

The Sword of the Spirit

The Making of an Orthodox Rosary

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WHEN a monk or nun is professed in the Orthodox Church he or she is given, as part of the investiture, a knotted cord. The Greeks call this κομβοσχοιου from κομβος, a knot, and σχοιου, a cord. The Russians call it "Tchotki" a word derived from the verb meaning "to count," but the old Slavonic name was "Vervitsa" meaning a cord, or "Lestovka," a ladder. The words of investiture used in the Slavonic rite are; "take, brother, the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, for continual prayer to Jesus; for thou must always have the Name of the Lord Jesus in mind, in heart and on thy lips." This cord is also used by priests who are not professed monks and by lay people. It is associated with the recitation of the Jesus prayer. The cord traditionally given is made of black wool and the most usual formula of the prayer is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." Sometimes the word "sinner" is added, but whether it is explicitly included or not it is always implied. Variants of this formula are also used; some change the "me" to "us" and others shorten or lengthen the formula. Essentially and always the Jesus prayer consists of the recitation of a formula in which the Name of Jesus is invoked and whether the word sinner is expressly included or not it is always implied.

It is not generally known or appreciated that the knots are made in a very complex and peculiar way which is described in this article. The making of the cord seems to the writer to be of great symbolical interest and for this reason the process is described in detail.

The wool required is first measured and the number of strands needed, which varies with the thickness of the wool and the size of the knots desired, are cut into the required lengths. The length necessary is eight arm lengths and another half length for the cross which completes the rosary. The number of strands will be twelve or more if the wool is of the thickness usually required for making socks. The wool is divided into two strands which I will subsequently refer to as Strands A and B. These are knotted loosely together. This first knot does not subsequently form part of the rosary. It is later untied and is only made for convenience in order to keep A and B together at their source whilst the first permanent knot is made. It should not therefore be considered as playing any part in the symbolism of the rosary though for convenience and clarity it is referred to in the text and shown in the illustrations as though it remained throughout the making of the cord and as if A and B preceded as well as followed its making. This of course is not the case, since before we began there was only the undivided stream of wool from which all the knots are made. There is one God and Creator of all "by Whom all things were made" and therefore there is one source from which the whole rosary derives. We start from unity but duality is inherent in creation. God made light and dark, heaven and earth, male and female, soul

and body, and so we make our two strands A and B in imitation of the divine pattern. From now on we work with these two threads which we shall weave into a complicated pattern, always ordered, though it may seem at times to be disordered. We use now one thread, now the other, but each is always related to the other and to the knot itself.

The process of making each knot may be divided into twelve distinct "movements" each of which is described in what follows.



Fig. 1

1. See figure 1.

Place the knot behind the first finger and take strand A across the palm and between the third and fourth fingers of the left hand; take strand B behind the three fingers and back onto the palm of the hand between the third and fourth fingers. The two equal parts into which the wool has been divided may be regarded as the two opposing or complementary elements in the created world, the active and passive principles, black and white, good and evil, expansion and contraction etc. Throughout the making of each knot the palm of the hand may be considered as the field of creation, or the more limited field of work of each one of us, that area of space and time within which we are permitted to "live and move and have our being." It is circumscribed and limited, yet, on it and by means of it, the whole knot is formed. The back of the hand is equally important although we cannot see it and we do not consciously work with it. It may be thought of as symbolizing those hidden influences which are continually at work in the whole of creation and in our individual lives though we are unaware of them until their results become apparent and then we realise their immense significance. In the same way that the wool which has passed behind the fingers is integrated into the knot when it emerges onto the palm of the hand, forming an essential part of each knot, so these hidden forces are an essential part of the whole creation and so also they influence and are integrated into the life of each one of us. Without the "work" which goes on behind the backs of the fingers the knot would never be tied; and without the work which goes on in the hidden part of the soul nothing would be achieved. Let us therefore consider that strand A represents the light or the active principle whilst strand B represents the darkness or the passive principle. It is to be noted that A is in full view in front of the fingers while B is hidden behind them and only comes to light again when A and B cross between the fingers.

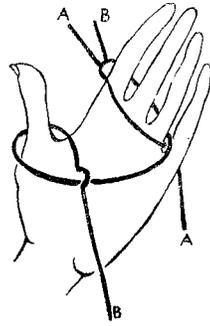


Fig. 2

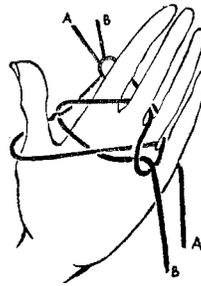


Fig. 3

2. See figure 2.

The second movement is made entirely with B which is taken round the thumb and crossed over itself at the centre of the palm, thus making a first, though rudimentary, cross. At this stage it is made entirely of B, a hidden, dark cross at the centre of our being; perhaps a cross in embryo only, a foretaste of what is to come. A does not participate in the making of this cross.

3. See figure 3.

The third movement is a very complicated interweaving of the two strands by which they become inextricably entangled in each other. It may be described as follows; pick up strand B at a point near the thumb and place it over the second finger; pick up strand A, through the loop of B, and slip it over the thumb, then slip B off the thumb. A square has been formed in the palm and this has been firmly secured by two loops, namely A round the thumb and B round the second finger. These are at opposite corners of the square, which now surrounds the palm. We may think of it as a symbol of form and hence of matter, which is bounded, as the square is bounded by four sides, by four elements and four cardinal directions. There is, thus, a clearly defined circumscribed form in the palm of the hand made by the two opposite (or complementary) strands. The "earth" is no longer "without form and void." A form is there and out of this will come the perfect knot.

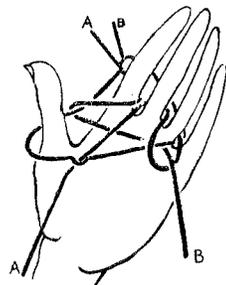


Fig. 4

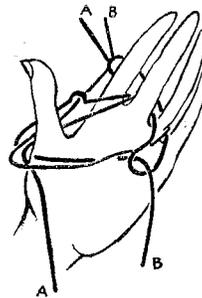


Fig. 5

4. See figure 4.

Take A behind the two middle fingers and over B, threading it under the strand of itself which comes from the thumb. By this process a very important step is taken. A cross is made by the two strands in the centre of the palm. The square of the world and of ourself has been filled by the cross. There is no need to enlarge on the meaning of this since it is clear.

5. See figure 5.

Take up the cross. This is of course a very significant action. There is no hope of reaching the perfection of the end unless the cross is taken up unhesitatingly. It is placed over the thumb leaving the palm empty and thus ready and able to receive. By this action the self has been emptied of itself, self noughted and denied. The world holds nothing for one who has taken up his cross and denied himself and therefore his hand is empty. Bordering the empty palm the two strands A and B hang down freely parallel to each other. They still appear as two opposite forces but they are now firmly interwoven with each other and emerge in orderly fashion to surround and limit the field of work.

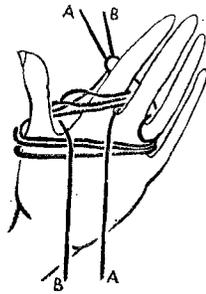


Fig. 6 & 7

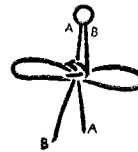


Fig. 8

6. See figure 6/7.

Take B behind the two middle fingers and underneath the three strands between the thumb and the original knot and let it hang down over the palm.

7. See figure 6/7.

Take A (under B) behind the same two fingers and under the three strands between the thumb and the second finger, letting it also fall freely down over the palm. The picture is now that of a still smaller and more circumscribed square; the field of our work has narrowed down to a smaller space, it is more clearly bounded, more tightly and firmly held, and the interweaving threads are more closely bound together. A and B still hang down on each side of this space but they have changed places, B is now on the left and A on the right. Is there much difference between darkness and light? Do they not both come from the same source? We are beginning to see as we make our knot that these apparent

opposites are the very warp and woof of life. Both are necessary and both are closely interwoven in the whole created world of which we ourselves are a part. It is to be noted that the palm of the hand is still empty. There is no central point visible and the two strands are joined together at their source, the original knot, which is still there at the beginning of all this complicated business of interweaving.

8.

Here is the turning point. The direction given is to search for and find the original strand A behind the thumb as it comes from the first knot, hang on to it and throw all the other strands which are behind the thumb into the palm of the hand. Now search for B in the same manner. It is the loop safely secured round the third finger. Place this on the second finger and throw all the rest into the palm of the hand. This direction tells us quite plainly to go back and look for the source, to find the threads which lead to it, and to hold on to them, securing them firmly one on each side of the palm. Duality is still there, A and B still exist, but we are quite clear now that there is unity behind this duality, that there is one God and Father of all, one Creator from Whom and also in Whom all things exist and have their being. We have firm hold of the two threads which lead us to Him. However curiously interwoven these two have become we know that they link us to God Himself and that, were it not so, there would be no knot no field in which to work, and nothing but a fruitless and disordered end to our labours. It is this link which keeps us steady and which will ultimately prove to be the end as well as the beginning. We still hold the first knot. It has been there behind the first finger all the time, even if we have forgotten it.

9. See figure 8.

We are now faced with what looks like an inextricable tangle in the palm of the hand. Everything, except the original knot and the two strands leading to it, has been thrown into the palm, which we can still consider to be our field of work. There the wool lies in what looks like a complete muddle. The direction given is "arrangez joliment au centre." In other words, there is order in this apparent chaos and we must find it and arrange it round a central point to form the knot. This is achieved by holding tight to the three secure points and pulling gently on the two threads which hang down. If this is done carefully, and with little pulls of adjustment here and there, the result is a cross which can be slipped off the hand altogether. The two horizontal arms are formed by the loops A and B which we held round the thumb and second finger respectively, the stem consists of the two strands A and B which we left hanging down and at the top is the original knot. At the centre, if all has been done correctly, is the virtual knot, not yet in its final form but nevertheless containing in itself all that is needed to make the perfect knot itself.

We have trusted and we have believed that out of the tangle order would come; we have held on to the thread which has never broken and which has always linked us to Him to Whom we owe our whole existence as well as the conditions within which we can work and which we have accepted with all their apparent limitations and difficulties; now the end is in sight.

10.

The next direction is "to run the knot up the stem towards its source" by pulling the top threads of the right and left loops. If we have made the least mistake the knot will not run up the stem. If this should happen there is nothing we can do except start again. If we pray harder and concentrate better our next attempt may succeed. But if we have made each move correctly then our embryo knot will move smoothly up the stem until it reaches the first knot, or if others have been previously made, the one immediately before it. This immediately preceding knot will be our link with the first source of all the knots. There is still more work to do but we are free now of the earlier limitations, we are in direct touch with the chain which leads us back to the beginning, nothing can stop us except some foolish last mistake and we begin to experience the joy of good work accomplished. Is this not natural? We are nearer both to the beginning and the ending, to God the Father of all, and to Him Who brings all things to fulfilment.

By this movement the very centre of the cross is drawn back towards the source from which it came. It is significant that the centre itself moves vertically up the stem. This word calls to mind the symbolism of the tree of life, of "l'axe du monde" and reminds us of the importance of the central point where this axis meets each plane of existence. We are also reminded, as the knot moves upward, of that which came after the cross, the resurrection.

At this point we can associate the two strands with the two natures of Christ, and we may also remind ourselves of the interweaving of the divine and human in all that happens in this world. There is a wealth of meaning which pours out upon us. Sometimes we may see one aspect more clearly and sometimes another.

11.

Hold the right loop B against the stem and work first with the loop A pulling it three times through the knot. Then hold the left hand loop A against the stem and work with B. Pull B through the knot once, then allow it to fall naturally through the loop A, and finally pull it once more through the knot.

These threefold moves probably have many meanings, as indeed have all the previous moves. For a Christian they are likely to be associated especially with the mystery of the Trinity, firstly as It is in the Godhead, and secondly (during the moves with strand B) in relation to the world and ourselves. The interlocking of the two loops, one falling through the other, can then be considered as symbolizing the incarnation, the descent of God into flesh and the union of the two natures, and finally the deification of man.

We can also think of these triple moves as symbolizing the "three worlds" of body, soul and spirit; or the three parts of ourselves occupied in the Jesus prayer, the discursive intelligence, which repeats the name of Jesus, the intellect which is wholly concentrated on the Name, and the spirit which creates in us compunction and love. (cf. St. Theolepte as referred to in "La Priere de Jesus" by a monk of the Eastern Church) Or, again, we may think of the three stages of purification, illumination and union; or the three "margas" of the Hindu tradition, the Way of action, the Way of love and the Way of knowledge by which the prayer itself may lead us.

There is a sense of rhythm in the triple moves by which first A and then B is pulled through the knot and made firm. It suggests the association of the Jesus prayer with the rhythm of respiration and the beating of the heart. It may be connected in our thought with the indrawing and outflowing not only of our own breath, but of the breath of God Himself. The Jesus prayer is also associated with the beating of the heart, when the lips may be stilled and there is left to us only a listening, since the prayer says itself in the depth of the heart. We may find all this, and more, symbolized in the later stages of "tying the knot." Whatever we may learn it is integrated into a whole, but we only see it as such when the knot is finished.

12.

The knot is now finished, all that remains is to pull the two ends down evenly so that the two loops are absorbed into the knot and A and B disappear in what seems a strange and quite surprising manner. There are no longer two separate strands; they have been integrated into the completed knot. But this knot is not an isolated creation; it is part of a whole chain of knots, making a complete circle which is finally finished by untying our original loose knot and making a final knot which unites the beginning of the rosary to its end, and the whole is completed by making a small cross from the woollen ends that remain.

The making of such a rosary or cord is a whole day's work and, throughout, the Jesus prayer should be repeated continuously. It is said that if each knot is not correctly made it is because the maker has not prayed continuously and with due attention, for without prayer nothing can be right since God alone can perfect the work.

No mention has been made in this article of the symbolic significance of the numbers involved. There are two of particular note. The turning point comes after seven movements and the whole knot is completed in twelve. These numbers are obviously important though the writer prefers to leave others to draw their own conclusions, merely drawing attention to the seven days of creation of the Book of Genesis, and the seven Churches of the Book of Revelations, and to the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles and the twelve gates of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. It is not a mere accident that these numbers have an important place in the making of each knot.

It may well be asked who invented such a complicated knot and who was the first to make it. The answer given to writer's enquiry was "the blessed Mother of God, Herself; who else could have thought of it."