



**Orthodox Church of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

306 W. Main Street Emmitsburg,
MD 21727

<http://EntranceMission.org>

717-817-0084

The V. Rev. Elias Yelovich,
Rector

The Rev. Anthony Duvall,
Assistant

***Gregory Palamas and the Prayer of the Heart
March 31, 2024***

Second Sunday in Lent. Entrance Church.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Three of the Sundays in Great Lent bring us face to face with a saint whose life illustrates the importance and power of repentance. Mary of Egypt in the fifth week is the very symbol of one who led a repentant life. St. John of the Ladder in the fourth week reminds us of the central role that repentance leads in the life of a monastic, or for that matter, anyone who seeks to enter upon the road to life eternal. Today, the Church in her wisdom brings to us the remembrance of one of the most important saints whose life and writings were essential to preserve the spirit of repentance within the daily life of the believer.

St. Gregory was a monk in what was in his time the largest monastery on Mt. Athos. He spent his life in that monastery practicing what has come to be known as the "Prayer of the Heart." In silence and with ascetic discipline, the monks would look within and practice the Prayer of the Heart, a form of which is the recitation of what we call the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son

of God, have mercy on me the sinner.” Some of them experienced the presence of God so strongly, so dynamically, that they were able to assert that they actually participated in the Uncreated Light of Christ Itself.

St. Gregory who was among them came into disagreement with a visiting scholar from the southern tip of Italy, the region called Calabria. This scholar was all about the mind, the academic and theological understanding of the faith. He not only questioned the assertion of St. Gregory that one could experience the Uncreated Light, but he was shocked and dismayed with it. The faith from his perspective was all about rules, regulations, right belief, right thinking, the proper attitude of the mind. He did not understand that it was in the heart that God chooses to meet His disciples. It is in the heart, St. Gregory insisted, that the Spirit of God will dwell if invited to do so. The *heart* drives every action of the believer, not the *mind*. We come to understand God, Who God Is, how He wants us to live, how to become Christ to our neighbor, through the action of the Spirit within our hearts. Not our minds.

You see, it’s not good enough for us to intend to do something, or to say something, or to carry out some action. It’s not sufficient for us to confess our faith with our minds, to dutifully obey the commandments or canons without the Spirit guiding our every action. Our Holy Christian Faith is not about right-understanding, but about having the Spirit dwell within us, guiding our every thought, word and deed.

And this only begins to happen if we come before God with repentance. The Jesus Prayer is a prayer of repentance, par excellence. We think of Lent as a time for different foods, more services, giving up this or that want or desire. But above all else is should be the time for coming before God in repentance, like the Publican we heard about sever weeks ago right before Lent began.

You don’t need a rosary or a prayer rope to practice the Jesus Prayer. Some people do indeed use them, and that is fine, as long as they do not use them to keep track of how many times they say the Jesus Prayer. We do not pray the Jesus Prayer in order to present our piety before God as if it were some sort of achievement. We pray in order to bow the knees of our hearts to Him in humility and repentance. We can say the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, repeatedly, in silence or with the actions of our lips out loud. But we say it, in order to establish the foundation of our relationship with the Lord: He is our Lord, our Master and our God.

Before Him, we come in humility, or we should probably not come at all until we are ready to do so.

Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner!

To Jesus Christ be all honor and glory forever! Amen!

Fr. Elias

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