

THE PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE JESUS PRAYER

By Fr. Robert Slesinski

Western interest in Eastern Christianity has, for the most part, been centered on two aspects of Eastern ecclesial life—namely, its liturgical dimension and its spiritual ethos. In addition, it can be said, at least in a general fashion, that the Western mind has been captivated by these aspects both at the popular level and at the strictly intellectual, theological level. The specific "return to the Fathers" which has marked the researches of both Eastern and Western scholars for over a half century now is not out of harmony with this assertion, but rather only serves to confirm it. This is because what the Patristic turn has meant on a methodological level has been itself inspired by a desire to have a real integration of ecclesial practice and devotion with theological strivings. The scholarship and piety of the Fathers of the Church manifest this type of desirable existential unity of theory and praxis.

This fascination with Eastern Christian thought, which has done so much to renew all Christian thought, both Eastern and Western, has not, however, been without its dangers. The concentration of effort on the liturgical and spiritual moments of Eastern thought, inalienable though they be to this thought, has obscured other areas of legitimate, and often capital, importance. At the same time, this interest has not infrequently been of an overly romantic inspiration. What this has meant in practice is the oversimplification and, concomitantly, overestimation of certain features of Eastern thought and practice. The troublesome side of Eastern life, above all, seems at times to have been glossed over in the process. The true dynamism—the painstaking effort at deepening and growth—of Eastern thought is thus not always sufficiently appreciated and savored. One immediately thinks of liturgical thought. If one would judge by some theological literature—and especially popular presentations—one would think that the Christian East has only known a properly Sacramental view of the Liturgy in the sense of the Liturgy being a participation of the faithful in the very mysteries of the faith. This is not true. One need only think of those classical commentaries on the Liturgy like St.

Germanus' *Historia ecclesiastica*,¹ in which the overriding stress is on allegorical interpretation; and such commentaries actually evidence more of a deformation of symbolic understanding of the Liturgy than true Sacramental enlightenment. Similarly, one cannot but note the view of those guilty—it would seem—of excessive romantic sentiment, those who would make nineteenth century liturgical and musical practice the pinnacle of Eastern liturgical development and understanding.

Analogous observations can be made about the spiritual domain. The Christian East is not, contrary to popular opinion, marked by a monolithic spiritual doctrine. Real and quite divisive conflicts in the spiritual realm have not infrequently plagued the Orthodox Church. Mawkish hagiographical writings—all too typical of the East—as well as uncritical expositions of Eastern spiritual life can, however, leave one with a different impression. Again, this is unfortunate because something of the real drama of genuine spiritual insight and conquest is lost in the process. The fundamental problem with these oversimplifications is that they leave the impression that there is such a thing as a "reified," as it were, Eastern spirituality that can readily be had by some specific technique of set methodology. Orthodox authors have, indeed, cautioned against this tendency, to the point of shying away from the term "spirituality" itself.² Stanley Harakas, for one, even disavows its orthodoxy,³ preferring instead to employ the broader and generally richer notions of "spiritual life," "life in the Spirit," and "spiritual living."

These comments all seem to be needed preliminaries to a full discussion of the exact subject matter at hand. If there is any one aspect of Orthodox spiritual practice which has justifiably won the praise of Eastern and Western commentators, this surely is the *Jesus Prayer*. Disarmingly simple in formulation, it has uplifted numerous souls to closer union with God throughout the centuries. What is the force behind this prayer? Is it a technique pure and simple? Or is its strength rather to be found in the deep sense of adoration and compunction that it inevitably seems to instill in the heart and soul of anyone honestly committed to this form of prayer?

¹ An English translation by Paul Meyendorff exists under the title, *On the Divine Liturgy* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984).

² See, for example, the remarks of Alexander Schmemmann in *Of Water and Spirit* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974) 107.

³ Stanley Samuel Harakas, "Spirituality: East and West," in *The Legacy of St. Vladimir*, (eds. J. Breck, J. Meyendorff and E. Silk; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990) 179.

The proffered answers to these questions generally have been variations on a common theme sympathetic to the Jesus Prayer. Rarely have defenders of this prayer form found themselves in serious disagreement. Twice only in the history of Orthodoxy have divergencies of opinion as to the form and outward fruits of the Jesus Prayer led to formal conciliar decrees on the matter. The first of these surfaced in the fourteenth century in relation to the hesychast method of prayer, and specifically around the claims of the monk-practitioners of this prayer that an ardent, continual exercise of this prayer could, indeed, by the grace of God, admit of the human body's enjoyment—here and now—of a vision of God such as the one experienced by the Apostles on Mt. Tabor. Attacked by the philosopher-monk Barlaam the Calabrian for their "presumption," and even ridiculed by him for it—scoffing at them as *omphalopsychoi* (men-with-their-souls-in-the-navel)—the monks found their able defender in St. Gregory Palamas, the Archbishop of Thessalonica, whose very name has subsequently become nearly synonymous with hesychasm. It was in the context of his defense of the hesychast monks that Palamas was to work out the essence-energy distinction in order to explicate God's nature and how He relates to the world, on the one hand; and to explain, on the other, how man can participate by grace in the Divine energies, the essence of God still remaining totally transcendent and, hence, incommunicable to him.⁴ It is, of course, important to keep the two, the hesychast method of prayer and Palamite doctrine, distinct. Theoretically speaking, one can recommend the former without necessarily favoring the latter. One is a matter of spiritual fact, the other of philosophical and theological insight and reasoning. Although it would seem that the stated goal of hesychast prayer, a real communion short of pantheistic absorption between God, the Uncreated One, and His creature, ultimately needs the speculative underpinnings of some sort of Palamism, one cannot logically rule out other possible interpretations—at least initially.

These comments take on an interesting twist when we turn to the second time of extended debate over hesychast prayer. This occurred in the early years of the second decade of our own century. The controversy this time, however, was over *imeslavie*⁵ (name-glorification or name-praising). Again, monks of Mt. Athos were the

⁴ Palamas' main work in defense of hesychasm is commonly known as *The Triads*. Extensive parts of this work have now been translated into English in a work edited by John Meyendorff (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983). For Meyendorff's own monographic treatment of the subject, see *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Leighton Buzzard, Beds, England: The Faith Press, 1964).

⁵ In Russian theological literature, a linguistic variation occurs. One reads of "*imeslavie*" (Florensky) and of "*imyaslavie*" (Bulgakov).