

Cross

"Love unites the soul with God; and the more love the soul has the more powerfully it enters into God and is centered on Him." - St. John of the Cross
"If a soul is seeking God, its Beloved is seeking it still more." - St. John of the Cross

"Wait upon God with loving and pure attentiveness, working no violence on yourself lest you disturb the soul's peace and tranquility. God will feed your soul with heavenly food since you put no obstacle in His way. The soul in this state must remember that if it is not conscious of making progress, it is making much more than when it was walking on foot, because God Himself is bearing it in His arms. Although outwardly it is doing nothing, it is in reality doing more than if it were working, since God is doing the work within it. And it is not remarkable that the soul does not see this, for our senses cannot perceive what God does in the soul.... if the soul stays in God's care it will certainly make progress." - St. John of the Cross

"The soul that wants God to give Himself to it wholly must surrender itself totally to Him, and keep nothing back for itself." - St. John of the Cross

A prayer rope is a cord with 25, 33, 50, or 100 knots, tied into a loop, usually with a cross hanging from it. It looks a little similar to a rosary. Prayer ropes are often made of black wool (to signify that we are Jesus' penitent sheep). Although the Jesus Prayer is the prayer most frequently used with the prayer rope, other prayers may be used, like the "Our Father" (also known as "the Lord's Prayer," Matthew 6:9-13) or the "Glory Be" ("Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit now and ever and forever"). The knots are used to count prayers without having to think about numbers.

It is very easy to make your own prayer rope with nylon cord and evenly spaced triple knots (three loops per knot instead of one). Beads could also be used in place of knots. If you choose to make your own, this should be done in prayer.

Origin of the prayer rope

Saint Antony the Great (also known as St. Antony of the Desert, sometimes spelled Anthony; 251-356 A.D.) is often called "father of Christian monasticism." He was a Coptic Catholic of Egypt. One day while he was in church the Lord told him to sell everything he owned, give his money to the poor, and follow Him. In 269 A.D., Antony withdrew from society to move further and further into the desert as a hermit, in order to be alone with God and devote more time to prayer. Those who followed his example called him "Abba," father, from which we derive the English word "Abbot." The best biography of St. Antony, very influential in the conversion of St. Augustine, was written by St. Athanasius in the 4th century A.D. (available from TAN Books). The prayer rope is sometimes attributed to St. Antony. This passage from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* explains why:

"When the holy Abba Antony lived in the desert he was attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved but these thoughts do not leave me alone, what shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' A short while later, when he got up to go out, Antony saw a man like himself sitting at his work, getting up from his work to pray, *then sitting down and plaiting a rope, then getting up again to pray*. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct and reassure him. He heard the angel saying to him, 'Do this and you will be saved.' At these words, Antony was filled with joy and courage. He did this, and he was saved."

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The Jesus Prayer

Just as Jesus Christ *emptied Himself* completely as a gift to us, so too we must *empty ourselves* as a complete gift to Him. One way we engage in *mutual self-communication* with God is prayer.

The Jesus Prayer

The words are simply:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

repeated continually, attentively, and receptively. This prayer is the foundation of Eastern Catholic spirituality.

How to pray the Jesus Prayer

When beginning to pray the Jesus Prayer, assume a posture in which you can be attentive. Many of the ancient saints stood in an "orans" posture (with arms bent forward from the elbows, palms up receptively), or knelt with their heads bowed. You may follow their example, or you may choose to sit or lie on your back (like St. Francis)--as long as you can remain attentive and receptive.

You may say the words of the prayer aloud or silently, as long as the meaning of each word, as you pray it, is your focus of attention. It is normal for the prayer to synchronize first with your breathing, and later with your heartbeat. You may pray the invocation (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God) while inhaling and the petition (have mercy on me, a sinner) while exhaling. This signifies receptivity to the divine Name and emptying of the self.

Many people use a prayer rope to help focus their attention on the prayer, and to count if they are just beginning. Beginners might start with fifty or a hundred prayers a day, increasing the number per day each week if they can remain attentive. With



perseverance, the prayer becomes habitual and, in time, unceasing.

Yet saying the words of this (or any other) prayer alone is nothing--it does not unify you with God. The same goes for posture, or rhythm of breathing. The words, the posture, and other external elements of the prayer are intended only to *aid* or dispose you to prayer. They are a great help. They should *not* be a focus or *distraction*. They are not, furthermore, a "talisman" or "magic words" or a "technique" for effecting divine communion. It is always good to remember that true prayer is God-given rather than man-made. With His grace we can prepare and persevere, but without His help we can do nothing. After all, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1Corinthians 12:3).

The Jesus Prayer, in addition to being a prayer of the lips, must become a prayer of the mind. You must be attentive to God, mentally focused on the "one thing needful"--Jesus Christ. The prayer must, furthermore, become **prayer of the heart**, of the will. This attentiveness is deeper and more open to God, accompanied by (or at the very least open to) faith, hope, love, thanksgiving, devotion and submission to God's will, and other virtues.

In the Jesus Prayer, *heart addresses heart* (communion between your own heart and the Heart of Jesus). *If you seek Jesus, you may receive profound joy, peace, contentment, and consolation, even in the midst of intense physical, emotional, and spiritual trials.* Do not despair or give up when you do not feel emotional highs, because God uses such "dry" and "desolate" or "dark" times for our growth. Persevere. *If you seek joy, peace, contentment, and consolation rather than Jesus, you will miss them all.* He will bless each person who seeks Him according to his or her capacity (this capacity can grow). As one holy man once said "if fulfillment is delayed, this may be because the person praying is not yet ready to receive what he asks."

The Jesus Prayer echoes the Gospel words of the humble who seek union with God and the healing and wholeness it brings (Luke 17:13, 18:14, 18:38). Its deepest level is prayer of the heart, when the Jesus Prayer is no longer what we do but who we are (a temple of the Holy Spirit, a spiritual bride of Christ)--

a true vocation. Then we know God's boundless Presence and communion with Him at the fullest depth of our being. Only God can decide when we are ready for this. We may have ecstatic experiences and we may not. Seek only *Him*: Jesus Christ the eternal Logos.

"The name of Jesus is at the heart of Christian prayer. All liturgical prayers conclude with the words "through our Lord Jesus Christ." The Hail Mary reaches its high point in the words "blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus." The Eastern prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, says: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Many Christians, such as St. Joan of Arc, have died with the one word "Jesus" on their lips" (Catechism of the Catholic Church § 435. See also paragraphs 2709-2724 on contemplative prayer.

Caution: Never embark on a perilous spiritual journey without reliable directions and a guide, because there are many ways to leave the true path and fall into serious danger. Study and meditate on the Gospels (and all the scriptures) regularly, consult the writings of the saints who have gone before us, and seek the frequent counsel of a holy and orthodox spiritual director (e.g. a monk, nun, deacon, priest, etc.). Participate in sacraments like confession/reconciliation and the Eucharist, and cultivate virtue. Just as a "city slicker" shouldn't wander into the woods without training, provisions, and a reliable guide, we should seek and accept help for this journey.

Some quotations from the saints

"There are many souls who close their ears against Him because they prefer to speak and hurry through vocal prayers as if a task had been set them to say a certain amount every day. Do not imitate them. You are doing more by occasionally repeating a single petition of the *Our Father* than by repeating the whole of it many times in a hurry and not thinking [or willing] what you are saying." - St. Teresa of Avila

"God always enriches the souls He visits. This is certain, for although the favor and consolation may

pass away quickly, it is detected later on by the benefits it has left in the soul." - St. Teresa of Avila
"Let your desire be to see God; your fear, that you may lose Him; your sorrow, that you are not having fruition of Him; your joy that He can bring you to Himself. Thus you will live in great peace." - St. Teresa of Avila

"The soul that truly loves God loves all good, seeks all good, protects all good, praises all good, joins itself to good men, helps and defends them, and embraces all the virtues: it loves only what is true and worth loving. Do you think it possible that one who truly loves God cares, or can care, for vanities, or riches, or worldly things, or pleasures or honors? Neither can such a soul quarrel or feel envy, for it aims at nothing save pleasing its Beloved." - St. Teresa of Avila

"That you may have pleasure in everything, seek your own pleasure in nothing. That you may know everything, seek to know nothing. That you may possess all things, seek to possess nothing. That you may be everything, seek to be nothing.... Desire to be empty and poor for Christ's sake. This state must be embraced with a perfect heart and you must really want it. If your heart is truly engaged in these efforts you shall speedily attain to great joy and consolation. Be continually careful and earnest in imitating Christ in everything, making your life conform to His." - St. John of the Cross

"Seeking oneself in God is the opposite of love." - St. John of the Cross

"Be earnest in prayer, and hope in detachment and emptiness. Your good will not be long in coming." - St. John of the Cross

"That man attains to spiritual freedom, clearness of judgment, repose, tranquility and peaceful confidence, together with true worship and obedience of the will when he represses all joy in passing things. Man has greater joy and comfort in creatures if he detaches himself from them." - St. John of the