

Comboschini (The Prayer Rope)

– Meditations of a Monk of the Holy Mountain Athos



Let us pause for a moment just to look at a little prayer rope, like this one made of black wool on Mountain Athos. It is a blessing from a holy place. Like so much that we have in the Church, it is a blessing prepared and given to us by a brother or father in Christ, a living witness to living tradition. It is black, the color of mourning and sorrow, and this reminds us to be sober and serious in our lives. We are taught that repentant prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer, can bring us what the Holy Fathers call joy-creating sorrow—in Greek “Harmolipi”.

We are sorry for our sins and our weakness and failings before God, our fellow men and ourselves; but in Christ, Who pours out His mercy and forgiveness on all who call upon His Name, this sorrow becomes a source of joy and comfort. This prayer rope is knotted from wool, that is, it has been sheared from a sheep, a reminder that we are rational sheep of the Good Shepherd, Christ the Lord, and also a reminder of the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world (see: John 1:29). And the cross likewise speaks to us of the sacrifice and victory of life over death, of humility over pride, of

self-sacrifice over selfishness, of light over darkness. And the tassel? Well, you can use it to wipe the tears away from your eyes, or, if you have no tears, to remind you to weep because you cannot weep.

Besides, from the Old Testament times, little tassels have been a decoration for sacred vestments, a reminder of the sacred tradition in which we participate when we use the prayer rope.

Prayer ropes are made in keeping with a tradition whose origin is lost in antiquity. Perhaps one of the earliest forms was simply gathering small pebbles or seeds and moving them from one spot or container to another as one said his prayer rule or did his rule of bows or prostrations. The story is told of a monk who decided to make knots in a rope, which he could use in carrying out his daily rule of prayer. But the devil kept untying the knots he made in the rope, frustrating the poor monk's efforts.

Then an angel appeared and taught the monk a special kind of knot that consists of ties of interlocked crosses, and these knots the devil was unable to unravel.

Prayer ropes come in a great variety of forms and sizes. Most prayer ropes have a cross woven into them or attached to mark the "end", and also have some kind of marker after each 10, 25, or 50 knots or beads.

There are many forms of prayer ropes, some knotted of wool or silk, or other more elegant or simpler materials. Others are made of beads or the dried flower of a plant called "Tears of the Mother of God". The prayer rope is one of the items given to an Orthodox Christian monk at the time of tonsure: it is given to him as his spiritual sword with which he, as a soldier of Christ, must make war against our spiritual enemy, the devil. This sword is wielded by calling on the name of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ in a plea for mercy on me a sinner.

This prayer can be said in a shorter form, such as: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me"; or in a longer form, as: "By the prayers of the Most Holy Theotokos and all the Saints, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me".

Other short prayers: the prayer of the publican: "God be merciful to me a sinner" (see: Luke 18:13), the prayer to the Mother of God: "Most Holy Theotokos save us", or other short prayers to the Guardian Angel, to individual saints or to all the saints can also be offered with the assistance of the prayer rope.

A common form of such a prayer is: Holy Guardian Angel—or Saint (name)— pray to God for me.

By changing the words of these short prayers and saying: “have mercy on us”, or “pray for us”, or by including the name or names of persons we want to pray for, we can also use the prayer rope for intercessory prayers.

This also applies to those already departed this life: “Give rest O Lord to the soul of Thy servant.”

When monks carry the prayer rope in their hands, it serves as a reminder of their obligation to pray unceasingly.

In keeping with the commandment of the Holy Apostle Paul to “pray without ceasing”. Anyone can keep a prayer rope in a pocket or some other discreet place where it can be easily used unnoticed when in situations where it is better to pray or remember prayer in secret, without attracting the attention of others. The prayer rope can also be placed over the head of our bed, in an automobile, with a small cross or icon, or in other appropriate places as a reminder of prayer and a kind of blessing and a holy and godly presence in our lives.

But now, let us discuss briefly the primary use for which this prayer rope was made. The whole purpose of the prayer rope is to assist us in offering our prayers before God and His Saints. In addition to serving as an external reminder and a blessing present with us, how can this little rope help us to pray?

We can pray without a prayer rope, of course, and there are times when using the prayer rope may become a distraction for us in our attempts to concentrate in prayer.

With that in mind, let us consider some ways in which the prayer rope can be of assistance. There are times when our prayer is fervent and it is easy for us to pray. There are times when our thoughts are so distracted that we find it virtually impossible to concentrate on prayer. This is especially true when we try to keep a rule of prayer each day.

Some days it goes very well, but other times—if not most of the time?—our efforts seem almost to be in vain. But because we are “creatures of habit”, as the saying goes, it is very profitable for us to set apart a special and regular time (or times) during the day for prayer.

The time in the evening before going to bed is a good time, as it is important to end the day with prayer.

The morning, upon awakening from sleep, is also good, so as to begin the new day with prayer. Or a person may find other times during the day when he is able to be quiet and concentrate.

We are trying to establish a rule of prayer in our lives, not an exception, so we want to find a time when each day we can find some quiet in order to concentrate and turn the eyes of our soul towards God.

We may want to read some prayers from a prayer book as part of this rule, or offer prayers and find quiet for our souls in other ways, such as reading religious literature, reflecting over the events of the past day—"Anaskopisis"[1]—and so on.

But one of the most effective ways to find benefit from a rule of prayer is to say a set number of the Jesus Prayer regularly each day.

This does not have to be a large number, and it may take only fifteen minutes or so, but that will be the portion of our day that belongs to God, the little grains of salt that will add savor to our Christian life.

This practice is now recommended by many physicians for the sake of a person's physical health, especially in overcoming stress. Better still, find such little pocket of time at various points throughout the day and regularly fill them with the precious treasures of prayer, a treasure no one can steal from you, that is laid up for you in heaven (see: Mat. 6:20).

In maintaining a consistent number of prayers as part of such a daily rule, a prayer rope can be quite helpful.

With the prayer rope, you can offer a set number of prayers and concentrate on the words of the prayer as you offer them. After collecting your thoughts, take the cross on the prayer rope in your left hand, holding it lightly between the thumb and the index finger.

Then, making the sign of the cross over yourself quietly, whisper the Jesus Prayer. As your thoughts become more concentrated, you may not need to continue crossing yourself or saying the prayer audibly. Other times, when concentration is difficult, use the sign of the cross and whispering as means to help keep your mind on prayer.

It is good to stand, with head bowed, in a humble position; some people like to raise their hands from time to time in their petitions for mercy. But others find it more helpful to sit or kneel, with head bowed, in order to concentrate.

A lot depends on the individual and also on his health and upbringing.

The important thing is to be able to keep still and concentrate on the words of the prayer as you repeat it.

Of course, a person has to fight off the temptation to "rush". For this reason, some people use a clock instead of a prayer rope as an external measure for their prayer rule.

By using a clock, a person can devote a set amount of time to prayer, although he may not keep track of the exact number of prayer he says. But, then again, clocks with electronic beeps are quite a recent development, and keeping a loudly ticking clock that jangles the nerves with a loud alarm bell seldom proves to be a great boon to prayer.

So much for traditional use of digital alarm clocks!

The prayer rope is also a convenient way to keep track of the number of bows or prostrations a person makes during his prayer rule. Making the sign of the cross over oneself and then bowing from the waist and touching the ground with one's fingertips, or bowing down on one's knees and touching the forehead to the ground are very ancient ways of offering prayers to God and His Saints.

One can combine these bows or prostrations with the Jesus Prayer or any of the short prayers we have mentioned above. The physical action of bowing or kneeling can contribute to the fervor of the prayer and give expression to our supplication, as we humble ourselves before God.

This is one way in, which we can carry out the apostolic command to praise God both in our souls and in our bodies. [2]

Many people use the prayer rope when they lie down to sleep.

After signing their bed with the cross, they take their prayer rope, bless themselves with the sign of the cross as they lie in bed, and quietly pray with the prayer rope until they fall asleep.

And waking up with the prayer rope still in your fingers or next to you on the pillow helps begin the new day with prayer. But ending the previous day with quiet prayer is an even better way to prepare for a prayerful beginning of the new day, not to mention preparing for the Eternal Day should we fall asleep that night in death.

And others take their prayer rope in hand during idle moments, such as while commuting or traveling.

At any time of the day, whenever you remember to do so, you can take a little prayer rope in your fingers, and the association of that action with the prayer you offer at other times will help you concentrate and offer some prayers during the course of the day whenever you may be, whatever you may be doing.

And this is an important step towards fulfilling the commandment to pray without ceasing.

The holy bishop Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov mentions that the lengthy services held in the Orthodox Church are also a good opportunity for praying with the prayer rope.

Often there are times when it is difficult to concentrate on the words being read or chanted, and it is easier to concentrate quietly on one's own private prayers, be they extemporaneous prayers for some special need, repeating prayers or psalms that we know by heart, or repeating some short prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer, with the assistance of the prayer rope. In fact, this often helps a person concentrate better on the service itself, something mentioned by St. Seraphim of Sarov.

Of course, when we are praying at the services, our prayer is joined to that of the entire Church.

We are constantly occupied by all kinds of thoughts that appear in our heads, and it seems we no sooner start to pray than we catch ourselves thinking about something else.

Here again, the physical presence of the prayer rope in our fingers can help us catch ourselves and return to our task of prayer more quickly.

Or, meeting up with one of the markers or with the cross on the prayer rope as we move it through our fingers remind us that we have been robbed of the prayers we intended to offer.

And immediately we can offer our prayers anew without getting further entangled in our thoughts about how easily we get distracted from prayer to God.

Here we have touched on the great science of prayer, what the holy fathers have named the "art of the arts". There is a great and rich literature written by the great men of prayer from all ages that can help guide us in learning, with God's help, this greatest and most beneficial of all sciences.

Regular reading the Holy Gospel, the lives of the saints and other devotional and spiritual literature can be of great assistance. Such works as the Philokalia contain important and inspiring instruction and direction in learning to pray as a Christian, which is an essential aspect of being a Christian.

Above all, however, one needs the grace of God in the Church, especially in communing the Holy Mysteries.

These are just a few introductory thoughts on how we can make good uses of a prayer rope. But the important thing is to start to pray. The prayer rope does not pray by itself, although some of them are so magnificent they may give that impression. Here is an important, traditional aid in offering prayers, and especially for a daily rule of prayer. But the important thing is to concentrate on words of the prayer, to offer heart-felt prayers to Jesus Christ, our Lord and God.

If this little prayer rope helps you to say a prayer or reminds you to pray or helps you in some way to become more prayerful, it will have fulfilled its purpose, it will have tied you more closely and more intimately with Christ our God, and also brought you closer to the Kingdom of God, for "the Kingdom of God is within you." (See: Luke 17:21)

(We have to note, once more, that regarding any prayer rule about praying with the prayer rope or any other rule (fasting etc.), the first and the last word has to be said by our spiritual father, in order to avoid delusion, as the Holy Fathers have taught us.)

Some quotes on the prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" from our Holy Fathers:

"Pray without ceasing"

– St. Paul, 1 Thessalonians

"Brothers, be always occupied with the intellectual [noetic] prayer and do not move far away from God until you receive God's mercy and pity. Never ask for anything but for His infinite mercy and this is enough for your salvation. When asking for His mercy, cry aloud in entreaty with humble and contrite heart from morning to night and, if possible, during the whole night, saying unceasingly: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us".

– St. John Chrysostom (in his speech about sobriety and prayer)

"Win the enemies in your mind with the name of God. You will not find any other weapon more effective than this! Similarly you will manage both to appease your passions inside yourself and to efface them with the aid of the prayer".

– St. John Climacus

"When mind and heart are united in prayer and the soul is wholly concentrated in a single desire for God, then the heart grows warm and the light of Christ begins to shine and fills the inward man with peace and joy. We should thank the Lord for everything and give ourselves up to His will; we should also offer Him all our thoughts and words, and strive to make everything serve only His good pleasure."

– St. Seraphim of Sarov

"Through the constant remembrance and invocation to Jesus Christ, a holy condition is created in our mind. This happens, if we appeal to Jesus Christ with fervor, crying aloud towards Him in entreaty day and night, so that repetition leads to habit and habit becomes second nature!"

– St. Isichios

"I advise you to make a Comboschini (Prayer Rope), all of you, young and old, and hold it in your left hand and cross yourselves with your right hand and say: 'Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me'"

– Saint Cosmas Aetolos

Endnotes

(1) Anaskopisis: The Church Fathers use this term to refer to the practice of checking ourselves, in order to feel remorse for our sins and become better, but also recognize the mercy and kindness of God.

This has been the complete text of the booklet Comboschini (The Prayer Rope): Meditations of a Monk of the Holy Mountain Athos. Published with the blessing of Abbot Paisios, St. Anthony's Monastery, Florence, AZ.