

## “Lord have Mercy”

Many Orthodox Christians wear at their hands a “bracelet” made of wool knots or wooden beads. It is not a piece of jewelry but a “prayer rope.” Its purpose is not just as decoration or to show others we are Orthodox, but to be used in praying. We remember the prayer of the Publican – “Lord have mercy.” Listen and you will hear that this prayer is repeated more than any other during the Liturgy.

Some prayer ropes are made of a wool yarn tied in a special kind of knot. Other prayer ropes are made of wooden beads. There is typically a knotted or wooden Cross (or sometimes metal) where the prayer rope is joined together to form a loop.



A prayer rope has a certain number of knots or beads, most commonly 33 – the number of years Christ lived on earth, but there are also 40, 50, 100, 150, and 300 knot ropes. The longer prayer ropes that are used by monks, nuns, and other devout persons have a few beads at intervals between the knots (usually every 10 or 25 knots) for ease in counting. These long prayer ropes frequently have a tassel at the end of the cross. The tassel represents the glory of the Heavenly Kingdom, which one can only enter through the Cross.

Prayer ropes are used as an aid in prayer by helping us keep our mind focused. By using a prayer rope, the physical motion of moving the knots or beads through your fingers calls your mind back when it wanders and allows you to refocus on communicating with God.

The use of prayer ropes is ancient. It was begun by Saint Pachomius and Saint Anthony the Great in the fourth century. It was originally intended as an aid for monks who could not read to say a certain number of prayers. The use of the prayer rope made it possible to pray the Jesus Prayer unceasingly, whether indoors or outside, to fulfill Saint Paul’s advice to “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

During their tonsure (the special service when a person becomes a monk or a nun), monks and nuns receive a prayer rope, with the words: “Accept, O brother (sister) (name), the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God in the everlasting Jesus prayer by which you should have the name of the Lord in your soul, your thoughts, and your heart, saying always: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.””

Young persons, and many adults too, say the shorter versions of the prayer: “**Lord have mercy**” or “**Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.**”