we say it, it helps us (without any pantheist implications) to transform the whole world in Jesus Christ. This is true even of inanimate nature. The material universe, which is not simply the visible symbol of the unseen beauty but which struggles with groans towards the Christ and whose possibilities a mysterious compulsion lifts up towards the bread and wine of salvation, this universe murmurs secretly the name of Jesus ('... the very stones will cry out': Luke 19, 40) and it belongs to the priestly

function of every Christian to voice this longing, to pronounce the name of Jesus on natural things, stones and trees, flowers and fruits, mountains and seas, to grant their secret its fulfilment, to bring near the answer to that prolonged unspeaking and unknowing expectation. We can also transform the animal world. Jesus, who declared that not even a sparrow is forgotten by the Father, and who lived in the desert 'with the beasts' (Mark 1, 13), has not left them outside his care and his influence. Like Adam in paradise we must give a name to all the animals; whatever be the name that science gives them we shall call down on each the name of Jesus, giving them thus their ancient dignity which we so often forget and recalling that they were created and loved by the Father in Jesus and for Jesus. But it is above all where men are concerned that the name of Jesus helps us to exercise a ministry of transfiguration. Jesus who, after his resurrection, willed to appear many times to his own 'under another form' (Mark 16, 12)—the unknown traveller on the road to Emmaus, the gardener near the tomb, the stranger standing on the lakeside—still meets us, disguised, in our daily life, still confronts us with that most important aspect of his presence: his presence in man. What we do to the least of our brethren, we do it to him. It is through the features of men and women that with the eyes of faith and love we can discern the face of the Lord; it is in stooping to the distress of the poor, the sick, sinners, all men, that we put our finger in the print of the nails, plunge our hand into the pierced side; we acquire a personal conviction of the resurrection and real presence (without confusion of essence) of Jesus Christ in his Mystical Body, and say with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20, 28). Now the name of Jesus is a practical and powerful means of transfiguring men in their most profound and divine reality. These men and women whom we meet in the street, the factory, the office, and especially those who seem to us irritating and unlikable, let us approach them with the name of Jesus in our hearts and on our lips; let us say silently over them this name (which is their true name); let us name them with this name in a spirit of adoration and service. Let us dedicate ourselves to them in a practical manner if possible, or at least

by an inward desire, and it will be Jesus Christ in them to whom we dedicate ourselves; by the recognition and silent worship of Jesus fettered in the sinner, in the criminal, in the prostitute, we in a certain way set free both our Master and his unfortunate captors. If we see Jesus in everyone, if we say 'Jesus' over everyone, we shall go about the world with a new vision and a new gift in our own heart. We can then, as far as in us lies, transform the world and make our own the words of Jacob to his brother: 'I have seen thy face as if it had been the face of God' (Gen. 33, 10).

The invocation of the name of Jesus has an ecclesial aspect. In that name we meet all those who are united to the Saviour, and in whose midst he abides. In that name we enclose all those whom the divine heart embraces. To pray for someone else is not so much to plead for him before God as to apply to his name the name of Jesus and to adhere to the intercession of our Lord himself for those whom he loves. We encounter here the mystery of the Church. Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church. Whoever is in Jesus is in the Church. The name of Jesus is a means of uniting us to the Church, for the Church is in Christ. She is there without blemish. It is not that we can afford to lose interest in the existence and problems of the Church on earth, or close our eyes to the imperfections and disunion of Christians. We shall not separate the visible and invisible aspects of the Church; we shall not oppose them. But we know that what is implied in the name of Jesus is the spotless spiritual and eternal aspect of the Church, that Church which transcends every earthly manifestation and which no schism can rend. The words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman on 'the hour which comes and is even now come' (John 4, 23) when the true worshippers shall adore the Father, no longer at Jerusalem or on Garizim, but in spirit and in truth, appear to involve a contradiction. How can the hour have come already and yet be still to come? But because Jesus was there in his person Jerusalem and Garizim alike were infinitely surpassed, the hour had already come. We are in a similar position when we invoke the name of the Saviour. We cannot believe that divergent interpretations of the Gospel are true, or that divided Christians possess the same measure

of light; but we do believe that those who, as they say the name of Jesus, try to unite themselves to their Saviour by an act of unconditional obedience and perfect charity, override human divisions, participate in a certain way in the supernatural unity of the mystical body of Christ, and are, if not visibly and explicitly, at least invisibly and implicitly members of the Church. Thus the invocation of the name of Jesus from a sincere heart is a way towards Christian unity. It helps us also to renew in Jesus our communion with the faithful departed. To Martha, who declared her faith in the future resurrection, Jesus replied: '*I am* the resurrection and the life' (John 11, 25). That is to say, the resurrection is something other than a future event; the person of the risen Christ is already the life of all the redeemed; and instead of trying, whether in prayer, or by memory or imagination, to establish a direct spiritual contact between our dead and us, it is in Jesus, where their true life now is, that we should compel ourselves to reach out to them, linking with their own names the name of Jesus. These dead, whose life is hidden with Christ, make up the heavenly Church, the most numerous part of the whole eternal Church. In the name of Jesus we communicate with the saints who bear his name on their brow (Apoc. 22, 4), the angels of whom one said to Mary, 'Thou shalt call thy son by the name of Jesus' (Luke 1, 31), and with Mary herself; would that we could learn in the Spirit, long to understand and repeat the name of Jesus as Mary understood it and said it!

The name of Jesus can become for us a sort of Eucharist. Just as the mystery of the upper room gathered up the life and work of the Saviour, so a certain 'eucharistic' use of the name of Jesus gathers up and unites the aspects of that name which we have so far considered. The sacramental Eucharist cannot be confined within the limits of our theme. But our soul is also an upper room where Jesus desires to eat the pasch with his disciples and where the Lord's Supper can be celebrated, in an invisible manner, at any moment. In this purely spiritual supper the name of the Saviour may take the place of the bread and wine of the sacrament. We can make of the name of Jesus a thankoffering (and this is the

original meaning of the word 'Eucharist'), the support and substance of a sacrifice of praise rendered to the Father. In this interior and invisible offering we present to the Father, as we say the name of Jesus, a lamb slain, a life given, a body broken, blood which has been shed. In this sacrificial use of the holy name it becomes a way of applying the fruits of the unique and perfect oblation of Golgotha. There is no Lord's Supper without Communion. Our invisible Eucharist implies what tradition calls a spiritual communion, that is to say, the act of faith and desire by which the soul feeds on the body and blood of Christ without using the visible elements of bread and wine. Far be from our minds any thought of diminishing or underestimating the sacrament of the Eucharist as the Church uses it, or of confining ourselves to spiritual communion. But we believe that we are in the authentic tradition of the Church in proclaiming the reality of a constant, invisible, purely spiritual access to the body and blood of Christ, an access distinct from a general approach to his person, for it implies a special relation between us and our Saviour as the one who feeds and who is the nourishment of our souls. Now the name of Jesus may serve as the form, the support, the expression of this approach. It can be to us a spiritual food, a participation in the Bread of Life. 'Lord, give us always this bread' (John 6, 34). In this name, in this bread, we unite ourselves to all the members of the Mystical Body of Christ, to all those who sit down at the banquet of the Messiah, we who being many are one bread, one body (I Cor. 10, 17). And since the Eucharist shows forth the Lord's death until he come (I Cor. 11, 26), since it is an anticipation of the eternal kingdom, the eucharistic use of the name of Jesus has also an eschatological significance: it proclaims the end and the second Advent, it is an ardent longing, not only for those occasional comings of Christ in our earthly life, but for that final coming of Christ to us which will be the moment of our death. There is a way of saying the name of Jesus which makes it a preparation for death, a leap of our heart beyond the barrier, a strong cry to the lover, 'whom though we have not seen, we love' (I Peter 1, 8). To say 'Jesus' is indeed to repeat the cry of the Apocalypse, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22, 20).



When we read the book of Acts, we see what a central place the name of Jesus held in the teaching and work of the Apostles. By them 'the name of the Lord Jesus was glorified' (Acts 19, 17); it was in this name that signs and wonders were done and lives were changed. After Pentecost the Apostles were able to proclaim the name 'with power'. There we find a pentecostal use of the name of Jesus, a use which is not confined to the Apostles but remains available to all believers. Only the weakness of our faith and charity prevents us from renewing in the name of Jesus the fruits of Pentecost, from putting demons to flight, and laying our hands on the sick and healing them. The saints still continue to do this. The Spirit writes the name of Jesus in letters of fire in the hearts of his elect. That name is a burning flame. But there is another link between the Holy Spirit and the invocation of the name of Jesus which is more interior than the pentecostal ministry of the Christian. In saying the Saviour's name we can have a certain 'experience' (the word is used with all necessary reservations) of the relation between the Son and the Holy Spirit. We can strive to follow the descent of the dove upon our Saviour, to unite our hearts (as far as a creature can unite itself to a divine activity) with the eternal movement of the Spirit towards Jesus. 'O, if I had the wings of a dove' (Ps. 54, 7), not only to take flight far from earthly sorrows, but to rest upon him who is all my good! O, if I could only hear 'the voice of the turtle' (Cant., 2, 12), say 'with unspeakable sighs' (Rom. 8, 26) the name of the Beloved! Then would the invocation of the name of Jesus be an initiation into the mystery of the loving relation between the Christ and the Spirit. On the other hand we should also be able to try to unite ourselves (keeping always our due measure) with the attitude of Jesus to the Holy Spirit. Conceived by the Spirit, driven by the Spirit, Jesus showed the humblest docility towards him whom the Father breathes forth. As we say the name of Jesus, let us unite ourselves (as far as it can be given to a creature to do) with the complete surrender of his life which Jesus made to this divine breathing. Let us find also in the name of Jesus a source whence the Spirit is diffused, let us

find in Jesus the abode whence the Spirit is sent to men, the lips wherewith the Spirit is breathed upon us. The invocation of the name of Jesus bringing us into touch with those different moments—the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus, the sending of the Spirit to men by Jesus, the aspiration of Jesus towards the Father—will make us grow in the knowledge and friendship of him whom Paul calls the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4, 6).

And so we have the Son. And we have the Father. Our reading of the Gospels will remain superficial as long as we find there only one life and one message offered to men. The heart of the Gospel, the mystery of the Jesus is the relationship between the Father and his only Son. To say the name of Jesus is to pronounce the Word which was in the beginning, the Word which the Father says from all eternity. The name of Jesus, we might almost say (with a certain easily rectifiable anthropomorphism), is the only human word the Father says, in so far as he begets the Son and gives himself to him. To say the name of Jesus is to draw near to the Father, is to contemplate the love and the gift of the Father centred in Jesus, is to feel (in our poor measure) something of that love, and to associate ourselves with it from afar, is to hear the Father saying 'Thou art my beloved Son' and to answer with a humble 'yes' to that affirmation. On the other hand, to say the name of Jesus is to enter as far as a creature can into the filial sentiment of Christ. Having found in the word 'Jesus' the tender address of the Father, 'My Son', it is to find there also the tender reply of the Son, 'My Father'. It is to recognise in Jesus the perfect likeness of the Father, to unite ourselves with the eternal movement of the Son towards the Father, with the total offering of the Son to the Father. To say the name of Jesus is (if one may so say) to unite in a certain way the Father to the Son and glimpse some dim reflection of their unity. It is to discover the best way to the heart of the Father.

We have, then, considered different aspects of the invocation of the name of Jesus. We have arranged them in a kind of ascending scale, useful perhaps from the teaching point of view, but nevertheless artificial since in fact these stages overlap and God 'does not give the Spirit by measure'. At one

stage or another in the practice of the 'Jesus Prayer' it is good and even necessary to concentrate on one particular aspect of the divine name. But a time does come when such particularisation becomes a weariness, hard, sometimes even impossible. The consideration and invocation of the name of Jesus now embraces everything. All the implications of the name become for us simultaneously though confusedly present. We say 'Jesus' and we rest in a fullness, a totality which it is no longer possible for us to disunite. The name of Jesus brings with it the whole Christ. It admits us to the full presence. In it all the realities to which the name has been an approach are found: salvation and forgiveness, Incarnation and Transfiguration, Church and Eucharist, Spirit and Father. All things now seem to us as 'summed up in Christ' (Eph. 1, 10). The whole presence is everything. Without it the name is nothing. And he who has reached the presence no longer needs the name. The name is but the support of the presence, and at the end of the journey we become free of the name itself, free of all save Jesus, save the living and unspeakable contact with his person. The ray of light is composed of the many colours which the prism disperses. Thus the 'whole name', sign and vehicle of the full presence, acts like a burning-glass which receives and concentrates the white light of Jesus. This burning-glass—the name of him who is the light of the world—helps us to kindle that fire of which it was said, 'I am come to cast fire on the earth' (Luke 12, 49). If we attach ourselves to the name of Jesus we receive that special blessing which Scripture promises: 'Be merciful to me as thou art wont to be to those who love thy name' (Ps. 118, 132). And may the Lord be able, may the Lord be good enough to say of us what he said of Saul: 'He is to me a chosen vessel to carry my name' (Acts 9, 15).