

ON THE JESUS PRAYER

Peter VRYZAS*

ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on the Jesus Prayer, attempting to explain (1) how in this prayer, by the grace of God, our mind can be united with the heart and (2) what the fruits of this marvellous union are.

Keywords: prayer of the heart, Jesus Prayer, *hesychia*, hesychasm, St. Silouan the Athonite, St. Sophrony (Sakharov), knowledge of God, God's grace, return of the mind, contemplation, the "deep heart" of man, repentance, vision of light, discernment of thoughts

Introduction

Divine revelation makes manifest to us God as the Creator of all things, Who by the energy of His Word, "spake, and [all things] were made; He commanded, and they were created."¹ He fashioned man with special care, crowning him with glory and honour. He created his heart in a unique manner and rendered him capable of receiving Divine Being within himself. The honour that God bestowed on His creature lies in the fact that man can become a co-worker with God in bringing forth the divine image in his own heart and in the hearts of his brethren. The supreme act that manifests man's cooperation in the work of his own salvation is prayer.

Prayer is the union of two forms of energy: human created energy and divine uncreated energy. Its strength can become an intense spiritual upsurge that bursts through the tight ring of heavy matter.² Prayer is indeed an infinite

* *PhD, Very Reverend Archimandrite and Hegoumen of the Holy Patriarchal and Stavropegic Monastery of Saint John in Essex, The United Kingdom. E-mail: grammateia.monastery.essex@gmail.com.*

¹ Ps 32:9 (LXX).

² Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *On Prayer*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1996), 49.

creation, superior to any art or science, since true prayer to the true God is communion with the Spirit of God, Who “maketh intercessions” in us “with groanings which cannot be uttered.”³

The pattern and example⁴ for the practice of prayer was left to us by Christ, Who “departed into a solitary place a great while before day,”⁵ and “He was there alone.”⁶ In His eternal Gospel, the Lord bears witness that He did not come to earth to minister unto the treacherous peace of this world, but to bring “a sword and division.”⁷ Prayer is one of the forms of that “division”⁸ the Lord has brought into the world, since it lifts him who is fond of it from the troubled multitude, as a mother lifts her child; it delivers him from the daily turmoil and despondency of the world that makes love grow cold.

Interpreting the writings of St. Silouan the Athonite, Elder Sophrony distinguishes two ways of knowledge.⁹ In the first, the main means of knowledge is the human mind. Along the typical path of science and the intellect, the mind of man is turned towards the exterior with the aim of seeking knowledge. Thus it comes unavoidably into confrontation with countless polymorphous phenomena and forms of information. In its effort to create, albeit artificially, some kind of unity from all the information, the mind takes refuge in a synthesis that does not ultimately respond adequately to the objective and ontological reality. The fascination that the power of reason exercises over man leads him to want to investigate and comprehend even the Divine world with his mind, mobilizing principally the workings of his imagination.¹⁰ Such an endeavor, which many would refer to as ‘theological creativity,’ can result in the subversion and contortion of the truth, so that man creates God according to his own image and likeness.¹¹

The second way of knowledge is spiritual in kind. This differs substantially from the intellectual way, because this knowledge is apprehended through existential communion as union “in very being.”¹² For St. Sophrony, knowledge

³ Rom 8:26.

⁴ See 1 Pt 2:21.

⁵ Mk 1:35.

⁶ Mt 14:23.

⁷ See Mt 10:34.

⁸ See Lk 2:53.

⁹ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991), 103.

¹⁰ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 155.

¹¹ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*; idem, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, trans. Edmonds (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004), 223.

¹² St. Sophrony the Athonite, *Ὁψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστὶ*, 8th edn (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2020), 310.

of God is experienced as “communion in being.”¹³ The one who knows comes into existential communion with the One Who is known. Man participates in this act not only with his intellect, but with all the fulness of his nature, and for this reason it restores his wholeness.¹⁴ In other words, this kind of knowledge of God differs qualitatively from the knowledge that man acquires through philosophical thought, because another form of life is imparted along with spiritual knowledge.¹⁵

By the strength of his mind, man can perhaps comprehend a few of the phenomena of this world. Apprehending Divine revelation, however, is possible only in the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ This invisibly imparts knowledge of God to the soul, revealing the mysteries of eternal life and granting man strength to love the Beloved.¹⁷ Without the living experience of God, the human intellect alone cannot approach the ontological content of faith, which is ‘knowledge’ received from entering into the Energy of Divine Eternity.¹⁸ It is one thing for someone to believe “by hearing”¹⁹ and another entirely to know God.²⁰

According to Elder Sophrony, pure prayer is the safest path to knowledge of God.²¹ God is always known “in the bond of love” in the state of pure prayer, when the mind is “stationed in the heart in prayerful attention,”²² from where it also turns to God in “imageless prayer.”²³ Through pure noetic prayer the human mind enters initially into the fleshy heart. Gradually, however, it penetrates the depths of the heart that are no longer flesh. It discovers the deep, spiritual heart.²⁴ The man who prays from the depth of his being strives to stand before

¹³ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 112, 170; idem, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 217; idem, *Truth and Life* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2016), 35.

¹⁴ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Τὸ Μυστήριον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ζωῆς*, 4th edn (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2020), 18.

¹⁵ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 35.

¹⁶ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 289.

¹⁷ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 366. For the reasons why man can only know God in the Holy Spirit, see Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 371, 396, 353–354, 361–372, 382–383.

¹⁸ “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17:3). See also Archimandrite Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 8.

¹⁹ Rom 10:17.

²⁰ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 86–87, 189, 301, 354. See also idem, *We Shall See Him as He Is*, 223.

²¹ For a definition of pure prayer, see Archimandrite Peter (Vryzas), *Theology as a Spiritual State in the Life and Teaching of Saint Sophrony the Athonite* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2019), 75–119 (chapter 2, “Hesychastic Prayer and the Emerging of the Deep Heart”).

²² Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 133.

²³ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 155.

²⁴ See Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 47.

God “with a pure mind.” Through the action of grace, man’s attention that before was turned towards the earth is now confined within his heart, and from there it ascends to the spiritual sphere of “the things which are not seen and eternal,”²⁵ where “he prays as an eternal mind before the first eternal Mind.”²⁶ Because of the vastness of the subject of prayer, this paper will focus on the Jesus Prayer, attempting to explain (1) how in this prayer, by the grace of God, our mind can be united with the heart and (2) what the fruits of this marvellous union are.

The Jesus Prayer

In his Epistle to the Corinthians, Saint Paul says, as if it were common knowledge to all Christians: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”²⁷ And we have three means of becoming the temple of the Holy Spirit: the word of God, the Jesus Prayer, and the Divine Liturgy. The opening of our heart to the word of God, the invocation of the Name of Christ through the Jesus Prayer and the communion of His precious Body and Blood constitute our three main activities in our act of worship towards God.

It is nevertheless very important for us to point out that in the conscience of our Church and of the Holy Fathers, who are the glorious members of the Church, the word ‘worship’ signifies something truly sublime. It signifies the true calling of man, which lies within the pre-eternal plan of God. This plan has destined for man to become incorruptible and eternal through a life of loving communion with God his Creator. From the beginning, man was fashioned according to God’s “image” and after His “likeness.” He was given the potential to receive the divine form of being, to become a god by grace and precisely for this reason the true knowledge of God is accessible to man. Prayer is one of the most precious and necessary means for the fulfilment and perfection of this glorious purpose. According to the words of Saint John of Sinai, “Prayer, by reason of its nature, is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God.”²⁸ God’s image is preserved in man even after the Fall and that is why it is natural for him to seek for the

²⁵ Cf. 2 Cor 4:18.

²⁶ Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), *Οικοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ μέσα μας καὶ στοὺς ἀδελφούς μας* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2013), vol. 1, 140; vol. 2 (2014), 53.

²⁷ 1 Cor 3:16.

²⁸ St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012), 212 (step 28).

Absolute in his life. Being a bearer of the immortal breath of God, man can never be content with the created things of this world; neither can he find real peace while he is separated from his Creator:

Being made in the image of the Absolute, he is possessed by an unquenchable thirst for the ultimate knowledge of God, and does not feel satisfied with intermediate states. This knowledge will shed light in the darkness of his ignorance concerning his own existence and his personal destiny.²⁹

The Jesus Prayer is a short invocation which the faithful try to repeat ceaselessly calling upon the Name of the Lord with the words: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner" or else, "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me." The first part of the prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God," contains a confession of faith in the divinity of Christ, but also in all the Holy Trinity. In the second part there is a confession made by the one praying who acknowledges his sinfulness. These two parts of the prayer, the confession of faith and the repentance of the one praying, give fullness and content to the prayer.³⁰ The foundation of the Jesus Prayer can be found in the words of the Lord: "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full [...]. Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you."³¹ Among the first who witnessed the power of the Name of Christ were surely His disciples:

When they were sent forth "as sheep in the midst of wolves" to bring peace to the world, to heal the sick, to proclaim the coming of the Divine Kingdom, according to the Gospel "the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name." Thus the history of the Jesus Prayer dates from apostolic times.³²

Already from the beginning of Christianity we see that the invocation of the Name of Christ and the communion of His Body and Blood had become the two poles of the life of Christians.

²⁹ Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *Christ, Our Way and Our Life – A presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony*, 2nd edn (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2012), 159.

³⁰ Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *The Enlargement of the Heart in the Theology of Saint Silouan the Athonite and Elder Sophrony of Essex* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2013), 138.

³¹ Jn 16:24, 23.

³² Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 122.

Purpose: Union of Mind and Heart – Stages in Prayer

Progress in the practice of the Jesus Prayer depends greatly on having a correct theory concerning the ways that lead to salvation. The beginning of spiritual life is signified by the fight against the passions. The more man is initiated in prayer the more he realises that the centre of all the spiritual battles against the passions and the devil is a specific part of his body: his very heart. There, in his heart, he feels the influence of passionate thoughts, but he cannot see further than that yet. However, when his prayer attracts the waves of God's grace, these visitations of grace reveal to him that in fact the heart is something far greater than he could ever suspect. In the Old Testament, man is defined as a "deep heart."³³ We also read that "the heart of man seeks a spiritual and divine sensation."³⁴ In other words, the deep heart of man is the place where he accepts the visitations of God's grace and, even more, it is the place where man is united with God:

The heart of every individual human is made by God in a specific and unique way. It is unrepeatable; it is the centre of the human hypostasis-person. Man is majestic when he approaches God with his "deep heart," for there is the place [...] where the infinity of the Lord is revealed, and the prayerful spirit of man is concentrated.³⁵

The way that leads to the "deep heart" passes through our physical heart. The relationship we find between the two of them is the same as that which we can trace between our mind and our brain. The significant difference lies in the fact that man uses his brain and his physical heart only until the time of his death, whereas the mind and the spiritual "deep heart" accompany the soul after the departure from this world. Nevertheless, during the time of our earthly life, the actions and the energies of our mind are strongly connected with the function of the brain, and in the same way our physical heart remains the centre of our being where all the aspects of our spiritual life are made manifest.

The purpose of the Jesus Prayer is the unity of the mind and the heart. The mind of man (νοῦς) has its own energies. Usually, as we grow up living in the world, we learn to live outside our heart and our mind uses its energies through the functions of our brain and the senses of our body; in this way, our mind is dispersed in the things of the world around us. However, the purpose of all our labours as Christians is for the mind to seek and find the heart anew. When man starts to live with repentance and with the invocation of the Name

³³ Cf. Ps 64:6.

³⁴ Cf. Prv 15:14 (LXX).

³⁵ Archimandrite Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, 169.

of Christ, the moment comes when, by the grace of God, the heart emerges from the thick layers of passions that had covered it over the years. This is a very significant moment, because now the mind which was before scattered outside must make an inward movement and be united with the heart.

Already from the first centuries of Christianity we find that some of the Fathers of the Church speak about this threefold progress: the mind makes an inward movement through prayer and is united with the “deep heart;” then, through this incredible unity, it is lifted up to union with God, which union transmits the perfect knowledge of God. Saint Dionysios the Areopagite was one of the first Fathers to name this movement “the cyclical movement of the mind.” Many Fathers of the Church call this cyclical movement “a movement that knows no delusion.” This means that during this movement the devil cannot pollute the mind with his alien thoughts. The fervency of the spirit that is activated in the “deep heart” of man through the invocation of the Name of Christ becomes for the devil an intolerable furnace and that is the reason why he cannot approach the “deep heart” of man. The pain of repentance together with the Jesus Prayer kindles a certain warmth in the heart, which forces the devil to stay outside the walls of the fortress of our soul. “This is the baptism of fire which the Lord promised: the mind descends into the heart to be baptised in its fire [...] that it may recover its proper function. Man then regains the capacity to be in possession of his whole nature, his whole being, and to direct it towards God.”³⁶

Comments on the return of the mind to the heart can also be found in the works of St. Basil the Great. But the one Father that made a very inspiring analysis of this cyclical movement of the mind is our Father among the saints Gregory Palamas. According to this great saint of our Church, the first movement has already happened with the original Fall of man when our mind spread out into the visible world and became attached to it. The second movement occurs when, by the grace of God and through the practice of the Jesus Prayer, the mind finds the heart and is united with it. Once the mind is united with the heart, then man possesses his entire nature, the powers of his soul are united again. And the third movement takes place when man directs his whole being to God.³⁷ This is why the Fathers say that if you enter the inner chamber of your heart, you have entered the chamber of heaven.

If we follow the history of the Old Testament we find that one of the most important moments for the people of Israel was when King Solomon succeeded in building a temple for God in Jerusalem. And we read that the temple was

³⁶ Archimandrite Zacharias (Zacharou), *The Hidden Man of the Heart* (Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2007), 193 (chapter 12).

³⁷ St. Gregory Palamas, “The Hesychast Method of Prayer and the Transformation of the Body,” in *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 44.

consecrated when God “placed His Name there forever;” and because of this Name “His heart would be there for all time.”³⁸ God’s presence in the temple was so strong that for the Jews of old it was truly the place where God lived; it was the house of God beyond any doubt. In the same way, man becomes the temple of God when he “calls upon the Lord from a pure heart.”³⁹ It was a great miracle of God’s goodness to come and fill with His presence the temple which His elect had built. But when the fullness of the time was come God showed that His love for mankind was infinite. The coming of Christ into the world made manifest that our God is a jealous God for whom the temples made by stone are too little, for he wants to make the heart of every man a living temple not made by hands. Then, the glory of the Lord and His love, which is love unto the end, fills the house of our heart and it becomes His house for ever.

The Creator of our nature “took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man.” The Word of the Father “was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” The Eternal manifested Himself in time. This new revelation brought us a new Divine Name upon which we can call: JESUS which means Saviour. The Name Jesus first and foremost indicates to us the purpose of God’s coming in the flesh “for our salvation.” In assuming our nature God indicates the possibility for us, too, to become sons of God. A great Light came into the life of the world. A new period began. History from Adam to Moses was indeed holy. It was also holy from the moment of the Appearance of God on Mt. Sinai; but it is holier still from the moment of the coming of Christ.⁴⁰

Something that is very interesting to note, however, is the disposition with which Solomon offered up his great prayer to God before the consecration of the temple. Before posing his supplication, his request, king Solomon confessed a great truth: he acknowledged that man is fallen, that man is justly separated from God and that there is an immense distance between the earth and the place where the Lord of hosts lives; and that is why Solomon said the following words in his prayer: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?”⁴¹ As we know, God’s response to that prayer was that immediately He filled the temple with His Glory. Now however, His condescension is much greater, because He accepts to come and dwell in our hearts. This makes it evident that

³⁸ Cf. 1 Kgs 9:3.

³⁹ 1 Tm 2:21-22.

⁴⁰ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 130.

⁴¹ 1 Kgs 8:27.

our approach to Him should be even more humble than before. Something that can help us keep a humble spirit is the knowledge that our heart is too small for Him. The unity of mind and heart, and through it our union with God, is a work that can be accomplished only by the grace of God; and it is given to us freely as a gift, not as a reward for our efforts. We have done nothing to deserve recompense from God, since He first loved us, and “He died for us while we were yet sinners.”⁴² If the Jews, during their journey in the desert suffered persecutions and tribulations longing for the day they would meet the Promised Land, then we should also suffer the pain of repentance, bearing the Name of Christ with patience, because it is the only Name under heaven that can transform our hearts into living temples for the showing of His glory and thus lead us into the Promised Land where we shall live in the Lord’s presence for ever.

The rule in prayer is that quantity brings quality. That is to say, the prayer of the beginner cannot be pure and undistracted, and that is why it has to be said aloud and as frequently as possible. In practice, the Jesus Prayer should be said continuously, and we must try to hold fast to it, but not only with our spirit, because we are easily distracted. A gradual ascent into prayer is the most trustworthy. The beginner is usually recommended to start with the first step, which is verbal prayer (saying the prayer aloud), until body, tongue, brain, and heart assimilate it. The time this takes varies, yet: the stronger the repentance, the shorter the road.

It is possible to establish certain stages in the development of the Jesus Prayer. First, we say the prayer with our lips while trying to concentrate our attention on the Name and the words. Next, we no longer move our lips but pronounce the Name of Jesus Christ, and what follows after, in our minds, mentally. In the third stage mind and heart combine to act together: the attention of the mind is centred in the heart and the prayer is said there. Fourthly, the prayer acts on its own. This happens when the prayer is established in the heart and, with no special effort on our part, continues there, where the mind is concentrated. Finally, the charismatic prayer. Now the prayer starts to act like a gentle flame within us, as inspiration from on High, rejoicing the heart with a sensation of Divine love and delighting the mind in spiritual contemplation.⁴³

According to Saint Sophrony, this last stage is sometimes accompanied by a vision of Light—the uncreated Light of God. The invocation of the Name of Christ creates such a state in man’s heart that life becomes really a foretaste of the life in heaven.

⁴² Rom 5:8.

⁴³ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 142–143.

Fruits of the Jesus Prayer

But what are the fruits that spring forth when the mind is united with the heart and invokes the Name of the Lord therein?

A. *Peace and Joy*

The aim of the Jesus Prayer is to help the Christian remain in the living presence of God. This presence in some of its forms becomes “a consuming fire.” It contains divine strength that restores our hearts from the death of sin and light that enlightens the mind. It is a power that banishes the spirit of evil and helps us to discern what goes on in our heart and mind. Our being is healed and this awareness of being whole again transmits great joy to the heart of man.

Once we surrender ourselves to the labours of repentance and we shed tears of compunction, then the cage in our heart is demolished, the fire of the passions is extinguished, we are spiritually reborn through the presence of the Comforter and once again the soul becomes a palace of purity. God who is above nature descends into the heart and sits on it as upon a throne of glory, giving peace to all our inner powers.⁴⁴

B. *The Mind Is No Longer Attached to the Vain Things of This World*

“Walking in the Spirit” man no longer “fulfils the lusts of the flesh.”⁴⁵ The “pride of life”⁴⁶ by which the world is led astray cannot influence his heart the way it did before. Likewise, the intellect no longer becomes the victim of the intrusion of unclean thoughts through imagination, since it is no longer dispersed throughout the whole creation, but it has found a stable base in the heart.⁴⁷ The whole man is freed little by little from the dominance of sin and becomes the target of the secret visitations of the Lord.⁴⁸ Having put off the old man and being renewed in the spirit of his mind, he now puts on the new man which is created in righteousness and perfect holiness in the fear of God.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Niketas Stethatos in *The Philokalia. The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, trans. Gerald E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 120–121 (modified).

⁴⁵ Cf. Gal 5:16.

⁴⁶ Cf. 1 Jn 2:16.

⁴⁷ Cf. Archimandrite Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life*, 174.

⁴⁸ Cf. Jb 7:18.

⁴⁹ Cf. Eph 4:22-24; 2 Cor 7:1.

C. Man Enters the Presence of the Living God

By invoking the Name of Christ with the mind in the heart, man enters the presence of the living God and in the light of that presence he is able, for the first time in his life, to see the true state of his heart. Seeing the darkness and the corruption that he bears in himself, he realizes the mortal wages of sin he has been carrying all the years of his former life.⁵⁰ Having allowed his senses to follow “the carnal mind”⁵¹ of this world, he now recognises the distorted image that covers his heart and he thus acquires a humble spirit. He now boldly takes upon himself the work of spiritual mourning, feeding his soul with the bread of tears which the Lord provides sumptuously to those who make a sincere decision to follow Him to the end.⁵² This sight may seem fearful to our eyes, but in fact it is a great gift from God. The Lord in His goodness allows man to see his true state so that the tension of his prayer increases more and more. “Progress in prayer unfailingly entails an ever-deepening recognition of our sinfulness. Only then we can invoke the wondrous Name of Christ with an ever-increasing inspiration, eagerly seeking for the restoration of His image in us.”⁵³

Just as the senses of the body are pulling us almost violently towards what attracts them, so also the intellect, once it tastes the divine goodness, leads us towards invisible blessings. Everything desires what is similar to itself: the soul, since it is bodiless, desires heavenly goods, while the body, being dust, seeks earthly comforts. Therefore if we labour to refine our material nature through prayer and repentance we shall surely come to experience the immaterial consolation of God’s grace.⁵⁴

D. Discernment of Thoughts Happens Naturally

The man who has restored the unity of mind and heart through the Jesus Prayer is “no longer ignorant of the devil’s devices.”⁵⁵ Discernment of thoughts happens naturally, since his heart becomes like a crystal clear mirror in which man can perceive all the evil inclinations of his mind and all the machinations of the unclean spirits. The heart is now like a fortress in which the mind is enthroned as a king, seeing the thoughts of the enemy from far and not allowing them to intrude into the sacred work of prayer. In a peculiar way, he who loves

⁵⁰ Cf. Rom 6:23.

⁵¹ Cf. Col 2:18.

⁵² Cf. Ps 79:6.

⁵³ Cf. Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 162 (part 2).

⁵⁴ St. Diadochos of Photiki, “On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination,” in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 259 (modified).

⁵⁵ See 2 Cor 2:11.

the Name of Christ becomes familiar with His word. The reading of the Gospels gives great joy to the heart and becomes a very creative act, since the inner prayer of the heart inspires man to “bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”⁵⁶

E. Man Acquires Purity of Mind and Heart

In the practice of the Jesus Prayer the heart holds a central place, but the function of the mind as well is extremely significant. As the wise Solomon declares, we must “keep our heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the senses of our body may be five, but, considering the inner man, these five senses merge into one inner sense which is based in the heart. The mind and the heart constitute the centre of every individual human being. Once the mind and the heart are cleansed, purity is restored both in the body and the soul of man. Nevertheless, it is very important to note here that it is easier to cleanse the mind than to purify the heart.

Purity of mind is one thing, and purity of the heart is another, just as a limb differs from the whole body [...]. The heart is what contains and holds the inner senses: it is the root of all the senses; but if the root is holy, then the branches are holy. It is evident, therefore, that if the heart is purified, all the senses are made pure. Now if the mind, on the one hand, is a little diligent in reading the divine Scriptures and toils a little in prayer (in fasting, vigil, and stillness), it will forget its former activity and become pure, as long as it abstains from sinful thoughts (alien concerns). Even so its purity will not be permanent, for just as it is quickly cleansed, so too it is quickly defiled.⁵⁸

But the heart, on the other hand, is only made pure by many afflictions and deprivations. Man has to pass through the fire of repentance and to keep this fire for a substantial amount of time in his life. He really has to humble himself under the mighty hand of God until the Lord grants him again “in due time”⁵⁹ the purity of heart. Only tearful prayer of repentance can destroy the roots of passion in our heart and only the invocation of the Name of Jesus can cleanse, regenerate, and hallow our nature. Man must be patient in the invocation of the Name of Christ knowing that: “Any purity that comes quickly, with little

⁵⁶ Cf. 2 Cor 10:5.

⁵⁷ Prv 4:23.

⁵⁸ *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), 133 (*Homily 3*).

⁵⁹ Cf. 1 Pt 5:6.

time and slight labour, is also quickly lost and defiled. But the purity that comes through many afflictions and is acquired over a long period of time in the soul's superior part (which is the heart) is not endangered by any moderate assault."⁶⁰ "Once the heart is purified, its purity can no longer be stained by little things, nor is it discouraged by great and open conflicts,"⁶¹ because "greater is He that is in our hearts, than he that is in the world."⁶²

The heart that has been purified by God's grace acquires the humility which St. Silouan the Athonite describes when he speaks about the soul of the humble man: "The soul of the humble man is like the sea. Throw a stone into the sea—for a moment it will ruffle the surface, and then sink to the bottom. Thus do afflictions disappear down in the heart of the humble man because the strength of the Lord is with him."⁶³

Conclusion

During the years that the Jews were wandering in the desert it is said that the Lord was feeding them by sending manna from heaven. This heavenly food had a very special property: once the Jews would put it in their mouth it would transform into that kind of food that each one of them desired. Thus the Lord was satisfying the hunger of His people in a way that was fulfilling their personal desires as well. Using this as an example we could say that the same miracle happens with the Name of the Lord; it responds to the personal needs of each one of us, feeding us with bountiful mercies. The Jesus Prayer becomes all in all: it feeds the hungry, it heals the sick, it transmits "the peace of God which passeth all understanding,"⁶⁴ it gives us such an inspiration that every day is teaching us something new and also it satisfies our desire for freedom in a way that surpasses all our expectations. Man is truly free when he is in full possession of his true nature. Unity of mind, heart, and senses allows him to fulfil the two great commandments; he is now free because he can "love God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength, and his neighbour as himself."⁶⁵

In the act of prayer we strive to unite with that which transcends our created nature. Consequently, in this world, prayer is a 'supernatural' act, which is why every natural thing proves to be an obstacle to this activity. Sometimes

⁶⁰ *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 133.

⁶¹ Cf. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 133.

⁶² 1 Jn 4:4.

⁶³ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 305.

⁶⁴ Phil 4:7.

⁶⁵ Lk 10:27.

the heart of man becomes dry, the struggle to turn to God in prayer becomes toilsome, and the corruptible body, which is unable to ascend to the realm of the Spirit, resists prayer or grows weary. Nevertheless, according to the words of Saint Sophrony the Athonite, we must always take care to ensure that “every reduction in our prayer-strength must be as brief as possible.”⁶⁶

It is impossible for the man who prays to know when God will be well-pleased and condescend to His suffering creature. Even when man surrenders himself to prayer unto exhaustion, it does not necessarily mean that God will draw nigh. Such events depend purely on the good pleasure of God alone. “We only yearn for Him; weep in repentance over our perversion; long for Him to heal us; weary of being separate from Him.”⁶⁷ As we read in the writings of Saint Silouan the Athonite:

The Lord does not desire the death of a sinner, and on him who repents He bestows the grace of the Holy Spirit, which gives peace to the soul and freedom for mind and heart to dwell in God. When the Holy Spirit forgives us our sins we receive freedom to pray to God with an undistracted mind. Then the soul can freely contemplate God and live serene and joyous in Him. And this is true freedom.⁶⁸

Prayer loves those who pray. The invocation of the Name of Christ unites us with the Person of Christ, bestowing upon us the royal freedom of sonship because “he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.”⁶⁹ “Unto us is the promise.”⁷⁰ We only need to try and then we will surely “taste and see that the Lord is good.”⁷¹

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

St. Diadochos of Photiki. *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*. English translation in *The Philokalia. The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*, translated by Gerald E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. Vol. 1, 253–296. London: Faber and Faber, 1979.

⁶⁶ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 12.

⁶⁷ Archimandrite Sophrony, *On Prayer*, 81.

⁶⁸ Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 342.

⁶⁹ 1 Cor 6:17.

⁷⁰ Cf. Acts 2:39.

⁷¹ Ps 33:9.

- St. Gregory Palamas. *The Triads*. Translated by Nicholas Gendle. New York: Paulist Press, 1983.
- St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2012.
- The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*. 2nd edn. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011.
- The Philokalia. The Complete Text Compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth*. Translated by Gerald E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware. Vol. 4. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

Secondary Literature

- Sakharov, Archimandrite Sophrony. *Saint Silouan the Athonite*. Translated by Rosemary Edmonds. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1991.
- _____. *On Prayer*. Translated by Rosemary Edmonds. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1996.
- _____. *We Shall See Him as He Is*. Translated by Rosemary Edmonds. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004.
- _____. *Οἰκοδομώντας τὸν ναὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ μέσα μας καὶ στοὺς ἀδελφούς μας*. 2 vols. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2013, 2014.
- _____. *Ὀψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστι*. 8th edn. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2020.
- _____. *Τὸ Μυστήριον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ζωῆς*. 4th edn. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2020.
- Vryzas, Archimandrite Peter. *Theology as a Spiritual State in the Life and Teaching of Saint Sophrony the Athonite*. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2019.
- Zacharou, Archimandrite Zacharias. *The Hidden Man of the Heart*. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2007.
- _____. *Christ, Our Way and Our Life – A Presentation of the Theology of Archimandrite Sophrony*. 2nd edn. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2012.
- _____. *The Enlargement of the Heart in the Theology of Saint Silouan the Athonite and Elder Sophrony of Essex*. Tolleshunt Knights, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2013.

