

To Father Thomas Fidelis (Francis) Smith, O.C.S.O.*

Thomas Merton

June 29, 1963

Probably you are overdoing the Jesus Prayer a bit. I think it is all very well for a hard-headed nineteenth-century Russian monk to do that all day and all night, but it is not going to work for Americans today. And in any case, remember that you are adding this to an already rather heavy schedule. Our life as it stands is pretty overloaded with "means."

Personally I like the *Way of the Pilgrim* and it is a good stimulating book to read. The ideas are good, but we have to apply them to ourselves with due concern for our own situation. It seems to me that it is expecting too much to try to make our whole life center itself in the Jesus Prayer. And it is not necessary. I think that this repetition of the prayer is useful at certain times. I have recourse to it when I am plagued with distractions or half dead with sleep and can't do anything better. As for the breathing, I would get some idea of some good Yoga breathing, as described in a reliable book like Dechanet's *Christian Yoga*, and use that *sometimes*. But for the rest, the light of the Lord shines in our hearts always and all we need to do is to remind ourselves of it in the simplest possible way, and surrender to Him totally. If a simple ejaculation helps, well and good. Words do not always help. Just looking is often more helpful.

As to the inner warmth around the heart, as a result of pushing the prayer, don't fool with this. This is one of the misleading and risky aspects of Oriental prayer (see Simeon the New Theologian, who is off on this in many ways).

I think that reading some of the great Protestant O.T. theologians would help your prayer. Von Rad, for instance (without getting too stuck on his special axe-grinding), or Eichrodt. Any-

*Father Thomas Francis Smith is a monk of the Holy Spirit Monastery at Conyers, Georgia, who expressed an interest in the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church.

way, I'll send a paper I did based on some of this material and you can see what I mean, and evaluate it for yourself. I am no Scripture scholar.

It seems to me that the Bible is a much better source of light than the Jesus Prayer. But all sources fail, except God himself. And He is after all the most accessible. We get tired of means once in a while, and that is perhaps because we are nearer to the end than we realize.

It seems to me that we create obstacles for ourselves by setting up arbitrary division, "intellectual life" and "life of prayer." Each of us has to find the unity in which everything fits and takes its right place. For some, a certain amount of intellectual life is necessary for the life of prayer. Each must work out just what the right measure may be. And it varies, at different times of our life. The best thing is to acquire that discretion by which we can tell when to do what needs to be done, even though it does not seemingly fit in to some ideal plan of monastic spirituality. There are moments when all plans are useless. So while we cannot rely on them, we learn to rely more directly on God himself, Who cannot fail us ...