

THE STARETS' PRAYER

This summer we are bearing the fruits of, more than anything else, an increased consciousness of what it means to have already turned to the world. It has forced us to be spirit people in a way we have never had to consider before. Perhaps, since Summer 71, we have seen that with every little next step into the world, with every impact of the sociological, the deeper we have pushed, the more we have dropped into the spirit dimension. We have also become more aware of how little our life is on the line. We have become more aware of how unspiritual (if you want to put it that way) we are. The world we are going into is God's world, and the only way into the spirit dimension is through the secular. Although maybe even that is a false way to put it. The only way into the spirit dimension is through God's world as it is given to us. As we have said in other contexts the only way of changing society is to redo the social and the economic together; when we do that, spirit metamorphosis happens.

It is not as if we are going to have a spiritual revival or something like that. That would just be talking about refurbishing the past, and that is impossible. Rather, it is a radical discontinuity; it is a spirit awakening which, then, automatically happens. In other words, when intentionality is injected into the socio-economic process, spirit deepening and awakening is radically intensified. At the same time, we have seen that things like the Global Community Forum and Social Demonstrations are manifestations of the spirit awakenment which has already taken place. Yet that awakenment is not direct action. It is as if we hit here and explosions take place over there, and finally we know that we are not Lord and Master of the spirit dimension. The spirit dimension is not synonymous with the socio-economic renewal, and socio-economic renewal only occurs on the other side of spirit awakenment. Of course, the liberal in us desires to have evidences that what we are doing is significant. We stand here today in the midst of wrestling with the socio-economic, the renewing of the world, knowing that we live on the other side of the spirit awakenment that has already happened. And at the same time, every step we take into the world forces us deeper into that spirit awakenment, deeper into the dimensions of the spirit that perhaps we have not even thought of before. It comes to us with a white-hot heat, a new burden of consciousness.

Now, you have in front of you a sheet on the Staret's Prayer. This prayer came out of the Church of Russia and recently it has been awakened in us or forced itself upon us. One way that that has happened is when Bishop Matthews visited Russia and was asked what he would like to see. He said he wanted to visit with some Starets and was given the opportunity to meet and talk with them in depth. A second occasion was when we went back and looked at Franny and Kooley and discovered that six pages or so are filled with discussion of the Pilgrim or the Starets and are pressing at this prayer. And finally, recall, Dr. McCloud, when he came here last fall, indicated to us five or six subjects that he could speak on. One of those was the Starets' Prayer. The word Starets is a singular word. Staretsi or Staretsii is the plural, as I

understand it. The Starets is a monk who lives in the desert all of his life. Then when he is an old man he returns to society. While he has been out there perhaps some sixty years, he has inculcated this prayer until it becomes that which his consciousness speaks to him over and over and over again. Because he has forced himself into a state of intensified consciousness, he has the ability to almost look through anything. So he is brought back into the service of society as a whole in his old age. Now he has the ability to see through any situation--economic, political, social. It is as if you speak three words and he sees the whole context and moves into the center. Or he can just watch you walking and give you a resolution before you are able to open your mouth. That is what you mean when you say the Starets has used this prayer for a radical intensification of consciousness.

The prayer itself is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." In the book of Luke that is the prayer of the publican who screamed it out after Jesus had held him up against who he was. And then in John 16 Jesus is recorded as saying to his disciples, "Up to this point you have not asked anything in my name. But from now on you can ask in my name and it will be done." And remember Paul said "You must learn to pray without ceasing." So the Starets, the Russian monk, picked this up and began to use it. They asked, "How can I take this so that whatever I ask it will be done? How do I learn to pray without ceasing?" Well, let's take a look at the prayer.

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

Now the phrase "a sinner" is a problem. As you know, the Jews and Islam and the Eastern church do not use the term "sinner" the way we in the Western church do. It is not part of the everyday liturgy that would be set up in this prayer. The Western church took the term "sinner" and sort of froze it; then we Protestants took it and endeared it; then the sectarian church took it and double endeared it. Yet we are all deeply aware of the ontological category the term "a sinner" is pointing to. We are deeply aware of the struggle of our being to stand before God, the deep lifelong struggle of wrestling with the alien image as it impinges on our lives. And yet we are bigoted here, not in relation to the reality but in relation to the struggle, because in that emerges the question, "How in the world do you and I get out of the moralism that has just been woven around us by these categories?" If you grabbed somebody in the street and said, "You're a sinner," you would have immediately hit him with a ton of moralism--in whatever particular way society had conditioned his understanding of that term. There is a struggle to get out of the moralistic relationship that those categories point to. We have to get loose from the endearing theological concepts that are there in order to allow us to move into the future.

Nevertheless, as far as this prayer is concerned, that is probably not the first reason that the words "a sinner" are a problem. They are first of all a problem because they are redundant. When you come to the word "me" in that prayer you have everything being pointed to with the word "sinner". So the Staretii dropped this out of their prayer as those of you who have read "The Pilgrim" know.

Then again the term "Son of God" is also redundant. It is just another way of saying "the Christ". And, therefore, it is probably not necessary. In

fact, it was dropped out of the Starets' Prayer, too.

That left the Starets with a prayer something like this: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me."

Some of you who have been reared in certain parts of this continent know that there are parochialisms that are evident, often among older people, maybe your mother or your grandmother. You have heard them mutter when things are getting out of hand or chaotic, almost like a slang expression, "Mercy me. Mercy me. Mercy me." Think where that came from: "Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me." If we reduce those double words into one, the prayer becomes, "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Wouldn't Ghandi have had a great time with that? You know how he took his people and with the five knuckles taught them everything they needed to know? "Lord-Jesus-Chirst-mercy-me" are the five things. "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." The middle knuckle is always the Christ. And whenever you see the Indian people bowing like this or greeting you whether they are Christian or Hindu or Muslim you know internally they are saying something like "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me."

As you know, the Starets would say this prayer 3000 times a day. Then after he had internalized it to a point where he could do it without falling flat on his face he was told, "All right, now do it 6000 times a day." So he would do that until it became internalized. Then he was told "Now do it 12,000 times a day ." By this time he had begun to utter it so that it had become part of his being. His mind was released to think about almost anything while his interior consciousness was saying, "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Then he would begin to work with his breathing. Breathing is a great way of controlling intentionality. The Starets said the prayer with his breathing. How often do you breathe? "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Come on, try it. "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Now don't say it with me; say it with your breathing. Whatever the rate of your breathing is, that's fine. Say it with your breathing. "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Now go on for the 6,000th time. You're halfway through the day, so you've only got 6,000 times left. Keep that up. You can see now that what would happen would be an inculcating of consciousness.

One caution at this point is that the prayer has nothing to do with Christian dogma. What we are talking about here shows up in every religion. It is part of the given phenomenological situation. It reveals the depths of humanness. When you do the Prayer you are engaging in an activity that holds before your being the depth relationship that defines you. That is what you are after. That "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me" is not the expression of some doctrinal dogma to which you give intellectual assent. It is breathing in and out of your being the deeps of humanness. It is allowing you to hold the depth humanness of yourself before that relationship. It is calling that relationship into being by the very breathing of your existence. That is the happening you are after.

You can interpret this in other ways. Take for example the Old Testament term Yahweh. Yahweh. Yah. This term describes time or the exodus happening in life. El or Elohim is a special category. The name of the prophet Joel, Yah-el, is another way of saying the same thing. You remember in Acts when it was prophesied that old men would dream dreams and young men would have

visions and that spirit would descend upon men? That was the prophecy of Yah-el, Joel. Lord Jesus Christ. Adonai Yah-el. Adonai Yah-el. How would you say it in other ways? "Lord Buddha Enlightenment, mercy me." Would you do it that way? Perhaps. In Deuteronomy 6, what is being said in the statement "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord thy God is one"? You are being told to go around and put that understanding on every man's post, on every door, and to teach it to your children: "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord thy God is one." The Prayer can also be summed up with "Om". The Prayer must have more than a second-hand meaning for us or we cannot get inside of it; but I can see how in many other ways you can say the same thing. When you bring the Starets' Prayer into coordination with the highway of the inner consciousness, the confrontation of the self with historical essentiality occurs in your decision to be that essentiality.

How do you avoid in saying "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me" experiencing the Prayer as a battery of intellectual statements about something or all those images of moralism? Let's see if we can. I want to use "Lord" here as the existential, "Jesus" as the historical, and "Christ" as the universal, and then deal with "mercy" as it's given and "me" as the person involved in that. There will be three aspects to each of the five.

Let me just pause here. We are going to be using poetry that comes out of the Christian faith, but any hunk of poetry that can freight what I hope to now begin to articulate could be used. Now we are going to have to use poetry, but the words are not what we are trying to communicate. We are trying to communicate the address of humanness to your inner consciousness that allows you to stand before that depth of humanness with your inner being.

The first aspect of Lord, the existential, is the external relationship, which defines you in the beginning. You remember how we first began to break through on this by using Kierkegaard's understanding of the self as the relationship that relates itself to its self and relates itself to the power that posits it. You can see that when you say "Lord" you are dealing with the final relationship that you are. You have become radically intentional. You no longer bow with this or that current or give in to this or that latent propensity. You now bow the knee before the final power, the power that posits you, that creates every moment, that gives you every situation. When you have finally pushed through every kind of relationship to that final relationship, there is where you bow the knee. Consciousness shoves you to the point at which you can see there is nowhere else where you can go. You are fated to stand in this relationship. The Dark Night of the Soul and the Long March which is just eating the insides out of every one of us has left us in that position. Your fate is to live in consciousness before that relationship. That is the external relationship you have to exist in. Period. Period.

The second aspect is absolute decision--that to believe is to know. In other words you invest all in a particular decision. You have your own life and you lay it down here and not somewhere else. It is the decision under all the unlimited decisions--under all the thousands of decisions that you make every day. Kierkegaard said "Truth is subjectivity." Unlimited passion can only be made in terms of that unlimited relationship that is behind all relationships. Then it is not only the absolute decision.

The third aspect is I am myself. I come upon the unrepeatable givenness of my life. I see that I am here deciding about myself, or deciding what myself is. I am saying who I choose to understand myself to be. Here existence precedes essence because I intend, in one life, to create me. I sometimes think wouldn't it be nice to have two or three lifetimes to go around cleaning up everything that I have done and trying to clean up who I had decided to be in the midst of my life? And yet I have just that one life to create me. That is what I've got.

The first thing under Jesus, the historical is the history. The historical is just temporality, or creatureliness or contingency. In the midst of my getting born and getting died I have my life. It's the situation exactly as it's given. The only reason God sent Jesus into the world was to keep our feet in the mud. What does that mud turn out to be? Our situation is the Dark Night and the Long March. There is only one place you end up, only one situation in which you and I find ourselves. When you say "Jesus" you say "That is the situation--the one where I live." Here, too, the Dark Night and the Long March can eat you up. Every one of us knows that we are going to be exactly like that cry of Jesus on the cross, for sooner or later we are going to end up in some dinky little old sandpit out in some dinky little old town with some people out there who don't know what is going on. We know we will end up on a cross and the only thing we will have to say is "Aaaaah". We will all end up the same way, uttering the same cry.

The second aspect is myself. I am in my situation. I have no selfhood save in the situation that defines my selfhood or defines the en soi, and that is the whole situation, the exact situation. I remember in World War II I stood on the deck as we were landing alongside the naval officers who were lowering the boats from the side of the ship for the men to get to the beach. One of the lieutenants beside me just stood there and cursed and cursed the men. None of the men did anything right. Nothing worked right. Even the captain wasn't right. He cursed everything. He was a frail fellow who looked as if a cough would blow him over. I was frightened then listening to him curse everything that took place. When you end up a white Westerner, with the guilt of the world on your hands, conscious of living off the suffering and the death of millions of people around the world, it is no wonder that you want to become abstract and be a liberal or have cyanide deals to get out of this situation. But you are part of the whole evolutionary process, like the cough of that first age. You hear "Jesus". I am in my situation. Someone says, "Tish, tish. Why are you working there with the old mean Romans? They're mean to those Jews. Why are you working under Herod? He's mean to the others. Tish, tish. How can you live in that world?" I am in my situation. Or someone says of the Order, "Isn't it hard work in this outfit? The crumminess of this past year and my situation sure ought to be different, shouldn't it? How can I get my colleagues transferred? How can I get transferred? Maybe that would be better! If I just had the right people who were smart like me and all worked hard, then I could really do something." My situation. Jesus.

Well, the third aspect is my life. I woke up this morning a fifty-four year old man who was tired. I looked at my son and thought, wouldn't it be great to be his age again! But I have got my fifty-four years on my hands. At every RS-I I go into, at every Town Meeting or whatever else, I get up and run out on stage and after the first lecture I wish it were all over with and we could sit down and have a drink. I wish there were some way to not have to face

that situation of plowing through it and bearing the weight of responsibility that is there. When you say "Jesus" you are talking about the temporal existence as it is. Your life. Do you remember the T.V. program called "This Is Your Life"? I remember Bill Stern, who was a radio announcer during the forties and the early fifties. Stern was a hero of mine, because he could tell you what was going on in the game so that you were right out there on the field in the huddle watching every play, doing everything. How that man had that ability! But somehow he got hooked on drugs. When he appeared on "This Is Your Life" he had thrown the habit, come back to his family and had entered into society anew. You remember on that show you were given a few clues and you were supposed to guess, and then the curtain would be pulled back and out would come the person. Bill Stern and his family and friends just sat there in anticipation, waiting for them to announce his name. When they did Bill Stern came out. With one look at him you just died inside. You did not know why until they began to talk and ask him questions. He had turned into a zombie. Everyone said "My God, this is my life----not something I have to apologize for, or wish were different. This is my life." Every day in some way your life is given over to you again. Every day is scintillating. That is what you mean when you say, "Jesus". That is the historical happening.

Next we come to the Christ. The first aspect here is the logos, the contentless happening. It is here that you experience a rational comprehensive way of grasping the event so that you are allowed to grasp that next happening as the happening of life. Here is experienced the cosmic reality--insight beyond insight. And the last agonizing thrust of the mind plus the logos is equal to the total that was rational plus the total that was irrational which our Fathers tried to articulate. That cosmic reality, that contentless happening, finally embraced every part of life.

The second aspect is the event. The happening is not just any happening. It is beyond all happenings and is that without which no happening has any meaning. Every happening is rolled up into that one happening. Every happening is defined by that one happening. Every happening is now under the aegis of that one happening in life. It is as if your life bursts consciousness. It opens it up and splatters out anew. Then into your life booms consciousness. Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom. Consciousness begins to push into you, push into you, push into you. It's like a siren. It goes up into a higher and higher pitch until you do not think you can stand it and then it comes down to the audible range. And then there is silence, stillness. Nothing is left. Your eyes blink again and you see the world is in your hands. The world is in your hands! The event has taken place. The happening has happened.

The third aspect is humanity. I am my humanity. My "my" is in humanity. My "me" is my humanity. We are all one in that Jesus the Christ happening. Your situation is different from my situation, and your culture is different from my culture. Everything about us is different. And yet we participate in the one universal happening, the Christ. All men have been one in this Christ happening. This is the way it will always be. In this happening all men are human. In any other happening, humanness is qualified, is reduced, is defined by some other dimension of humanness. This is the one happening in which all men are human. I look and say, "I am what life is all about. I am humanness, and humanness is what humanness is all about." Now, Christian poetry is not necessary to point to this reality. Some other word is fine when you see you are in the profound deeps here.

"Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." Mercy is forgiveness first of all. You and I know that we never awaken unaware that we need forgiveness. Have you ever awakened when you did not see your life in radical rebellion, saying "No. No, no, no," to every relationship given to you and to the final relationship that dared to give you hope? Without forgiveness I cannot exist. There is no life unless you stand in the forgiveness that is there. What is forgiveness? I remember when I was a child, I used to get so angry at my parents for what they did. I thought they were old and stodgy and did not understand what was going on. They would force me to do things or put limitations on me and I would scream out "Well when I get old I'm not going to treat my children like that, I'm going to treat them good!" Then when I got a little older, I began to really appreciate my parents. Then I thought, how can I ever thank them for what they did? It seems sort of stupid to go up to my father and mother and say, "Thank you for what you did to me."

Even if I tried, it would not help, would it? Then it dawned on me what forgiveness would be. It would be to turn around and be the kind of parents to the children who you saw needed to be the parents to those children. And so you start with your own children and you think "My God, what a mess I've made of that!" And so you come back to "mercy me" again. You receive the forgiveness of the debt that you owe them. You are forced, then, into the second aspect, and that is the reprieve. You stand before the judge, to speak mythologically, always pronounced guilty. Again and again you and I need another chance. I have a friend who once did something that just literally tore him to shreds. He ran into the bathroom and got down on his knees, grabbed the toilet on both sides and vomited so that his whole being seemed to be turned inside out. He seemed to scream inside, "Give me one more chance! Give me one more chance! If you don't, I won't want to live, and my God, you know I want to live." Mercy is to receive a second chance, a reprieve. You know the story of Dostoevsky. Born as he was, writing the books that he did, he seemed destined at some point to come into conflict with the establishment. At one point he was sentenced to death and taken out at midnight and set before a firing squad. As he got ready to stand before those final bullets they blindfolded him and the dramatic process began. Suddenly someone told the squad to put their rifles down; he had been given a reprieve. He could live again. Dostoevsky's hair turned white that night. Mercy is that sort of thing, one more chance. It is not something like--"Whoopee, I've got one more chance!" It is like, "My God, I've got one more chance."

Blessing is the third aspect of mercy. "Showers of blessing" is used in that strange old song that we sing. But just look at what was being pointed to. There have been raindrops of blessing, of missional effectiveness. You know sometimes how you have done something pretty well. You have done this well or that well. There has been a raindrop of blessing here and a raindrop of blessing there. "Lord, give me showers of blessing. May my missional effectiveness just pour out, not on me, but on everything that happens." My God, it is time for the church to rise anew in North America through the Town Meeting and through the Community Forum Canada and for the whole world to pour out showers of blessing on everything that goes on. Oh, the breakloose of nations, the breakloose of nations!

"Lord Jesus Christ mercy me"--on me--through me--and in me. Knowing, doing, and being, have mercy on me. Through me, I am to be the one who brings mercy to others. I never demand more of others than of myself, always remembering that sound that comes out of the ancient past, that whosoever's sins you

forgive on earth will be forgiven in heaven. Lord, make me a vessel to this happening. Let my very action be forgiveness. Let me be the one that occasions reprieve. Let me be the one to bring my colleague off. Let me be the one that sees that everyone that I meet has some way of growing anew, not just individually, sociologically. Lord, let our happening see that the world has a second chance, a reprieve. Let every community be a happening that lets people see that there is another chance for community, for life to be born anew, for people to come off, have significance, and a vocation in the midst of their being. And then in me, make my being mercy itself. Scrape my insides out and make me clean, so that every part of my insides is mercy. Oh Lord, make me be mercy. Make me be care itself. Make me the presence of mercy or care. Make me the presence of strength itself. Who is the me? The one who has mercy on him, and through him. My cup runneth over with blessing and mercy, and with me to the world. Every morning here we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, merciful and mighty." The Merciful is the one who has care; the Mighty is the one who has power to act out that care. Make me like thine activity, Lord, a servant, a captive. Make me a captive, Lord. "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me."

Well you can see the Starets, in this prayer was enabled in every split second to grasp the profundity and the deeps of humanness for his life. Where his own identity, his being, his vocation, his destiny, were thrust into every second, they enhanced every perception that he had and every relationship that was there. And he said that prayer until he dreamed it. And he said it into his heart. Life and death. Life and death. Life and death. Life and death. "Oh, Lord Jesus Christ mercy me. Lord Jesus Christ mercy me." The Starets' Prayer began as external, then was made mental, and finally was wrought into the heart by the heartbeat. "Lord Jesus Christ mercy me."

What is it going to mean for us to stand? What will it mean to have a solitary office? What will it mean to pray without ceasing? I do not think that you and I would be interested in saying this 18,000 times a day, or even 12,000 times along with our breath or our heartbeat. Maybe you would like to go through that exercise until it became part of you. I do not know. But I am interested in your using it as a way of calling yourself into being, in situations when life squeezes you and the internal cry comes out.

Here a few months ago in one of our smaller collegiums we began to ask "What was it that came out of you when life pressed you hard and that internal scream came out." I thought we might get an answer here or there, but everyone around the table answered with something. What we were talking about is the deeps of humanness that allow you to be the deeps of humanness. Consciousness bursts into your everyday life to illuminate anew that step into the future. What will that be? Since we are dealing with transparentization here, every culture is going to have to deal with this question in one way or another. Hardly a day goes by that somebody does not say something that recalls to my mind the question, "What is it going to mean to take care of ourselves?" In taking care of ourselves, all people will be, once again, taken care of, themselves.

-----Joseph A. Slicker