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Seeking silence a way to transform the heart

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Palms are burned for ashes used to mark the start of Lent. (CNS photo/Bill Wittman)

Lent

First time visitors to Orthodox churches are often struck by the relative silence of the liturgies. For some Christians this seems strange.

"There are no loud praise bands to entertain, no colorfully-lit stages or jumbo-screen TVs, no shouting preachers dancing about, waving Bibles over their heads," says Orthodox Fr. Michael Reagan.

"By contrast," he continues, "Orthodox churches are often dimly-lit, the musical tones understated, the movements restrained, the prayers chanted simply. The whole environment is one of spiritual quiet, which many people find unnerving or frankly boring."

Orthodox spirituality traditionally believes this minimalism is exactly what we need in order to learn to become still and experience the presence of God.

Eastern Orthodox spirituality proves to be fertile ground for the religious imagination, especially during the Lenten season.

An article in *The New York Times* recently focused on Lent's return to Russia, noting that Moscow rock stars were telling interviewers about their Lenten diet, that the kitchens in the Parliament building within

the Kremlin were offering meatless and dairy-free meals during the season, that Vladimir Putin himself was thought to be a practicing Orthodox Christian who joined in the fasting in the weeks before Easter.

In 2004 in Moscow thousands in a mile-long line waited for more than three hours to enter the Church of Christ the Savior, near Red Square, to view an especially revered Orthodox icon, the Virgin of Tikhvin, which had been returned after six decades of safekeeping in the United States.

Central to Orthodox spirituality is hesychasm, the eremitic tradition of prayer in the Eastern church. Hesychasm is based on Christ's injunction in the Gospel to "go into your closet and pray," (Luke 18:38) and his declaration "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

The heart of hesychasm is the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The term "hesychasm" was used as early as the 6th century to describe the desert ascetics living in Syria. By the 14th century the term is in common use to describe the practices that involved the use of the Jesus Prayer along with certain psychophysical techniques.

Hesychastic prayer bears some resemblance to mystical prayer and meditation techniques used in the Eastern religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism. Such practices involve the seeking of an inner stillness, wherein the subtle movements of the Spirit can be detected and heard. The highest goal is the experiential knowledge of God.

The Jesus Prayer is not a mantra as in religions of the East. The prayer's call for mercy means that inner change and repentance are central to the spiritual life. It is also a prayer that is practiced solidly within the sacramental life of the church, combined with communion, confession, *lectio divina*, fasting and actively practicing love for one's neighbor.

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The Jesus Prayer is to be said with the heart, with meaning, with intent. There is also a great emphasis on humility. The pray-er is directed to bring the mind down into the heart. That descent is taken literally and is not considered as a metaphorical expression.

The Jesus Prayer, according to St. Gregory Palamas, "fills the soul with divine grace and spiritual gifts. As chrism perfumes the jar the more strongly the tighter it is closed, so prayer, the more tightly it is enclosed within the heart, abounds the more in divine grace. By this prayer the dew of the Holy Spirit is brought down upon the earth, as Elijah brought down rain on Mount Carmel.

"The Word of God took up his dwelling in the Theotokos (Mary, the God-bearer) in an inexpressible manner and proceeded from her, bearing flesh. He appeared upon the earth and lived among us, deifying our nature and granting us, after the words of the divine Apostle, 'things which angels desire to look into' (1 Peter 1:12)."

According to Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpatkos in Greece, "the essence of Orthodox spirituality lies in its therapeutic effects. It cures a person's infirmities and renders him an integrated person. And what is cured first and foremost is a person's heart, which constitutes the center of his or her entire being."

These spiritual traditions can be a good lesson for us for Lent.

Its way of opening ourselves to experience God, to hear the whisperings of the Spirit by seeking silence is

a tried and true way to transform the heart.

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