



The Jesus Prayer: A Cry for Mercy, a Path of Renewal

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

The Jesus Prayer is a rosary. A rosary is any repetitive prayer prayed on a knotted rope or beaded cord. Anyone traveling in the Middle East has seen Orthodox monks walking through the busy markets and praying a rosary. That rosary is the Jesus Prayer.

Some might rightly point out that Jesus condemned vain repetitions. Indeed, Jesus taught us the “Lord’s Prayer” or the “Our Father” specifically to teach us not to engage in vain repetitions. (Unfortunately, this sometimes happens with that very prayer when we pray too speedily.) The trick is to pray repetitions with real meaning, not to stop repetitive prayer altogether!

Many of the prayers of Orthodox Jews would have required that Jesus pray repetitive prayers. The great *Shema Yisrael* (“Hear, [O] Israel”) are the first two words of a section of the Torah and comprise the title (sometimes shortened to *Shema*) of a prayer that serves as a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. The first verse encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one,” found in Deuteronomy 6:4. *Shema* means to “hear,” but in a way that is also obedient to what we hear. In English the word *obedience* comes from the Latin *oboedire*, which comes from *ob* (toward) and *oeirdire* (to hear, listen and do). Jesus certainly did not take issue with this prayer, but only in repeating it as rote ritual without right meaning and right intention, and as a genuine prayer.

So repetitive prayer is not the problem. Vain repetition is.

Breath

The Eastern monastic fathers teach us to unite the Jesus Prayer to our breathing. This is often frightening to those who are skeptical of uniting prayer with the breath due to its similarity with Eastern meditation. But there is a good reason for this teaching, which is similar to but distinct from the teaching of Eastern religions.

The words for Spirit in Scripture are *rûah* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. Both mean air, wind and breath, specifically the air, wind and breath of a rational creature. In order to get a full breath of air we must relearn how to breathe with both lungs!

The apostle Paul instructs us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Through the centuries we have tried different ways to fulfill this. We have prayed at various times of the day the monastic Work of God or Liturgy of the Hours, which help us to pray always.

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Some, like the fourth-century Messalian Euchites, went to the absurd extreme of constant prayer to the neglect of everything else. Others, like the monks of Cluny in tenth-century Europe, established a constant rotation of monks who prayed in their churches. The notion was that, as the body of Christ, if one was praying, all were praying.

The Eastern monastic fathers taught to unite the Jesus Prayer with every breath. This enables a person to go about daily activity while praying constantly. We need not be in a church or chapel, or even in a prayer space to practice this prayer. Think about it: What is the one thing we do without ceasing? We breathe. If we are not breathing, chances are we are already dead!

St. Hesychios the Priest (eighth or ninth century) said in *On Watchfulness and Holiness*, “Just as it is impossible to . . . live without breathing . . . we should use the name of Jesus as we do our own breath. Let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breath, and in a few days you will find that it is possible [to pray without ceasing]. With your breathing combine watchfulness and the name of Jesus.”

So, from the perspective of praying in the breath or Spirit of God with our spirit, or of praying “without ceasing,” uniting prayer with our breath works very well.

I have been teaching the Jesus Prayer for about a decade in retreats at our Little Portion Retreat Center, and more recently in hundreds of three-day parish missions all across America. People are responding! Most say that the Jesus Prayer helps them find a place of legitimate meditation with the use of their breath. Months and years after a particular mission I still receive encouraging communications that confirm that this prayer has a profound effect on personal prayer life and the entire life of the church and the world.

– Adapted from the introduction



John Michael Talbot, author of *The Jesus Prayer: A Cry for Mercy, a Path of Renewal*
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John Michael Talbot

John Michael Talbot is an award-winning Christian musician, writer, motivational speaker and itinerant minister to churches and parishes around the world.

Born in 1954 into a Methodist family with a musical background in Oklahoma City, John Michael Talbot started learning to play the guitar as a young boy. By age fifteen he dropped out of school and was performing as a guitarist for Mason Proffit, a country folk-rock band formed with his older brother, Terry.

After countless tours and the release of several albums (on multiple labels, including Warner Brothers), Mason Proffit disbanded and Talbot embarked on a spiritual journey that eventually led him to Christianity and the Jesus Movement. Talbot started to use his musical talents to express his faith by joining the newly emerging Christian music scene. As a founding artist for Sparrow Records he delivered two albums, “John Michael Talbot” and “The New Earth” (both produced by Billy Ray Hearn).

His spiritual journey continued throughout his early days at Sparrow. Inspired by the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, he began studying at a Franciscan center in Indianapolis where he became a Roman Catholic in 1978. He immersed himself in church history, patristics and monastic/Franciscan sources. It was during this time that he started a house of prayer called The Little Portion. Talbot moved The Little Portion to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, on land he had purchased during his Mason Proffit days. There he founded his own community, the Brothers and Sisters of Charity, at Little Portion Hermitage as an “integrated monastic community” with celibate brothers and sisters, singles and families. By 1989, with permission from the Catholic Church, Talbot had married Viola Pratka.

After a successful career with Sparrow, in 1992 John Michael founded his own label called Troubadour for the Lord. Today he is recognized as Catholic music’s most popular artist with over four million sales and compositions published in hymnals throughout the world. His album “Worship and Bow Down” is the 53rd album in his 37 years in Christian music ministry.

His songs were the first by a Catholic artist to cross well-defined boundaries and gain acceptance by Protestant listeners. He was also the recipient of several prestigious awards. He won the Dove Award for Worship Album of the Year for “Light Eternal,” with producer and longtime friend Phil Perkins, and he became one of only nine artists to receive the President’s Merit Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. In

1988 he was named the No. 1 Christian Artist by *Billboard* magazine.

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John Michael also began to write books from his wealth of study and personal experience of integrated monastic life. His books include *Reflections on St. Francis*, *The World Is My Cloister* and *The Universal Monk*. John Michael's 24th book, *Blessings of St. Benedict*, was published in September 2011.

John Michael leads his very active ministry from the Little Portion Hermitage where he is the founder and minister general of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity. Along with his many artistic achievements, his humanitarian efforts have been honored with special recognition from Mercy Corps and the Mother Teresa award.