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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and the communion of the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

DIFFICULTIES IN CONTEMPLATION

God, through Jesus Christ, has called you not only to know the mysteries of His Trinitarian Family, but also to experience His inter-mutual love of Father, Son and Spirit for each of us. You are called to experience the ecstatic happiness of the Trinity. This joyful, exuberant, outpouring love of the Father through the Son, Jesus Christ, in His Spirit is to be a process of continued experiential growth reflected by our happy, self-giving, intimate love toward those whom we are called to love and serve.

The authentic test of how intimately you are living in God's presence is how intimately you are ready to live for others. The transformation of yourself into oneness with God can come about only through a mutual transformation into oneness with other human beings whom you are lovingly privileged to serve. Your dignity and the measure of sanctity of your life in God is shown by your striving to release God's loving presence in the world; the world in which you find yourself. Only in that time and space of our human situation with all its brokenness, banality and even sordidness will you discover God's love as transforming all things into a sharing of Himself.

You may be experiencing this brokenness in contemplation. Frequently, many complain about dryness, distractions and other areas of difficulties that could put an end to their efforts to pray. Let us look at this important area of your prayer-life, both the positive and negative elements, as well as some possible solutions and aids.

DIFFICULTIES IN CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

I have described contemplation as an habitual prayer attitude in which you move away from this or that act of which you are in charge, to enter into a more total experience of oneness with God. God breaks through more immediately to you by His Spirit communicating to your "spirit", your total self-moving into a union with God. As you experience God by greater and greater infusion of faith, hope and love as gifts from the Holy Spirit, He is no longer in your awareness as someone outside of you in His wondrous creations of nature or His studied perfections, but as dwelling within you. Your response is one of more total self-surrendering love that pushes your consciousness of your new identity, your new *I-ness* in God's *Thou-ness*, to new heights.

As you move into this simple presence of Jesus Christ, there is a great peace and quietude. "I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Whom my Father will send in My name will teach you everything, and remind you of everything which I tell you. Peace I leave with you; my own peace I give you; not as the world gives, I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:25-27). The Fathers of the Desert know by experience that the peace of Christ is a condition where nothing is lacking! In the beginning stages of "resting" in His presence, often intense affections may surge up with ardent longings to be more intimately united with Him and the Heavenly Father. The consolations in this period of your prayer can be strong and attractive. God seems to be everywhere, even outside of your concentrated prayer alone with God. a global presence of Jesus Christ surrounds you and you begin to find Him in the world around you, in places and

persons where you had never “seen” Him before.

A LETTING GO

You begin to yield with greater susceptibility to His loving presence. Your aggressive activity both in prayer and in your daily actions takes on a gentleness and docility to the indwelling presence of God, both within yourself and within all of creation around you. There is a “letting go” of your own controlled power and a new sensitivity develops, a new listening to God’s presence and loving activity around you and within you. You seem to be living on a new plateau of awareness of God’s presence.

He can seemingly do anything He wishes with you. Whether there is now ardent consolation or plain old dryness, there always seems to be a deep peace and joy in events which formerly were disturbing. Now they do not seem to disturb you.

The sensible presence of God in prayer has passed. As you continue walking along the paths of deeper prayer, eager for greater union with God, you no longer find that sweet presence of God. It is as if you have lost Him. The Song of Solomon describes your experience in prayer: “Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loves; I sought him but I found him not. The watchmen that go about the city found me; I asked them, Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” (Song of Solomon 3: 1-3).

A CLEANSING DARKNESS

A new presence of God indwelling within you shows itself as darkness. There are no longer clear and distinct ideas about God. Rarely are you aware of moving from affection to another in the course of your prayer. You have a dull sense of alienation as you seem to enter deeply within yourself. You see your own abyss of nothingness before the mountain of God’s majesty. There is a feeling of self-dread with a crying out in urgency for the face of God. You wonder whether you have sinned and God has left you to your self. Faith is deepening without the props of sensible consolation, images, words. The more you advance into this darkness, the more names about God and His attributes make no sense. When God determines you must walk in the darkness it is extremely important to remember you do not have to walk it alone.

Nothing satisfies you. The very presence of God that had flooded you both in deep affective prayer and in contact with the world now seems utterly absent. God creates this necessary pruning, this dying of the seed in order that greater union with Him may become possible. “I am the true vine, and My Father is the laborer. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, he cuts off; and the one which bears fruit, he prunes so that it may bring forth more fruit. You have already been pruned because of the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15: 1-3). “Truly, truly, I say to you that unless a grain of wheat falls and dies in the ground, it will be left alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it; and he who has no concern for his life in this world will keep it to life eternal (John 12: 24-25). You enter into a necessary dying process to your self-reliance and a deepening of faith that only comes when you are in this darkness, standing before an immense barricade that is impermeable by your own intellectual powers.

It is a crying out for God to show Himself in the night of the desert, where you understand your own absolute nothingness before God. There is a silencing of your own powers like the silence of steel in the pitch darkness of the black night. Only a person who has experienced this trial can understand because God has been all to this person. And now you have to dig roots and cry out in deep, dark stark faith for the mercy of God; “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of

God, have mercy on me a sinner!"

You should remember that, as you do not abandon yourself completely to God in a given moment and have it remain a fixed state of abandonment for the rest of your life, so entering into the state of contemplation and way of purer faith does not happen in one given moment, never to return to meditation. At times meditation will be possible and even desirable. At other times reading a few prayers at the beginning to "localize" yourself before God's majesty and glory may be helpful. To avail yourself to the invocation of the Name of Jesus in the "Jesus Prayer" or some other "mantra" before His Icon is an excellent means of centering yourself before the presence of God.

DISCOURAGEMENT

It is in these beginning stages of entering into the dark desert of contemplation that many Christians become discouraged and give up moving deeper into non-mental prayer. Such discouragement can take many forms and can lead to many other problems in your prayer life. You can readily understand why you must be constantly on your guard to fight discouragement in prayer. We are dealing with a relationship between ourselves and God in the related atmosphere of deeper faith.

Such a state of remaining concentrated in faith, hope and love before God without any images, words or feelings is hardly a state "natural" to us, at least for most of our life before this stage has been reached in prayer. We are born with a tendency to take charge of our lives, to make decisions with ourselves as the center of focus, not God. To go to prayer daily and seek constantly to surrender in faith to the loving presence of God whom we cannot see with our senses is a wearing process that tears down our bodies and brings discouragement to our minds.

But discouragement often can come from our lack of inner discipline, from sloth, from self-centeredness, all of which, in the beginning stages of prayer, seek things such as consolations and insights from God. Little by little we slack off in our efforts to prepare ourselves for our daily encounter with the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With little "success," judged from our own selfish criteria, we fall victim to discouragement and often cut down our prayer time, if we do not completely give it up.

You may have doubts in such a simplified prayer of faith that you are really praying at all. There are a few concrete acts to fall back upon to give you some assurance that you are accomplishing anything or that you really are not wasting your time in harmful emptiness. Yet your activity consists precisely now in pushing your will to become more united in deeper faith, hope and love with that of God, even though there may be extreme dryness and even harmless distractions that cannot be avoided. It is to be expected, as you stop using your discursive powers of intellect, will and imagination, that there will be much wandering of these facilities in search of images and ideas upon which to feed.

A NEGATIVE ELEMENT

Such a prayer of faith has a negative element of slowing down the use of these facilities. A definite purgation process takes place. Even though the thought of God does not necessarily bring any consolation, faith is being exercised in a new way, freed from any ideas or words. The most evident purgation takes place in what St. John of the Cross describes: "Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, He does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything."

We must actively intensify our activities and reflections on our daily living to check whether there are any sinful attachments or imperfections that are possibly at the root of such dryness.

Abandonment to God in contemplation avoids the errors of Quietism that so wrongly gave up all activity on the part of the contemplative, especially in the area of self-examination. Such erroneous teaching held that true abandonment meant abandonment of self-activity and that sinful actions committed in such a state of deep, faithful abandonment would not be true sins.

The true *apophatic* (negative) theology of the Eastern Fathers is best expressed in the classical work of Pseudo-Dionysius of the 6th century who describes the knowing by unknowing: "...and then it (God's presence in darkness) breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate into the Darkness of unknowing, wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is Unknowable of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding." Saint Paul instructs us; "Therefore I ask that I may not grow weary in my afflictions for your sakes, which is for your happiness; for this cause I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for Whom all fatherhood in heaven and in earth is named, to grant you according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit, that Christ may dwell in your inner man by faith, and in your hearts by love, strengthening your understanding and your foundation, so that you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the height and depth and length and breadth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3: 13-19).

A POSITIVE ELEMENT

Even though there seemingly is a negative presence of God to your senses, especially to your discursive faculties, there is however an inexplicable sense of the presence of God in a new and more hidden, yet more direct and immediate, manner. This is the work of the Holy Spirit pouring into your being a deeper infusion of faith by which you can "see" God. Leonard Boase describes this as a "sixth sense": "It is a communion with God in which the soul is aware of His reality and of His presence by a sort of 'sixth-sense' or 'second-sight' or 'telepathy' which is specifically different from the kind of certainty that He exists attained by logical demonstration. It is a certainty different also from the assent of faith given by Christians in every day conditions; but it differs from this not specifically, but only because that same certainty of faith has moved, so to speak, into the sensitive focus of consciousness."

You can see how your life can change as your prayer moves into purer faith. God becomes the center of your life and all your striving. You praise God, not because He is good to you; but an increase of faith and hope and love now allows you to praise Him in every event, whether it be pleasant or unpleasant; whether in prayer you are bathed in consolation or desolation. In all things you praise Him because you desire to do so since God is desired, not for what He can do for you, but sheerly because He is Goodness in Himself and infinitely loving. "Let every thing that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalms 150:6). "Be joyful always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ concerning you" (1 Thess. 5: 16-18).

DISTRACTIONS

Distractions are anything on a body, soul or spirit level that enters into your communication and communion with God. Voluntarily or involuntarily willed by you, they can prevent you from being attentive in faith, hope and love to God. Distractions tend to dissipate your attention to God and therefore defeat the prime purpose of prayer: to lift your mind and heart up to God in

loving surrender and adoration. “and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be in your heart: and you shall repeat them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut. 6: 5-6).

Most distractions are considered by spiritual writers as involuntary and arise from your mental concentration in praying to God in faith. You can see how you experience distractions in most of your mental work, even outside of formal prayer-activity. Your mind is racing at a very rapid rate of brainwave activity as you employ your imagination and understanding to make contact with God. As you move away from discursive prayer, all the more should you expect your mind to invite distractions.

This state of deeper faith-prayer invites distractions especially from the psychic material that has been stored up in your unconscious for many years, and still today remains in constant association with endless input through television, music, movies, advertisement, marketing, videos, constant communication through cell phones and world-wide internet connection, and commercialism to name a few. You would be naïve, knowing the laws of nature not to agree that there would be many thoughts, like idle reveries, dreaming aloud, even sexual feelings that could distract you from prayer by influencing the entire body powerfully.

Distractions can come also from outside of yourself. Atmospheric conditions can affect your body and mind, setting up distracting thoughts that make it difficult to focus upon God in prayer. Noises around you, in church or in your icon corner when you pray in secret, can often disturb you and take you away from adoring God.

Involuntary distractions can never in themselves take you away from centering upon God. They cannot touch your will to surrender in love to Him. The secret is not to fight such a distraction with a mental turning toward it which compounds the distraction by taking you even further from prayer.

Voluntary distractions in prayer, something that you freely and deliberately focus upon with attention, seem like contradictions in prayer; for either we want to pray or we do not want to pray. If we want to be attentive to something else, then evidently we do not want to be attentive to God. Prayer ceases when we sincerely no longer wish to communicate with God in loving adoration.

SOME HELPS

1. One help that can minimize the voluntary distractions in prayer is your immediate preparation as you enter into prayer. Seek to be reverent in prayer, controlling your external senses, placing your body in relaxed but prayerful attitude. Standing in prayer is frequently preferred since it permits the freedom for bowing, reverences and the beginning position for prostration.

2. Make a purifying intention as to what you are about to do in prayer. You desire in spite of any distractions to adore God and to be “present” in loving surrender to His Glory and Majesty.

3. When involuntary distractions seemingly carry you away from the focus of God, gently but firmly move back into the orthodox faith of the Church by centering upon God’s presence. Often you can gently turn the distraction toward God in a plea of humility and of trust in Him to come to your assistance.

4. Often the ejaculation of the Name of Jesus or some other simple form of God’s Name, when uttered with childlike love, will be sufficient to bring you back to God’s presence.

5. Many of your distractions will arise unconsciously from your deep concern about the routine of daily work activities or some plaguing worry and anxiousness. If such thoughts and worries haunt you during your prayer-period, it is often good to turn to a different form of

prayer, one that engages your senses and mental faculties more fully. Reading a prayer slowly or a passage from Holy Scripture or the wisdom of the Desert Fathers or the lives of the Saints or even making worry “itself” the subject of a surrendering act of prayer can often make a difference.

DRYNESS

I have already touched briefly on this topic of dryness. It is a state in which your former sensible and spiritual consolations, the affections experienced in prayer before, seem to have disappeared. In varying intensity dryness seems to be a dark cloud that covers the light of God’s presence.

Let us touch on dryness that results from your deliberate negligence, remotely or proximately, toward putting God at the center of your life. Dom Belorgey, OCSO, distinguishes between *obscurity* and *vagueness*. In obscurity you truly desire to pray in spite of complete darkness and dryness. You stretch out in will to embrace God and to surrender to Him, even though He does not seem to be present.

But in vagueness, even though psychologically there is the same dryness and apparent absence of God, you yield to mental wanderings, reveries. You give up desiring to stretch out in darkness to possess God. Instead, you yield to a void feeling. You remain locked inside of nothingness. You do not desire to push beyond by faith in total surrender to God. “Jesus said to him, if you can believe, everything is possible to him who believes. And immediately the father of the boy cried out weeping and said, I do believe, help by little faith” (Mark 9: 23-24).

Vagueness shows itself during the day’s activities. Where your treasure is, there is your heart or your consciousness. If you do not have a desire to seek God during your activities throughout the day, such a lack of inner attentiveness will return in prayer. “For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a good hope at the end. Then you shall call upon Me and pray to Me. And when you shall seek Me with all your heart, you shall find Me, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 29: 11-13). When over a long period of such infidelity to God you catch yourself and wish to return in fervor to God in prayer, it is advised that you return to a level of prayer that will involve your self again in a faith presence to God, even if this means to return to discursive prayer or to reading prayers. Learn to live with obscurity but avoid vagueness.

Allowing God to do with you what He wills through this dryness, discouragement and darkness is allowing yourself to become a pilgrim in the desert. The desert seems to be an endless waste, an expanse without water and nourishment. But you as pilgrim find a watering hole, an “oasis” in your journey as you immerse yourself through prayer into oneness with your God. You are not lost in aridity but are “found” in a new life when through your brokenness you let go of the “so-called” control you exercise over God and move into contemplative prayer through deeper faith, hope and love.

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPLATION FROM THE DESERT FATHERS

From: *Pilgrimage of the Heart*
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By Fr. George A. Maloney
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APOPHATIC THEOLOGY: KNOWING BY NOT KNOWING

By thy persistent commerce with the mystic visions, leave behind both sensible perceptions and intellectual efforts, and all objects of sense and intelligence, and all things not being and

being, and be raised aloft unknowingly to the union as far as attainable, with Him who is above every essence and knowledge...for by the restless and absolute ecstasy in all purity, from thyself and all, thou will be carried on high, to the super essential ray of the Divine Darkness, when thou has cast away all, and become free from all. **(Dionysius Pseudo-Aeropagite)**

Then he (Moses) is freed from them who are both seen and seeing, and enters into the gloom of the *Agnosia*: a gloom veritably mystic, within he closes all perceptions of knowledge and enters into the altogether impalpable and unseen, being wholly of Him who is beyond all, and of none, neither himself nor other; and by inactivity of all knowledge, united in his better part to the altogether Unknown, and by knowing nothing, knowing above the mind. **(Dionysius Pseude-Aeropagite)**

Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through the sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. This awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look toward what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was (Exod. 20:21). **(St. Gregory of Nyssa)**

The Bride is surrounded with the divine night in which the Bridegroom comes near without showing Himself...but by giving the soul a certain sense of His presence while fleeing from clear knowledge. **(St. Gregory of Nyssa)**

And thus the soul, slipping at every point from what cannot be grasped, becomes dizzy and perplexed and returns once again to what is connatural to it, content now to know merely this about the Transcendent, that it is completely different from the nature of things that the soul knows. **(St. Gregory of Nyssa)**

From the sacred text is here teaching us that spiritual knowledge first occurs as an illumination in those who experience it. Indeed, all that is opposed to piety is conceived of as darkness; to shun the darkness is to share in the light. But as the soul makes progress, and by a greater and more perfect concentration comes to appreciate what the knowledge of truth is, the more it approaches this vision, and so much the more does it see that the divine nature is invisible. It thus leaves all surface appearances, not only those that can be grasped by the senses but also those which the mind itself seems to see, and it keeps on going deeper until by the operation of the Spirit it penetrates the invisible and incomprehensible, and it is there that it sees God. The true vision and the true knowledge of what we seek consists precisely in not seeing, in an awareness that our goal transcends all knowledge and is everywhere cut off from us by the darkness of incomprehensibility. Thus that profound evangelist, John, who penetrated into this luminous darkness, tells us that no man hath seen God at any time (John 1:18), teaching us by this negation that no man---indeed no created intellect---can attain a knowledge of God. **(St. Gregory of Nyssa)**

And then it (God's presence in darkness) breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate into the darkness of unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding.

(Dionysius Pseude-Aeropagite)

For those who have been purified by *hesychia* (stillness, peace, tranquility referring to inner integration between body, soul and spirit in Christ as the fulfillment of God's plan to create us according to his own image and likeness) know that the Divine surpasses these contemplations and these initiations and so possesses that grace supra-intelligible and super-additional in a way that surpasses us; they possess it not because they do not see after the fashion of those who practice negative theology, but because there is in the very vision which they know, something which surpasses vision, by undergoing negation and not by conceiving it. Just as the act of undergoing and seeing divine things differs from cataphatic theology and is superior to it, so does the act of undergoing negation in spiritual visions, negation linked to the transcendence of the Object, differ from negative theology and is superior to it. **(St. Gregory Palamas)**

THEOLOGY

Our intellect often finds it hard to endure praying because of the straightness and concentration which this involves; but it joyfully turns to theology because of the broad and unhampered scope of divine speculation. Therefore, so as to keep the intellect from expressing itself too much in words or exalting itself unduly in its joy, we should spend most of our time in prayer, in singing psalms and reading the Holy Scriptures, yet without neglecting the speculations of wise men whose faith has been revealed in their writings. In this way we shall prevent the intellect from confusing its own utterances with the utterances of grace, and stop it from being led astray by self-esteem and dispersed through over-elation and loquacity. In the time of contemplation, we must keep the intellect free from all fantasy and image, and so ensure that with almost all our thoughts we shed tears...There is, moreover, a prayer which is above even the broadest scope of speculation; but this prayer is granted only to those who fully and consciously perceive the plenitude of God's grace within them.

At the start of the spiritual way, the soul usually has the conscious experience of being illuminated with its own light through the action of grace. But, as it advances further in its struggle to attain theology, grace works its mysteries within the soul for the most part without its knowledge. Grace acts in these two ways so that it may first set us rejoicing on the path of contemplation, calling us from ignorance to spiritual knowledge, and so that in the midst of our struggle it may then keep this knowledge free from arrogance...

Spiritual knowledge teaches us that, at the outset, the soul in pursuit of theology is troubled by many passions, above all by anger and hatred. This happens to it not so much because the demons are arousing these passions, as because it is making progress...The theologian whose soul is gladdened and kindled by the oracles of God comes, when the time is ripe, to the realm of dispassion; for it is written: "The oracles of the Lord are pure, as silver when tried in fire, and purged of earth" (Psalm 12:6). The gnostic, for his part, rooted in his direct experience of spiritual knowledge, is established above the passions. The theologian, if he humbles himself, may also savor the experience of spiritual knowledge, while the gnostic, if he acquires faultless discrimination, may by degrees attain the virtue of theological contemplation. These two gifts, theology and gnosis, never occur in all their fullness in the same person; but theologian and gnostic each marvel at what the other enjoys to a greater degree, so that humility and desire for holiness increase in both of them. That is why the Apostle says: "For to one is given by the Spirit the principle of wisdom; to another the principle of spiritual knowledge by the same Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:8). **(St. Diadochus of Photike)**

A DIAPHANOUS GOD

He preserves his soul undefiled, who compels his mind to think of God and of His perfections, who uses his speech for rightly interpreting and expounding these perfections, and who has taught his senses to look rightly on the visible world and all therein and to proclaim to the soul the greatness of the intelligence there concealed. **(St. Maximus the Confessor)**

My thoughts dwelt constantly on the Jesus Prayer and I felt a great joy. From that time on I began to experience occasionally a great many different sensations in my heart and my mind. Now and then my heart would brim over with happiness overwhelmed by such lightness, freedom and solace that I was all changed and enraptured. At times I felt a glowing love for Jesus Christ and all God's creatures; and my eyes filled with tears of gratitude to God, who poured His grace on me, a great sinner. **(The Pilgrim)**

After these words I looked in his face and there came over me an even greater reverential awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of his midday rays, the face of the man who talks with you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone grasp your shoulders; yet you do not see the hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several years around and throwing a sparkling radiance across the snow blanket on the glade and into the snowflakes which besprinkled the great elder and me. Can you imagine the state in which I then found myself? **(A Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov with Motovilov)**

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

Fr. John Michael Zboyovski