

The Rule of the Mother of God-Praying the Rosary in Eastern Catholic Churches

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The Jesus Prayer holds a place of prominence in the spiritual Patrimony of the Eastern Churches. This imageless prayer strives to unite the mind and heart in the Trinity through the constant invocation of the Name of Jesus. With this being held as the 'Gold Standard' of personal prayer, a form that uses images, like the Western Marian Rosary, is considered by many to be out of place in Eastern Christianity. By extension therefore, Ukrainian Catholics should not pray it. Yet within Eastern Christianity there exists a complementary prayer form to the Jesus Prayer that is almost identical to the Rosary. Called the "Rule of the Mother of God", it is primarily an image based, meditative prayer form, and like the Western Marian Rosary, it has theological foundations going back to at least the 5TH century.

St. Mark the Ascetic, an early 5TH century monk who was an advocate for and practitioner of imageless prayer, taught that praying with images and reflecting upon the life of God-Incarnate complemented the Jesus Prayer. According to St. Mark it is important for us to reflect upon the heights of God's glory and the depth to which He condescended through the Incarnation. He also tells us to ponder the utter humiliation that the Logos suffered by becoming human and undergoing crucifixion, "how the divine Logos dwelt in a womb; how He took human nature upon Himself, His birth from a woman; His gradual bodily growth; the shame He suffered; how He was scourged and spat upon; derided and mocked; the scarlet robe; the crown of thorns; the outcry of the (men of His own race)... the cross, the nails, the lance, the drink of vinegar and gall; the scorn of the gentiles; the derision of the passers-by... crucifixion; death; the three day

burial; the descent into Hell...the liberation from Hell and from death of those who were raised with the Lord; the ascension to the heavens; the enthronement at the right hand of the Father...the veneration of the Firstborn from the dead by all the angels, because of the suffering He had undergone."

When we pray pondering the above (which correlate well with the Mysteries of the Western Rosary), we pray like Mary, Jesus' Mother, who Scripture tells us also pondered the life of Christ in her heart. Image filled prayer, reflecting upon the life of Christ, was also approved of and encouraged by such saints as John of Kronstadt (1809-1908) and Peter of Damaskos (11TH or 12TH century) who saw great value in imageless (Jesus Prayer) and image filled (Rosary-type) prayer.

Another giant of holiness, St Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833), not only saw value in image filled prayer, but prayed it and promoted it among his disciples. The prayer form he used, called the "Rule of the Mother of God", was/is similar to the Western Marian Rosary and according to some traditions it even predates the Rosary's introduction to St. Dominic in the 13TH century.

Saint Seraphim's spiritual son, Fr. Zosima wrote the following in a letter about the practice:

...I forgot to give you a piece of advice vital for salvation. Say the O Hail, Mother of God and Virgin one hundred and fifty times, and this prayer will lead you on the way to salvation. This rule was given by the Mother of God herself in about the eighth century, and at one time all Christians fulfilled it. We Orthodox have forgotten about it, and St. Seraphim has reminded me of this Rule. In my hands I have a hand-written book from the cell of St. Seraphim, containing a description of the

many miracles which took place through praying to the Mother of God and especially through saying one hundred and fifty times the O Hail, Mother of God and Virgin. If, being unaccustomed to it, it is difficult to master one hundred and fifty repetitions daily, say it fifty times at first. After every ten repetitions say the Our Father once and ‘Open unto us the doors of thy loving-kindness...’ Whomever he spoke to about this miracle-working Rule remained grateful to him...

What did the form of this Rule look like? In addition to what is described above it was made up of the “Usual Beginning”, followed by 150 prayers broken into 15 decades with prayers before and after each decade. Each decade was accompanied by a meditation. These meditations are very similar to the Mysteries of the Western Marian Rosary. Bishop Seraphim Zvezdinsky noted them as follows:

First decade: Let us remember the birth of the Mother of God. Let us pray for mothers, fathers, and children.

Second decade: Let us the feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin and Mother of God. Let us pray for those who have lost their way and fallen away from the church.

Third decade: Let us remember the Annunciation of the Blessed Mother of God—let us pray for the soothing of sorrows and the consolation of those who grieve.

Fourth decade: Let us remember the meeting of the Blessed Virgin with the righteous Elizabeth. Let us pray for the reunion of the separated, for those whose dear ones or children are living away from them or missing.

Fifth decade: Let us remember the Birth of Christ. Let us pray for the rebirth of souls, for new life in Christ.

Sixth decade: Let us remember the Feast of the Purification of the Lord, and the words uttered by St. Simeon: Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also (Luke 2:35). Let us pray that the Mother of God will meet our souls at the hour of our death, and will contrive that we receive the Holy Sacrament with our last breath, and will lead our souls through the terrible torments.

Seventh decade: Let us remember the flight of the Mother of God with the God-Child into Egypt. Let us pray that the Mother of God will help us avoid temptation in this life and deliver us from misfortunes.

Eighth decade: Let us remember the disappearance of the twelve-year old boy Jesus in Jerusalem and the sorrow of the Mother of God on this account. Let us pray, begging the Mother of God for the constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer.

Ninth decade: Let us remember-the miracle performed in Cana of Galilee, when the Lord turned water into wine at the words of the Mother of God: They have no wine (John 2:3). Let us ask the Mother of God for help in our affairs and deliverance from need.

Tenth decade: Let us remember the Mother of God standing at the Cross of the Lord, when grief pierced through her heart like a sword. Let us pray to the Mother of God for the strengthening of our Souls and the banishment of despondency.

Eleventh decade: Let us remember the Resurrection of Christ and ask the Mother of God in prayer to resurrect our souls and give us a new courage for spiritual feats.

Twelfth decade: Let us remember the Ascension of Christ, at which the Mother of God was present. Let us pray and ask the Queen of Heaven to raise up our souls from

earthly and worldly amusements and direct them to striving for higher things.

Thirteenth decade: Let us remember the Upper Room and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and the Mother of God. Let us pray: Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me (Psalm 51).

Fourteenth decade: Let us remember the Assumption of the Blessed Mother of God, and ask for a peaceful and serene end.

Fifteenth decade: Let us remember the glory of the Mother of God, with which the Lord crowned her after her removal from earth to heaven. Let us pray to the Queen of Heaven not to abandon the faithful who are on earth but to defend them from every evil, covering them with her honoring and protecting veil.

The form of the Rule is strikingly similar to the Rosary. Its existence therefore means that there is no need to cast imageless and image filled prayer in opposition to each other. The Jesus Prayer need not, and in some ways, should not exist on its own-it should be complemented by other prayer forms such as the Rule/Rosary. The witness of Saints in both Eastern and Western churches testifies to this and encourages us!

The Second Vatican Council states:

“Between the all the various parts of the Church there is a bond of close communion whereby spiritual riches... are shared. For the members of the People of God are called upon to share their goods (as in the words of the apostle), ‘according to the gift that each has received administer it to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Pet 5:10).’ (Lumen Gentium #13).

It is clear that the Rosary, or the “Rule of the Mother of God”, is a worthy, and even a necessary prayer form that should be (and already is!) shared. Like icons that are now appearing in Roman Catholic churches, this prayer to the Mother of God does not pose a conflict but instead is an enriching, powerful tool for holiness!

Indeed, in an entry about the ‘Rule of the Mother of God’ in the *Encyclopedia of Orthodoxy* (published in Moscow, 2003) it is noted that, "this form of prayer to the Mother of God was revealed by Her to be more important than any other, including akathists and canons."

Let us pray as we are called to pray by the Spirit. If we are called to pray the Jesus prayer then let us pray the Name. If we are called to pray the Rosary then let us pray the Rosary. Since it is identified with the Holy Mother of God, and it is shared by East and West, Orthodox and Catholic, it can only lead us to peace and unity in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.