

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE THROUGH THE JESUS PRAYER

I. The Jesus Prayer: Prayer Without Ceasing

Claretian spirituality emphasizes two forms of prayer (CC 33):

1. **Faithfulness to regular prayer** – daily rhythms of liturgy and personal devotion.
2. **Ongoing or ceaseless prayer** – remaining in God's presence at all times, also called *contemplation in action*.

The **Jesus Prayer** belongs to this second form. Its traditional wording is: *"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."*

Originating with the Desert Fathers in the 4th century, this prayer was used to focus the heart, calm the mind, and remain conscious of God. A communal form also exists: *"have mercy on us."* The practice, known as **hesychasm** (from the Greek *hesychia* = calmness, stillness), seeks inner silence and union with God.

Biblical foundations:

- Invocation of God's name as holy (1 Kgs 8:29).
- Confession of Jesus as Lord (Phil 2:11).
- Salvation in His name (Acts 4:12).
- The publican's prayer of mercy (Lk 18:13).

Method:

- Recite the words slowly, silently, with full attention.
- In early stages, focus on "have mercy on me," leading to humility and purification.
- Later, focus shifts to "Lord Jesus Christ," leading to awareness of His indwelling presence.
- The prayer accompanies work and rest, even continuing subconsciously in sleep (1 Thess 5:17).
- Breath can be linked to prayer: inhaling the first part, exhaling the second (Gen 2:7).
- A prayer rope may be used for focus.

Three Stages of Practice:

1. **Oral Prayer** – reciting with lips, still external.
2. **Mental Prayer** – mind unites with the words.
3. **Prayer of the Heart** – the prayer becomes automatic, a constant rhythm of the soul: *"The person becomes the prayer."*

II. Thought Control and the Jesus Prayer

The heart and mind are where thoughts and emotions arise, and where God's presence is encountered (Phil 4:8). But negative or scattered thoughts obscure Him.

The Desert Fathers taught **watchfulness (nepsis)** – careful attention to thoughts, which they saw as "demons" distracting us from God (Eph 6:12). Neuroscience today confirms that thoughts affect emotions, which in turn affect body chemistry; accumulated negativity becomes like "emotional toxins."

John Cassian's Eight Negative Thoughts:

1. Gluttony
2. Lust
3. Greed (Avarice)
4. Anger
5. Sadness

6. Acedia (spiritual listlessness)
7. Vainglory
8. Pride

These move from bodily cravings to emotional disorders to subtle spiritual obstacles. The monks saw overcoming them as necessary purification, freeing the person to experience God deeply.

Lesson: To encounter God, we must purify thoughts and emotions, moving from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Ultimately, **love** is the purest knowledge of God (1 Cor 8:1).

III. Self-Transcendence through Jesus Prayer

The Desert Fathers believed God's kingdom is always within (Mt 13:16), but **ego (philautia = self-love in the negative sense)** clouds our perception. The spiritual journey is the passage from **false self** (ego, superficial personality) to **true Self** (image and likeness of God, Col 3:3).

Through Jesus Prayer:

- Ego-self is replaced by Christ-self (*"My Me is Christ"* – St. Catherine of Genoa).
- Communion with God, people, and creation becomes natural.
- Compassion flows spontaneously as ego dissolves.

This transformation is like forging iron, as St. Antony of the Desert said: we must decide what virtue we want to shape, otherwise our labour is in vain.

IV. St. Claret: A Living Temple

St. Anthony Mary Claret embodied the spirit of ceaseless prayer. He longed for "Eucharistic trans-substantiation" in his life and lived with a constant awareness of God's presence.

He wrote (Retreat Resolutions):

- *"I will strive to be in the presence of God and will direct and do everything for God"* (1843.4; Aut. p. 755).
- *"I will walk in the presence of God within me"* (1864.8; Aut. p. 826).
- *"I will build a little chapel in my heart, and adore God day and night"* (1857.1; Aut. p. 795).
- *"I will imagine that my heart is the room in which Jesus is sitting, and that my soul, like Mary, is contemplating at Jesus' feet, while my body, like Martha, is imperturbably busy with the works of my ministry, so that they may become a most savory meal for Jesus. I will imagine that my soul and body are like the two legs of a compass, and that my heart, like one point, is fixed in Jesus, while the other point of the compass is describing the circle of my appointments and obligations quite perfectly, since the circle is the symbol of perfection on earth and of eternity in heaven".* (1866.8; Aut. p. 834-835).

Claret also perceived God in creation, events, and even in enemies, seeing them as instruments of purification. His life illustrates the Claretian call: to live "always in the presence of God, even in the midst of prodigious activity" (Pius XII).

V. Stages of Growth in Faith and Ego-Transcendence

Christian maturity is the gradual weakening of ego and the awakening of Christ within (1 Cor 3:1–3; Eph 4:13). Richard Rohr describes **nine stages of growth**:

1. **My body/self-image is who I am** – infant stage, pre-ego.

2. **My behaviour is who I am** – identity tied to external approval.
3. **My thoughts/feelings are who I am** – adolescence; rebellion and self-assertion.
4. **My deeper intuitions are who I am** – breakthrough often through suffering; birth of humility.
5. **My shadow self is who I am** – dark night of self-awareness; weakness and hypocrisy exposed.
6. **I am empty and powerless** – surrender to God, trusting in darkness.
7. **I am more than I thought** – authentic Self emerges; dualistic thinking softens.
8. **I and the Father are one** – ego veil gone; inner freedom, Christ-consciousness.
9. **I am who I am** – full authenticity, humility, compassion; “My Me is Christ.”

Every Christian, especially Claretians, is called to grow through these stages—moving from ego-centred life to Christ-centred mission, where prayer and life become one.

The Jesus Prayer: A Beginner’s Guide for Initial Formation

1. Place of the Jesus Prayer within Claretian Formation

Within the Claretian vision of formation as a lifelong forging into the likeness of Christ for mission, prayer is not a technique but a transformative relationship. The Jesus Prayer belongs especially to the inner forge, where the Spirit works quietly and deeply to purify motivations, heal interior fragmentation, and configure the heart to Christ.

In the language of the Forge:

- **Fire:** The Holy Spirit gently purifies the heart through the repeated invocation of the Holy Name.
- **Hammer:** Faithful repetition, discipline, and perseverance.
- **Anvil:** The concrete reality of one’s inner life—distractions, wounds, poverty, sinfulness.
- **Smiths:** Formators and spiritual accompanists who help discern fruit and obstacles.
- **Iron:** The formandus, freely consenting to be shaped through simplicity and fidelity.

The Jesus Prayer trains the missionary to remain interiorly anchored in Christ, preventing activism without depth and fostering the “ceaseless prayer” that sustains apostolic zeal.

2. Spiritual and Formative Meaning of the Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer— “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”— is a prayer of relationship, humility, and trust.

It forms the missionary in four essential attitudes:

1. **Christ-centredness** – Jesus is not an idea but a living Presence.
2. **Sonship** – Addressing Jesus as “Son of God” roots prayer in faith, not emotion.
3. **Mercy** – The heart learns to live from grace rather than self-sufficiency.
4. **Truthfulness** – Naming oneself as “a sinner” fosters humility without self-contempt.

This prayer is particularly formative for Claretians, whose mission demands interior freedom, compassion, and availability, rather than ego-driven performance.

3. Practical Guidelines for Formandi

A. Learning the Prayer (Initial Practice)

Formandi are encouraged to practice the Jesus Prayer daily, especially during stages of purification and configuration.

Basic Method

1. Choose a quiet place and stable posture.
2. Gently regulate breathing.
3. Repeat the prayer slowly, verbally or interiorly:
 - Inhale: *"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God"*
 - Exhale: *"have mercy on me, a sinner"*
4. When distracted, return gently to the prayer.
5. Begin with 5–10 minutes, gradually extending.

B. Interior Attitudes to Cultivate

- Simplicity rather than effort.
- Fidelity rather than intensity.
- Trust rather than control.
- Love rather than self-analysis.

C. Integration into Daily Life

- Use short repetitions during work, walking, or transitions.
- Let the prayer become a background rhythm, not a forced exercise.
- Avoid judging the quality of prayer; remain faithful.

4. Practical Guidelines for Formators

Formators accompany this prayer not as supervisors of technique, but as discerners of integration.

Formators should:

- Normalize dryness, distraction, and resistance.
- Emphasize that this is not a relaxation method or a search for mystical states.
- Help formandi connect prayer experiences with:
 - Emotional patterns
 - Defensive behaviours
 - Community dynamics
- **Watch for signs of:**
 - Avoidance of inner work
 - Over-spiritualization
 - Scrupulosity or self-condemnation

The formator acts as a keeper of balance, ensuring the prayer supports growth rather than bypasses it.

5. Practical Exercises

Exercise 1: Naming the Inner Noise

After prayer, the formandus writes briefly:

- What thoughts or emotions most frequently arose?
- What does this reveal about my inner state?

Exercise 2: Mercy Awareness Journal

For one week:

- Practice the Jesus Prayer daily.

- Each evening, note moments where mercy (received or given) became more visible.

Exercise 3: Prayer and Mission Link

Reflect monthly:

- How does this prayer affect my patience, availability, or reactions in community and mission?

6. Accompaniment Guidelines

Spiritual accompaniment should explore:

- How the formandus experiences God's mercy.
- Whether the prayer leads to greater humility and freedom.
- How resistance or boredom might signal unresolved wounds or fears.

Questions for accompaniment:

- What happens in you when you repeat the Name of Jesus?
- Which part of the prayer is hardest for you?
- How does this prayer affect your way of relating to others?

When strong emotional material emerges, accompaniment may need to integrate psychological support, consistent with the Forge's trauma-aware and developmental vision.

7. Discernment Criteria

The Jesus Prayer is bearing fruit when it leads to:

Positive Indicators

- Increased interior stillness and self-awareness.
- Greater compassion toward self and others.
- Reduced reactivity in community life.
- Deeper trust in God's mercy.
- Integration of prayer and mission.

Warning Signs

- Rigid attachment to method.
- Withdrawal from community or mission.
- Spiritual pride or self-accusation.
- Use of prayer to avoid emotional truth.

Discernment must always consider the whole person—human, spiritual, relational, and apostolic.

8. Adaptation Across Stages of Formation

- **Pre-Novitiate:** Introduced gently as a way of grounding and self-awareness.
- **Novitiate:** Used as a tool of purification, healing, and interior truth.
- **Post-Novitiate:** Integrated into a stable rhythm of contemplative prayer.
- **Ongoing Formation:** Practised as prayer of the heart sustaining lifelong mission.

9. Concluding Synthesis

The Jesus Prayer forms the Claretian missionary from the inside out. It teaches the heart to remain in Christ amid fire, hammer, and anvil—until the missionary himself becomes a living invocation of mercy.

As the tradition reminds us: *“Let the name of Jesus be united with your breathing, and then you will know the benefit of silence.”*

In the Forge of the Spirit, the Holy Name becomes both fire and rest, shaping missionaries who are free, humble, and sent.