



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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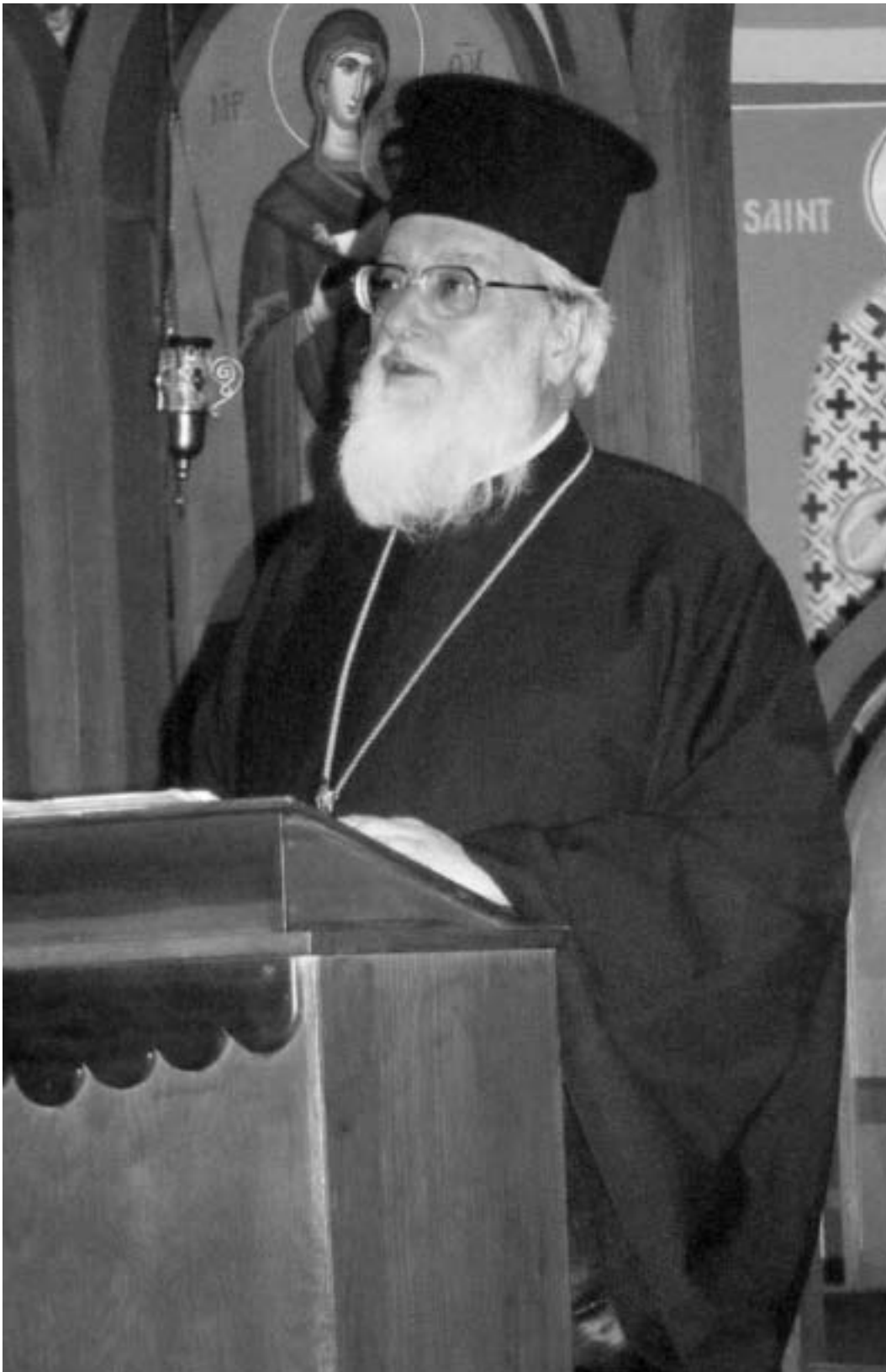


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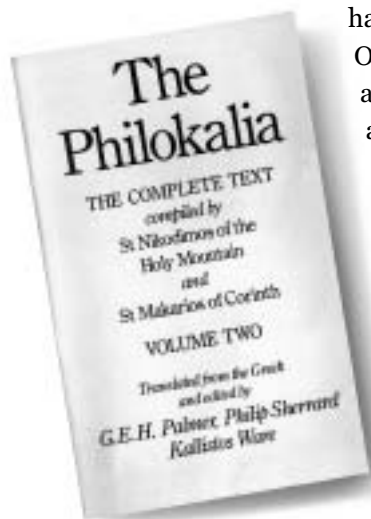
Thoughts on Personhood, the Philokalia and the Jesus Prayer

On February 8–10 of this year, a member of our *Road to Emmaus* staff attended a weekend retreat at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral in Wichita, Kansas, with His Grace Bishop Kallistos Ware, the bishop of Diocletia in Great Britain. For new converts who may not be acquainted with his works, over forty years ago Bishop Kallistos wrote the classic introduction to Orthodoxy that has never been matched in clarity, depth, or objectivity: *The Orthodox Church*. In the following decades, as well as being a lecturer in Eastern Christian studies at Oxford and pastor of Oxford's Orthodox parish, he co-translated the *Lenten Triodion* and *Festal Menaion* into English, as well as four volumes of the Orthodox spiritual classic, *The Philokalia*. The debt that the English-speaking world owes for his clear, concise explanations of Orthodoxy and his faithful translations of original sources and services is great. To that debt *Road to Emmaus* adds its own for His Grace's spontaneous willingness to answer our questions.

RTE: Your Grace, many of us have come to Orthodoxy from Catholic, Protestant, or even from unchurched backgrounds, and feel that it is Christ Himself who has led us here. When we become Orthodox we find such an “embarrassment of riches” — the icons, the services, the patristic tradition, the long history of the Church — that we are eager to plunge in, but often we bring with us an overly rational or an emotional experience of worship. How does a convert immerse himself in the Church in a way that avoids these extremes? We don't want to cut ourselves off from our past and the valuable lessons we've learned along the way, but how do we enter fully into the tradition? Is the Jesus Prayer an accessible door to a new convert?

BISHOP KALLISTOS: Yes. The first point to take up, which you yourself have been saying, is that when we become Orthodox we should see it as a fulfillment of our past, not as a negation. We should see it as an affirmation of all

that is good in our previous experience. To me, it is always a sad thing when Orthodox attack the Christian community to which they previously belonged. Of course they may wish to say why they became Orthodox, what they found in Orthodoxy that they didn't find previously, but they should also always bear in mind that their previous Christian community, if they had one, was perhaps what brought them to Orthodoxy. So, one should see Orthodoxy then as a crowning, as an affirmation of all that is good and not simply as a break.



But having said that, it is true that we bring a lot of baggage with us, and some of that baggage we need to discard. The most important thing for any non-Orthodox person who feels drawn to Orthodoxy, whether they belong to another Christian community or they come from an unchurched background, is that they should experience Orthodoxy as a way of prayer, as a community of prayer.

The first thing I say to anyone who is attracted to Orthodoxy and comes to consult me is, "Learn to pray with the Orthodox Church." That means attend the Divine Liturgy (of course they cannot yet have Holy Communion), but do attend the liturgy every Sunday if you are seriously interested in joining Orthodoxy. Also, use Orthodox prayers in your daily prayer times, and here certainly, the Jesus Prayer would come in. I encourage them even before they become Orthodox to start using the Jesus Prayer in a simple way, but in a serious and consistent way.

So the best approach to Orthodoxy is through prayer. Yes, we must read books, we must talk with other Orthodox, but above all, we must learn to pray with the Orthodox Church. Now that will not automatically strip off our non-Orthodox attitudes that we may have carried over from the past but, at least, this is the place where we should begin.

Then, arising further out of what you have said, what does it mean to be a person? We have a reasoning brain and that is a gift from God to be used to the full. We also have our emotions, and they too are not to be suppressed. They are to be used in God's service. But we need to recognize that the human person is more than just rational faculties and more than just emotional aesthetic feeling.

This "something more" is what is summed up in the traditional Orthodox literature under the two terms, *nous* and spirit. *Nous*, in particular, is a very difficult word to translate. If you just say "mind," that is far too vague. In our translation of the *Philokalia*, we, with some hesitations, opted for the word intellect, emphasizing that it does not mean primarily the rational faculties. The *nous* is the spiritual vision that we all possess, though many of us have not discovered it. The *nous* implies a direct, intuitive appreciation of truth, where we apprehend the truth not simply as the conclusion of a reasoned argument, but we simply see that something is so.

The *nous* is cultivated certainly through study, through training our faculties, but also it is developed through prayer, through fasting, through the whole range of the Christian life. This is what we need to develop most of all as Orthodox, something higher than the reasoning brain and deeper than the emotions.

RTE: When we are trying to reach that something higher, everything in Orthodoxy points us to the Holy Trinity and particularly to the Lord because He also was human. What would you say is the best way for a convert to reach Him? You mentioned the Jesus Prayer as part of this entering in. Would you enlarge on that?

BISHOP KALLISTOS: The Jesus Prayer is indeed a way of cultivating our spiritual vision. It is not a form of discursive imagination that provides us with new imaginary pictures about how Christ was; it is not a way of engaging in an inner theological argument that will lead us to new ideas about Christ. It appeals much more directly to the *nous*, to the heart, to the spirit. That certainly is one way of reaching this particular level of personhood of which we have been speaking. I do not say it is the only way, and certainly the Jesus Prayer exists in a context. It is presupposed that those who use the Jesus Prayer are taking full part in the sacramental life of the Church and are, in particular, going to the sacrament of confession and receiving Holy Communion. The Jesus Prayer goes hand in hand with the sacramental life.

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I would, however, want to mention more particularly the importance alongside the Jesus Prayer and the sacramental life of the reading of scripture. This, some converts might overlook because they get very enthusiastic about the icons, the incense, the richness of the Divine Liturgy, but we need also to think how deep is the biblical, the evangelical element in Orthodoxy. By evangelical I mean the literal sense of living in the Gospels.

In Orthodoxy we cultivate a particular way of reading scripture, which was indeed common to East and West in the early period, although it is perhaps not so common now in the West. We should read the Bible not necessarily with a lot of commentaries, but we should simply read the text of scripture slowly — listening, reading it as if it were a letter addressed to me personally.

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Read it carefully, reflectively, in a meditative, contemplative way but without developing a lot of inner arguments, simply in an attitude of listening.

This is the traditional Orthodox way of reading scripture, not to have open in front of us a great many commentaries, although that has its place, but to read scripture as part of our prayer time — not as a piece of rational study but rather as

part of an act of prayer. We shouldn't force the meaning of scripture in an artificial way to fit our condition, but nonetheless, as we read we keep applying it to ourselves, not with elaborate examples thought up from our imagination but simply by listening. I think if scripture is read in this way it will help to cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

And with the Jesus Prayer, let us remember always that it is not a technique to induce relaxation or concentration. It is a personal invocation, words of prayer addressed specifically to the person of Jesus, our Saviour.

RTE: When I first began reading Orthodox literature, I started with *The Way of a Pilgrim*, some years before we had the English translation of the *Philokalia* available. Later, when I discovered that *The Way of a Pilgrim* was based on a real book, that the *Philokalia* did exist, I obtained a copy with the hope of, "Yes, here it is. Now I will be able to pray like the pilgrim." However, as soon as one begins to read the *Philokalia* you find that not only are the writers light years ahead of one's own limited experience, but that you also keep coming up against the concept of the "mind in the heart."

After four or five chapters you realize that you have no idea of how to apply this, and you sit there wondering, "Is my mind in my heart yet? How do I get it there? Am I supposed to *do* something, or will God somehow make it happen later? Am I supposed to think, am I not supposed to think...?"

BISHOP KALLISTOS: Yes. First, the *Philokalia* is not an easy book. The works in the Greek edition, at any rate, are not presented in any particular order, or rather the sequence is simply historical but there is no systematic arrangement according to topics. There is something to be said for just picking the *Philokalia* up, reading it and seeing what God says to our heart, but possibly we do better if we have some help in reading it.

If I am recommending particular texts from the *Philokalia*, the ones I suggest are the *One Hundred Texts* (the Century) by Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos. That is in the fifth volume of the *Philokalia* which hasn't yet appeared, but you can find an English version of it in the earlier translation made from St. Theophan's Russian text, *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*. That is a good one to start with. Then I suggest from the first volume that people might read Hesychius; from the second volume, the life of Elder Philemon in particular; then possibly the shorter writings of St. Gregory of Sinai that are to be found in the fourth volume.

Those are useful texts to begin with, but again, we have to recognize that the *Philokalia* is a difficult book. I think that perhaps when I, by God's grace, have finished the fifth volume, I would like to prepare a kind of introduction to the *Philokalia*, which would contain some of the easier texts arranged thematically. This would not be intended as a substitute for the complete translation, but as a way in.

A book which can help people because it is simpler and easier than the *Philokalia* is the anthology, issued in English under the title, *The Art of Prayer*, by Igumen Chariton of Valamo, which has been reprinted. That perhaps presents the teaching of the *Philokalia*, mainly through the words of St. Theophan and St. Ignaty Brianchaninov in a simpler form.

As to the question of the mind in the heart, I would not recommend people to start by thinking about that. I would say, start with the Jesus Prayer

itself. Do not think about “Where is my mind, is it in my heart?” Do not think about the fact that “I am saying the Jesus Prayer.” Think rather about Jesus. The point to begin with is simply to recite the Jesus Prayer, to contain our mind within the words of the prayer. We are to be conscious we are speaking to Jesus. These are living words of prayer addressed to another living person. Don’t think primarily about, “Where is my mind?” Don’t think about one’s self, think about Jesus. Contain your mind in the words of prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Concentrate on the actual saying of the prayer and all else will follow from that in the way that God wishes and when He wishes.

RTE: Some people, particularly monastics, say a certain number of Jesus Prayers a day, others say it within a set amount of time. What would you suggest for someone who is beginning?

BISHOP KALLISTOS: Both ways are acceptable, but I would suggest to someone beginning: set aside a certain amount of time but do not attach primary importance to the number of times you say it. Actually, you can combine

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both approaches because you will probably discover fairly quickly how long it takes you to say one hundred Jesus Prayers. If it takes me twelve minutes, then I might set aside, say 25 minutes, and then I will be saying about 200. But that would just be as a rough guide. Start from the idea of how much time you are going to set aside. The quantity of times we say the

Jesus Prayer is less important and there are different traditions. Often in Greek use it is said quite quickly, whereas in the Russian tradition we are encouraged to say it fairly slowly.

RTE: If one says the prayer with attention and love, for most of us that means saying it slowly. How can one do this in the Greek practice of repeating it quickly?

BISHOP KALLISTOS: I prefer the tradition of saying it more slowly, but I don’t wish to judge others because I’ve not said the Jesus Prayer very quickly. If you are saying it in a free way as you go about your daily tasks you may well say it more quickly, but I certainly encourage people when saying it in their prayer times to say it slowly.

Now, monastics are often given a rule with a set number of times to say it. That, I think, is suitable for the monastic life because there you are leading a disciplined life with an elaborate sequence of liturgical services, so the prayer rule comes in that context. It is a much more structured context. There it makes sense to say, “All right, you say three hundred Jesus Prayers with a set number of *metanias*, either bows or prostrations.”

For lay-people, though, it is quite a good idea to say, “Well, it is reasonable for me to set aside so much time in the

morning or in the evening.” It might be only a quarter of an hour, but that already makes a huge difference if you’ve prayed that amount of time. Then you work from there, but without being concerned with quantity. As St. Isaac the Syrian says, “I don’t want to count milestones, I want to enter the bridal chamber.”

RTE: Thank you, Your Grace, that was wonderful. We have one final question that was raised by a member of the audience during your talk, and which I thought was particularly important. How does the Jesus Prayer, seemingly addressed to only one person of the Holy Trinity, participate in the very Trinitarian liturgical and prayer life of the Church?

BISHOP KALLISTOS: The Trinitarian dimension of prayer is indeed fundamentally important. There is no true prayer without the Holy Trinity. You may ask, “Well, is the Jesus Prayer a Trinitarian prayer?” Not, it is true, in its exterior form, yet if we look more deeply we can find a Trinitarian dimension in the Jesus Prayer. First, the Jesus Prayer, yes, is a prayer directed to Christ, but we speak of Christ as Son of God, and he who speaks of Son, speaks by implication also of Father, so in addressing Jesus as the Son of God we are certainly including in our prayer an awareness of the person of God the Father.

What about the Holy Spirit? He is not explicitly mentioned in the prayer, but He is, nonetheless, the atmosphere in which the prayer is recited. One of the most important texts in the history of the Jesus Prayer is I Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say Lord Jesus except in the Holy Spirit,” and writers on the Jesus Prayer repeat this particular text from scripture again and again. Although the Spirit is not mentioned, nevertheless the

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Spirit is there. We are invoking Jesus in the Holy Spirit. It is the purpose of the Holy Spirit to bring us to Christ.

In our Lord's last supper discourse, Christ says, "He will not speak about Himself, or on His own authority, He will take what is mine and show it to you." So, precisely, the function of the Spirit within the Trinitarian economy is to bring us to Christ, and Christ brings us to the Father. In this way, not explicitly, but implicitly, the Jesus Prayer is truly a Trinitarian prayer. One way of thinking about prayer is not to think of it as me talking to God, "Me, one person here in dialogue with God over there." We could, rather, think of prayer as "Me, entering into the dialogue of love that continually passes between the Three Persons of the Trinity." So, when I pray, it is not so much me praying as that I enter into a conversation that is already going on. From all eternity there is a dialogue within the Godhead, a dialogue of love. From all eternity, the First Person says to the Second, "Thou art my beloved Son." From all eternity the Second Person replies to the First, "Abba, Father, Abba, Father." From all eternity the Holy Spirit seals this exchange between Father and Son. So, when we pray, it is not so much we who pray, as we who enter into the dialogue of the Trinity. Through the Holy Spirit, we are brought to speak the words of Christ as our own. In the Holy Spirit we say, "Abba, Father," and so become part of the eternal Trinitarian dialogue.

This is the way in which prayer is understood, particularly in Romans 8. If we read that carefully we will see exactly that there is this idea of prayer as entering into the dialogue of the Trinity. We may not feel that immediately, explicitly, with our conscious minds, but that is what is going on. We become part of the Trinitarian dialogue of love. Through the Spirit we become sons in the Son, and with the Son we say to the Father, "Abba, Father." †