

# The Orthodox Prayer Rope



"Hitherto you have asked nothing in My Name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (Jn 16:24)

# The Orthodox Prayer Rope

The prayer rope, known in Greek as a κομποσκίνι (komboskini), has long been a powerful weapon for the Orthodox Christian. It has a very simple design, but is filled with meaning: it is traditionally made with black wool; the color symbolizes mourning for sins, sorrow for our offence against God, and reminds us to be serious and sober in our life. The material symbolizes Christ as the sacrificial Lamb, as the one who gave His life for us. It also reminds us that Christ is the Good Shepherd and we are his flock. At the bottom is small cross, a reminder of what Christ did for us, but also a symbol of hope; a device of torture and execution has become for us the gateway into eternal life. At the bottom of the cross is a tassel, which is there for both a symbolic reason and a practical one: it is used to wipe away the tears which are shed while praying. The rope typically comes in one of three lengths, 33 knots, 50 knots, or 100 knots, though there are some in use which are as long as 500 knots. The 33 knots of the shorter rope symbolize the 33 years Christ spent on earth.

The invention of this particular prayer rope is attributed to St. Pachomius in the fourth century, who created it as an aid for himself and his fellow monks so that they could each fulfill their individual prayer rule and accomplish a consistent number of prayers and prostrations. Since then it has become a tool to help monks—and laymen and women—to fulfill St. Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

It is used in conjunction with the Prayer of the Heart. On each knot is said, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This prayer is occasionally shortened to, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," and other prayers are sometimes said, such as, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Prostrations can also be made with each prayer or after a certain number of prayers.

St. Theophan the Recluse (+1894) recalls: "They used it as follows: they said, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner," and moved one knot with their fingers; then they said this again and moved another, and so on; between each short prayer they made a bow from the waist or a prostration, as desired, or between small knots they made a bow from the waist and at the larger knots or beads a complete prostration. The rule consisted in a set number of prayers and prostrations, interspersed with prayers in one's own words...."

The emphasis with this practice is not the mere repetition of a string of syllables, but the invocation of the Holy Name of God Himself, Who was made incarnate for our benefit out of love.

In this short work I hope to teach how one can make their own komboskini and to inspire its use through quotes from the holy saints and other various sources so as to make the modern English-speaking world aware of this ancient and powerful devotion.

- Zacharias Thornbury  
January, 2010

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# How to Tie an Orthodox Prayer Rope: Preparation

## Materials:

A length of material – I usually make my prayer ropes out of yarn, though if you prefer a nicer material 1/8" rattail works well. For a 33 knot rope out of this material, 20 ½ feet is enough to make the entire rope except for the crossbeam of the cross. For a 100 knot rope you will need 44 ½ feet of material. With this material each knot uses up about 2 inches of material, and you need about 2 feet to comfortably tie one knot. When using yarn I use 31 ½ ft for a 33 knot and 60 ½ feet for a 100 knot. With yarn, each knot takes up about 1.25 inches of material. If in doubt, it's always best to err on the side of having too much; it's very frustrating to spend a few hours tying a rope only to find out you don't have enough material! The best thing is to just make a few and see what works best for you.

Beads – Depending on how long your komboskini is going to be you might want some beads. They are usually placed after every 25 knots when making a rope of 50 knots or more. When I'm making a 100 knot rope I like to place one after the first 33 knots, then again 17 knots later to mark 50 and then one more 25 knots after that to mark 75.

Tweezers – This doesn't necessarily have to be tweezers, but you will probably need something to get the material started in the "Weaving" step below. I often use the tip of a pen.

## The Angelic Knot

The knot that makes up each "bead" of the komboskini is a very complex one, composed of seven interlocked crosses. There is a story that has been passed down for many centuries regarding the origin of this knot:



There was a monk who wanted to make a prayer rope in order to count his prayers. However, each time that the monk completed a few knots, a demon would come by and untie them all. The demon knew for what purpose the monk was tying his rope and out of fear and spite wanted to keep him from being able to complete it. One day an angel of God appeared to the monk and, answering his prayers for help, taught him how to make a special kind of knot composed of seven interconnected crosses. This knot was so complicated and, having on it so many crosses, the demon was unable to untie it and the monk was finally able to finish his rope.

It is because of this story that I call this knot the "angelic knot."

# How to Tie an Orthodox Prayer Rope: Tying the Rope

## Wrapping:

Before you begin you should pray a short prayer, asking God to bless the work you're about to undertake and to help you in the process. To begin, take your material and double it by folding it in half. If using a material other than yarn you only need to double it once, leaving you with two loose ends to work with. If using yarn you'll double the material twice, leaving you with four loose ends to work with since yarn tends to thin out and will make really small knots otherwise.

If using rattail, then tie a regular loop knot about 3 feet from where the material doubles if making a 33 knot rope, and 3 ½ feet if making a 100 knot rope. If using yarn I tie it about 2 ½ feet from where the material doubles for a 33 knot rope, and 3 feet for a 100 knot one. Be sure that it's loose enough to easily take out. It is at this loop knot that you will start creating the angelic knots and the material above it will be used to join the rope together into its circular form once all the knots are tied.



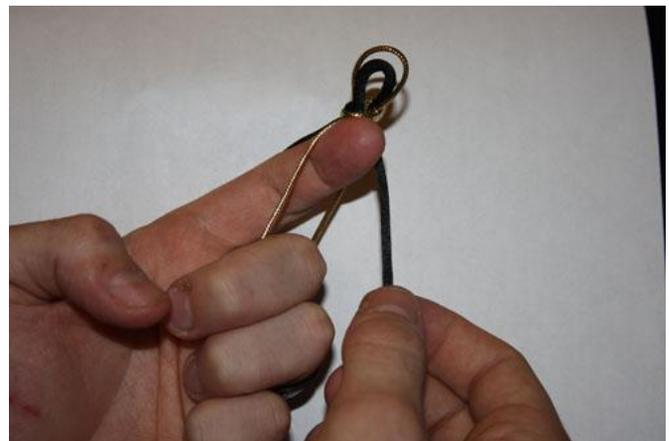
"It is impossible to draw near to  
God by any means other than  
increasing prayer."

- St. Isaac of Syria

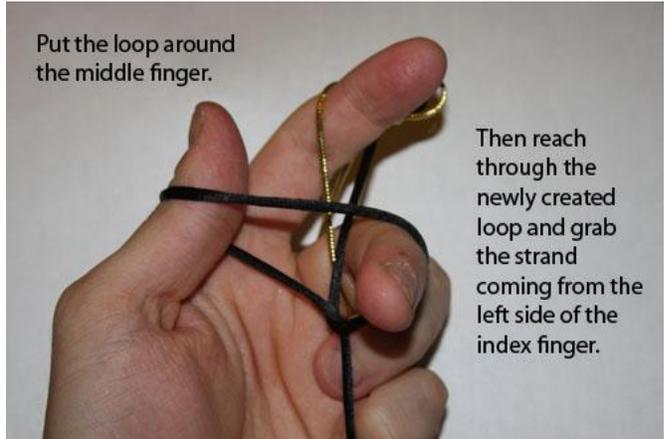
Place your index finger underneath this knot so that it sits on top of your finger with the loose ends running on either side of it.

"I advise you to make a komboskini, 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"

-Hieromartyr Cosmas Aetolos



With your free hand take the right-side strand and wrap it once around your thumb, starting underneath it and wrapping around the thumb clockwise. Then, grab the bottom of this loop and place it around your middle finger.



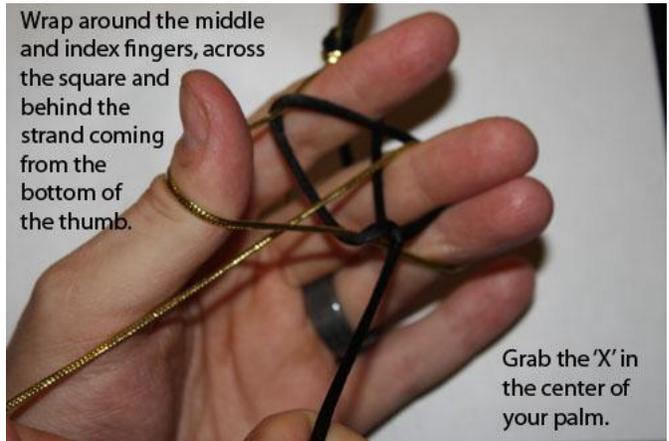
Reach through the loop newly created around your thumb and middle finger and grab the string that falls to the left side of your index finger. Pull it through the loop and as you do drop the string which is around your thumb off of it, placing the grasped string onto your thumb. You should have strands of string wrapped over your thumb, index finger and middle finger. If you tug gently on the two loose ends now the string should form a square in the middle of your palm.



"Brothers, be always occupied with the intellectual 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

Reaching behind the loose strand on the right, grasp the left string and pull it across your palm and between your ring finger and pinky. Pull this end up around the outside of your ring and middle fingers, and then back in towards your palm between the middle and index finger. Finally, put this end behind the string running from the bottom of your thumb to the square in the middle of your palm.



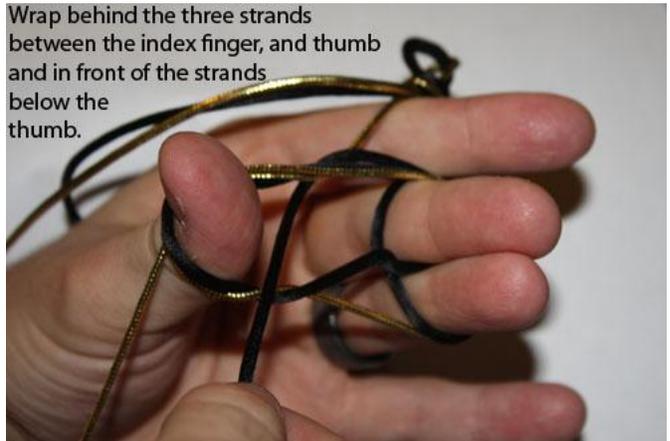
You will now have an 'X' just to the right of your thumb. Grasp the sides of the 'X' and pull the strands around the thumb.

"The incessant invocation of God's name is a medicine which mortifies not just the passions, but even their influence. Just as the physician puts medications or dressings on a wound that it might be healed, without the patient even knowing the manner of their operation, so also the name of God, when we invoke it, mortifies all passions, though we do not know how that happens"

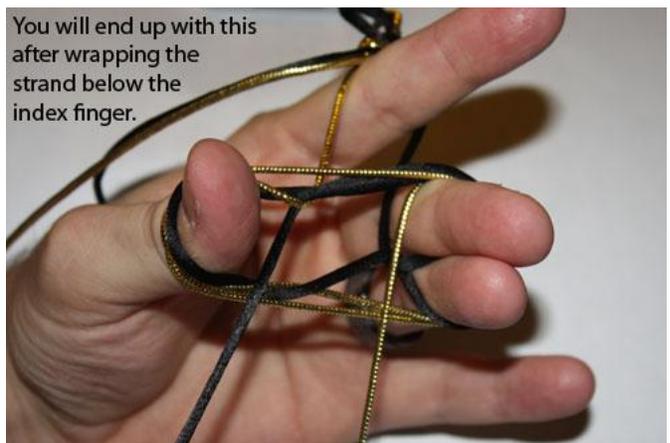
- St. Barsanuphius the Great



Take the loose end hanging on the right side and run it between the ring and pinky fingers again, back behind the ring and middle fingers and out between the middle and index fingers. Wrap it behind the three strings which run between the index finger and the thumb and then pull it out in front of the string running underneath the thumb.

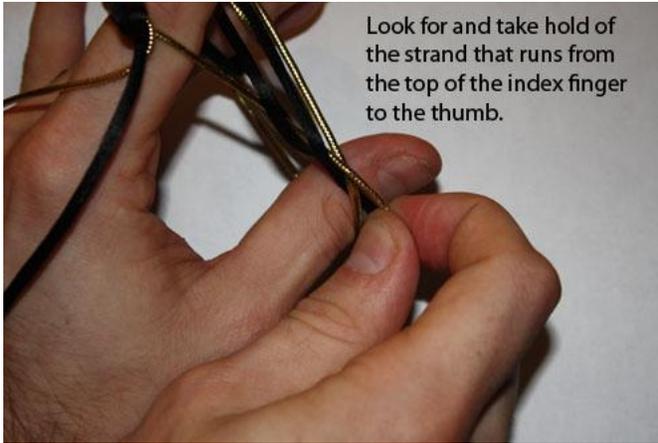


Next, reach behind the end on the right and grab the end hanging on the left side. Pull it across the palm and between the pinky and ring fingers, up behind the ring and middle fingers, and out between the middle and index finger. Wrap this strand behind the three strings directly underneath the index finger and then pull it out in front of the string running underneath the thumb.



### Removing from the fingers:

Now we begin the steps that will form this mess of string into the final shape of the angelic knot. Locate the string that runs from your thumb to the top of your index finger. Grasp this string and while holding it, drop the rest of the strings from around your thumb and then place the grasped string back around it.



Next, find the string that wraps around your middle finger. Grasp this string at the bottom of the finger and, while holding it, drop the rest of the strings from around your middle and ring fingers, then place the grasped string back around your middle finger.



If you pull gently now on the two ends the knot will begin to tighten up. Stretching open the hand that the strings are around will also help to tight it. You want to pull it so that it is snug, but not too tight so that you can perform the next few steps. Remove the loop from your middle finger, turn it 180 degrees towards you to untwist it, and then put it back on your finger. If you pull gently on the bottom string of each loop now you should be able to tighten it nicely. You should end up with a knot in the middle of your palm. The way this knot looks now is a good indicator of whether you'll be able to finish or if you should undo it and start over. You want it to look clean and even, without any one string kinked up or not pulled into the knot.



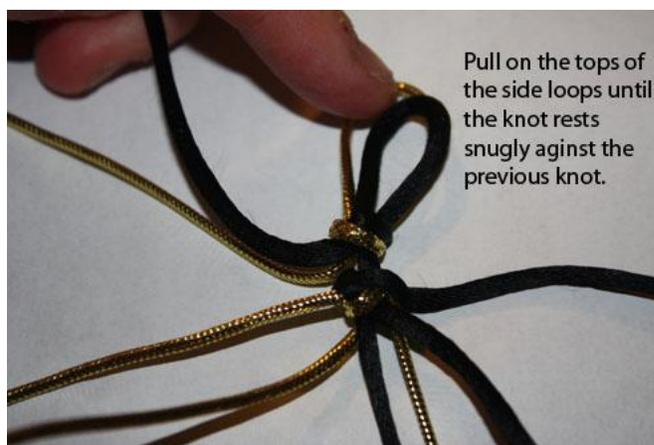
"The mind should be locked into the words of the prayer and should be forced back each time it departs from it."

- St. John of the Ladder

You can now remove all the string from around your fingers. You will notice that if you pull the top strings of each of the two side loops that the knot will move up. Pull on the top side of each loop until the knot is snug against the knot above it.

"When you turn to God in prayer, be in your thoughts as an ant, as a serpent of the earth, like a worm, like a stuttering child. Do not speak to Him something philosophical or high-sounding, but approach Him with a child's attitude"

- St. Isaac the Syrian



At this point in the very first knot of the rope you can remove the original loop knot that you made, cutting the now large loop from where you doubled the material so that you have two loose ends at the top of the knot as well as below (four if using yarn).

## Weaving the Knot:

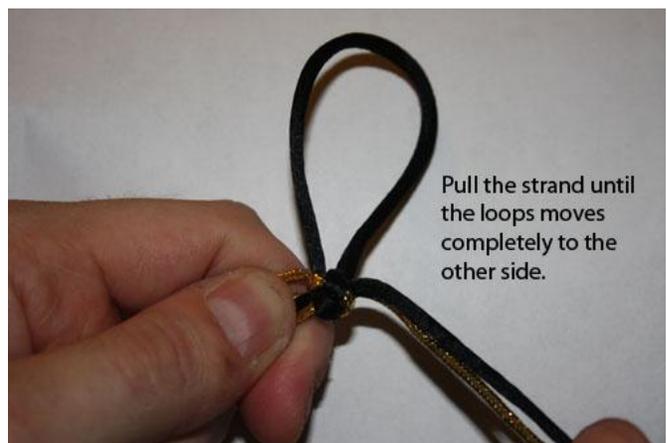
Now, after all that work, it's time to undo about half of it! Well, not really, but it certainly seems that way. Take the left-side loop, along with the two loose ends, and hold them in your palm, leaving only the right-side loop out. Turn your hand so that this loop is down. If you look closely at the knot you should see that the left side of this loop enters the knot, goes under a strand and then comes back out again at the top.



"When I prayed in my heart, everything around me seemed delightful and marvelous. The trees, the grass, the birds, the air, the light seemed to be telling me that they existed for man's sake, that they witnessed to the love of God for man, that all things prayed to God and sang his praise."

– Way of the Pilgrim

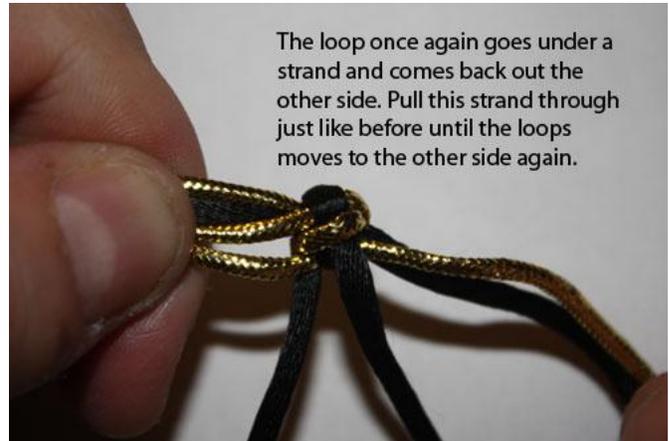
What you want to do is use your hook (or whatever tool you are using) to pull on the string where it comes back out from under the string. When you do this it will pull the bottom of the loop into the knot, and form a new loop above it.



Turn the entire thing 180 degrees so that the loop is the bottom again. You should notice the strand enters the loop, goes under another string, and then exits the loop again, just like last time. Pull up on this strand until the loop moves completely to the other side once again.

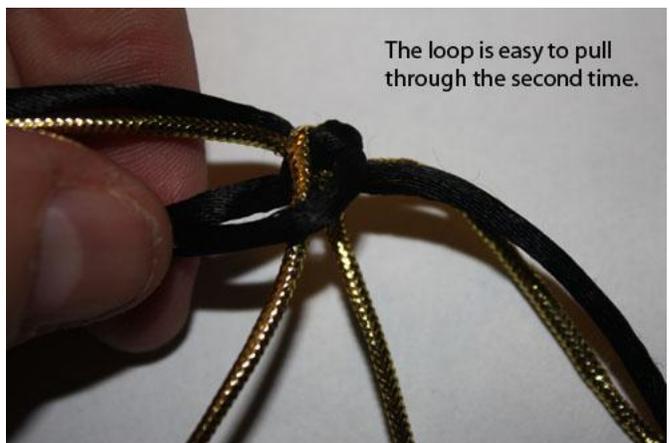
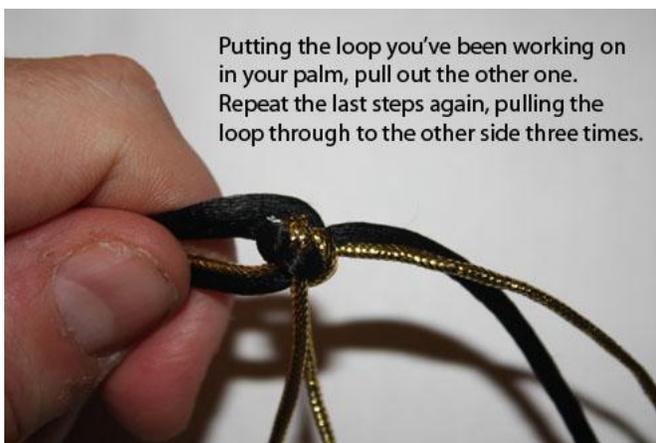
"God does not expect a pure and undistracted prayer. Despair not should inattention come over you! Be of cheerful spirit and constantly compel your mind to return to itself! For the angels alone are not subject to any distraction"

- St. John of the Ladder

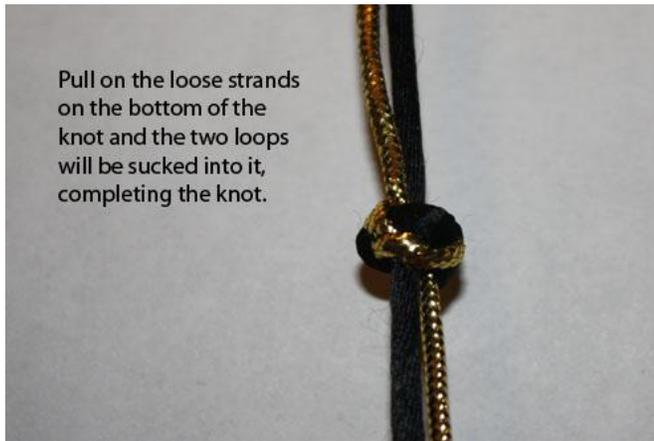


Turn the entire knot over 180 degrees once more, find where the string comes out from under another one once again, and pull it through for the last time.

Now, place this loop into the palm of your hand and pull the other one out. You want to do the same thing with this loop, weaving it through the knot three times just like before. On the second weave the string actually goes through the middle of the loop you just finished working on, so it's the easiest one to do!



Once you get all this done you should be able to pull on the two loose strings coming from the bottom of the knot, sucking the loops into it and leaving you with the completed angelic knot.



"Through the constant remembrance and invocation of 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

Congratulations! You've just completed one of the most complicated knots I imagine you'll come across. Only 99 more to go! ;-) Don't get discouraged if you have to redo one or (many) more of the knots while you work. It will take a lot of patience and determination to finish the rope, but the work becomes a meditation in of itself and a perfect opportunity to pray!

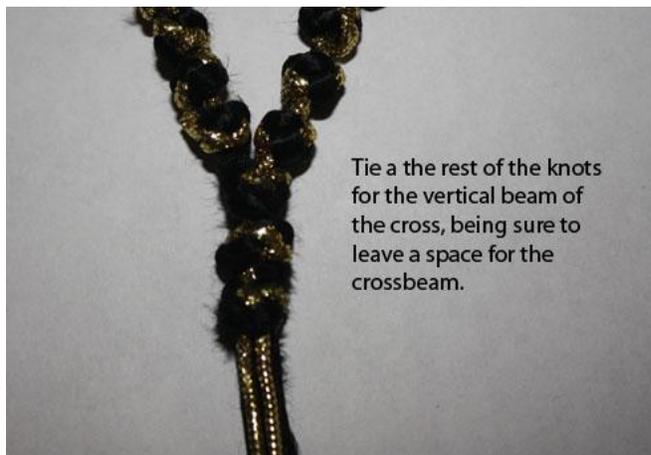
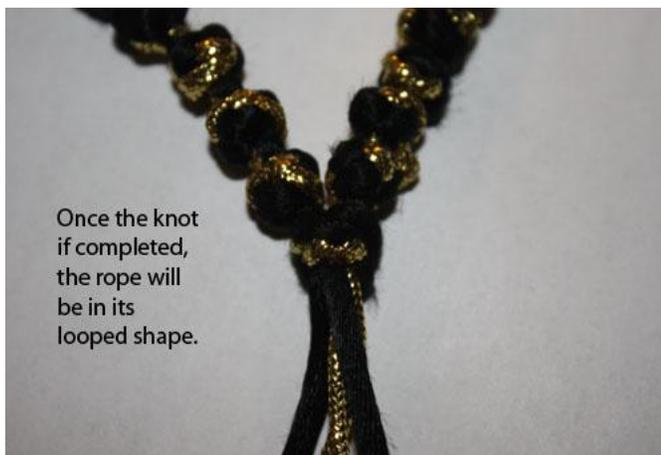
### **The Joining Knot and the Cross:**

After you have made the desired number of knots it's time put the rope into its proper shape. Before I do however I like to pull on both ends of the rope, stretching it. This action spaces the knots out a little bit from each other and makes it easier to distinguish individual knots while praying with the rope.

To bring the rope into shape, begin by creating another angelic knot, except this time, just before you reach the step of "Removing from the fingers" as mentioned above, pull the loose ends of string coming from the top of the first knot through the square in the middle of your palm from behind, then you can let it rest over the top of the square so it will be out of your way. Essentially, these strings are going to be tightly held in the middle of this and the next few knots so that the rope will stay in its looped shape.



The joining knot is also the first knot of the cross. Depending on how big you want the cross to be, tie another two or four knots, pulling the loose ends from the top through the middle of each one just like you did above. For a 33 knot rope I only tie two more knots after the joining knot for a total of three, while for longer ropes I will do four more knots for a total of five.\*

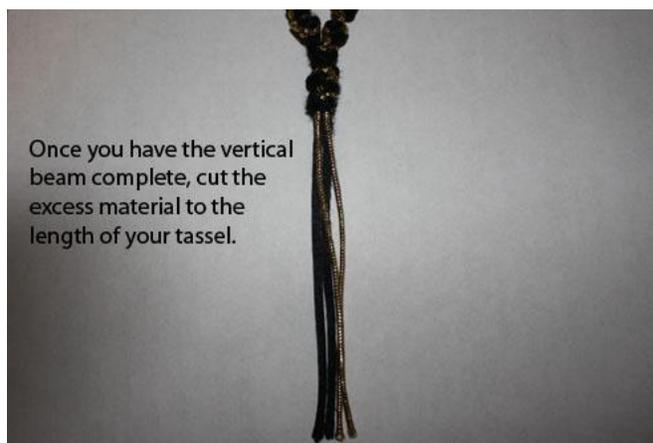


**\*Important:** if making the small cross, at the point where you can pull on the top of the side loops to move the knot snug against the preceding knot, leave a small space between the joining knot and the one underneath it. If making the larger cross then leave the space between the second and third knots of the cross. This is so that you can tie the knots of the crossbeam.

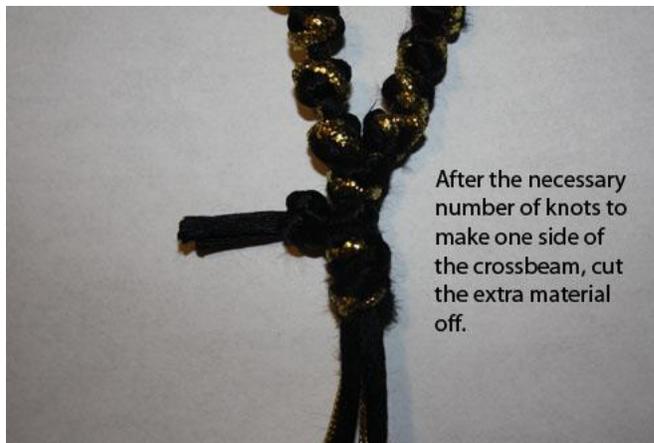
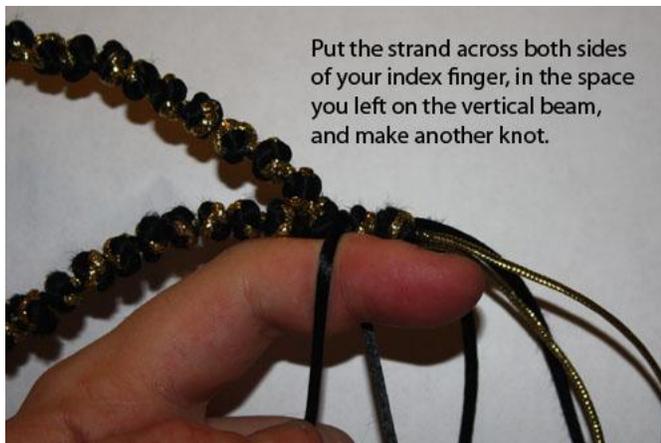
After tying the vertical knots of the cross you cut the remaining material coming out of the bottom of the final knot to the length that you want your tassel to hang.

"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



Using a strand that you've cut off (two if using yarn), or cutting a new length if what you had remaining is not long enough, double it, placing it in the space you left for the cross beam of the cross and over the top of your finger. Make an angelic knot. If making the smaller cross you only need to make one knot here, if the larger then two.



Repeat this on the other side with another length of material to finish the cross. Cut off the loose ends coming from these knots and you should have a nice cross at the bottom of the rope.



## The Tassel:

To form the tassel you can again use the leftover material you've cut off or cut new strands. You want a whole bunch of strands, about twice as long as you want the tassel to hang. Using the ends of string coming from the bottom of the final knot of the cross, tie all these loose strands for the tassel at their center to the rest of the rope.



"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

Finally, tie a one more string around the top of the tassel give it its final shape.



The holy bishop Ignaty 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

I hope that you found this guide helpful, and that you will use it to enrich your own prayer life and that of those around you. If you have any suggestions on how to improve this guide please e-mail me at [zthornbury@gmail.com](mailto:zthornbury@gmail.com). God bless!