

## **INSCAPE May, 2013**

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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!**

Throughout his many decades of teaching and directing retreats on the Christian Spiritual Life, Fr. George Maloney continually heard the desperate cry: "Teach me how to pray in a contemplative manner. What must I do that I am not doing now? Is there a special way of doing it? Do you have any practical techniques that will help me to become a contemplative?"

This month's *Inscape* will offer some very practical suggestions on how to form and develop a contemplative prayer-group. But the reader must have clearly in mind the interrelationships between material aids, techniques in prayer and the free gift of God's presence through the infusion of His Holy Spirit in the gifts of faith, hope and love.

Some bodily and psychic aids can be of great help in entering into a deeper awareness of God's presence that is always an abiding sameness of infinite love. We are "whole" persons when we enter into prayer---persons of body, soul and spirit relationships. St. Paul describes man in a process of becoming holy and blameless, "spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). It is only natural that material aids can help us to move from one level to another in a fuller integration of our total human nature in order to pray more completely as individuals meeting our unique, personalized God. We are in need of signs and symbols drawn from our experience in the world. Such signs as light, darkness, fire and breath are perceived as filled with spiritual meaning and they act on our consciousness.

We should, therefore, not be in fear of such techniques if they truly do help us to pray better. Christians down through the centuries have always used them. They learned that we all have to quiet our inner, psychic world and this can be done easily by rhythmic breathing and other centering techniques. But there are some important principles to keep in mind:

God wishes to give Himself to us directly through an immediate experience. This communication is made to us as whole human beings. We need to prepare ourselves through the ascetical life and psychosomatic techniques.

Yet these are means; God's grace is a sheer gift.

Let us explore this group technique as a means given to us by God.

### **DEVELOPING A CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER GROUP**

May I first remind everyone that *Inscape* is about man and God growing together in a synergy. Man descends to the valleys and plains of his mind and finds God there in all of his human experiences, stored up in his consciousness and unconscious. He discovers God in the valleys and plains of this earth, in the market place of his daily labors, in the sacredness of his family life at home, in the joys and sufferings that each day brings him.

But God is to be discovered "inside" of matter, through His dynamic Uncreated Energies of Divine Life and Love, as He and man cooperate to transform the materiality of this world into a realized, spiritual presence of God within the human community. Yet how few human beings, even Christians, can find God in matter with any consistent ease and habitual attitude? God is always present to us. Are we present to God?

As you and many others are encouraged more and more to pursue your God-given desire for a deeper, more contemplative prayer-life, you find that you have a strong need to share that desire with others. We can also say, what the apostle Philip said to Nathanael when Our Lord called him immediately to follow Him, "We have found that Jesus, the son of Joseph, of

Nazareth, is the one concerning whom Moses wrote in the law and the prophets” (John 1:45). This need can be met by urging such persons to form themselves with you into intimately loving and sharing groups. An individual, praying in a contemplative manner, has continued need of a support group and proper spiritual guidance. The Holy Spirit will guide such sincere persons, but usually in the context of a small, intimate, loving group of persons deeply committed to study, share and pray together. Discernment will be found in prayer as all the members of this small group seek in love to help each other grow and advance in the spiritual life and understanding and acting in all things according to God’s Holy Will. There is also the need for such groups to be in touch with the discernment that derives from the Church’s Sacred Traditions and teachings about prayer from the Desert Fathers, those experienced guides and masters in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. Many tools are available for contemplative prayer groups, such as the numerous books, CD’s and videos by outstanding spiritual teachers throughout the world. The Internet can also be an instrument to help such groups to be in touch with the total Church in its guidance and encouragement toward a deeper prayer-life.

The aims of such a group of individuals seriously committed in love and service to each other can be primarily:

To build each other up by mutual study, sharing and praying over teachings given through books and CD’s that deal with the spiritual life.

Mutually to share your faith vision with others; above all, to be a healing and loving listener to the others in the group.

To assist in the process of listening to the main spiritual director of the group, the Holy Spirit, and help in the discernment for the group and the individuals in the group.

Above all, to pray and worship together as a group, especially in silent, contemplative prayer before Icons which manifest “presence” and “communion”.

This type of prayer will be very demanding to remain faithfully committed to meeting with others. The small intimate group design is a great aid for sharing on a deep spiritual level. Disciplines should be introduced to help the group remain constant toward the prime purpose in coming together.

In keeping discipline simple and serious, the gathering should not be a coffee and cake social which can lapse into “holy gossip”. The entire meeting time should be for that which is strictly “spiritual things”. Remember in your prayers those who cannot attend the gatherings because of work or other responsibilities. Remember by name, all those who have asked you to pray for them.

## **FORMAT**

The format that a given meeting will observe will depend greatly upon the maturity and the needs of the group. Basically, the membership should be made up of like-minded persons who are more or less on a similar level of the spiritual life. A serious commitment should be made by each member to the group and a time and place chosen that will be convenient for all. The size could be from two members to twelve. Beyond this number of members intimacy fades off into impersonalism.

The setting for the meeting should be a quiet, maybe, a carpeted area. Cushions should be available for those who prefer to sit on the floor, to have the sense of literally being “grounded” in the Lord. For the others, chairs with straight backs should be available, so that the members can form a circle. Members should move into the appointed place when all have arrived, and there enter into a deep sense of quiet and peaceful presence to God among them.

## TECHNIQUES

If we claim to be true Christians, we must live the Incarnational spirituality of Jesus Christ, totally God in Divine Nature and totally man in Human Nature, existing in His person because of the cooperation of Mary the Theotokos, in God's plan of salvation. Matter as God creates it, is not only good, but very good "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen. 1:31). It can, therefore, especially since the Incarnation, become a meeting place with the Divine. We cannot ignore the material world around us, especially the fact that we are made up of matter.

The Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox have always maintained a healthy use of material techniques in their prayer-life, bodily gestures, the use of singing, chanting and music, use of bread and wine, oil, holy water, touch in healing, use of candles etc. Should we, therefore, fear techniques for becoming quieted, techniques that we can find employed by all humans, regardless of country and religion?

Therefore, the coming together as a group can be facilitated to reach that inward stillness by encouraging each of the members to select the position or posture for prayer, listening and sharing that is most conducive to him or her for concentration and listening to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Some may prefer to sit on cushions in the *lotus* or *semi-lotus* position or any simple sitting posture on the floor while still others may prefer to sit upon a straight back chair, or even at times, remain standing.

Centering prayer techniques that combine rhythmic breathing with the use of a *mantra* or Christian phrase, especially the name of Jesus, can be very effective in bringing the entire group to God, their Center. Perhaps a burning candle in dim lighting, incense, soft uplifting music or recorded monastic chanting can be used to silence the hearts of the members as they become recollected as a group.

We should always keep in mind that techniques are never in themselves prayer but can be powerful aids to center us and silence our distracted minds and hearts so that we can pray with greater concentration and a fuller consciousness of God's loving presence. The ultimate worth of any technique must be measured by the fruit produced. A technique has no meaning unless we ask the questions: "How is it being used by me? What are the fruits that come from such use? Does it help me and the other members in the group to pray with greater consciousness of the centrality of God among us?"

## STUDY-TIME

Study about the literature, liturgical worship in hymns and poems, and the teachings of Christian spiritual leaders from the past to the present is an important part of a community bonded together in love to be guided by the Spirit. That Spirit operates in like manner in your life as He has operated in the lives of earlier Christians. There are some very definite principles in the spiritual life that must not only be studied by serious-minded Christians but must be applied to their daily living.

St. Paul exhorts Christians to such serious study. "Finally, my brethren, whatever is true (Orthodox), whatever is honest, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report; if there is any virtue and if there is any praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). Study allows us to change our negative habits of thought and replace them with a renewing of the mind, "Do not imitate the way of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). Through studying the teachings of Spirit-filled instructors, we can share in the Spirit's guidance and thus prevent ourselves from falling into error. This is so very important in the area of contemplative prayer.

In any given period of study, whether it is done communally in your prayer-group or individually, there are four steps that are important to ensure serious and successful study.

First, **Repetition** is a way of re-fashioning a new thought pattern or an insight. You have certainly noticed how often commercial ads and marketing techniques repeat the brand name. Repetition is the mother of learning. It would be good for the members of your prayer-group to know in advance what will be the topic to be studied during the next meeting. If it is a definite material to be gone over, such as a chapter from an author's writings or recordings, efforts should be made to provide members of the prayer-group with such material in advance of the meeting.

Secondly, **Concentration** both in private and in communal study is most necessary in order that the attention of the individual may be completely centered on the given topic. Centering prayer in deep quiet before the study part of the meeting will be a great help, as also will be the general tenor of quiet and peace maintained throughout the meeting.

Thirdly, **Comprehension** brings the truth contained in the teaching into your intellectual grasp. It unfolds in greater insights and applications that will come forth in the sharing segment of the meeting. Such richness will then be brought into your daily living, but all depending on the degree of your comprehension.

Fourthly, **Reflection** is demanded even during the period of study. This reflection pushes you to connect things you already have studied and made a part of your life with what you are now studying. In a Christian prayer-group it is important to reflect in order to see the studied material in the light of God's revealed truth. Reflection calls for humility as we place ourselves in the attitude of students eager to acquire new knowledge, to admit before others and, above all, God, that there is so much more to learn, and to enrich our lives with these new truths.

Concretely, when it is time to move into the study portion of the meeting, the one in charge can carefully go over the topic, either by reading what it is hoped the members have already read thoroughly at home or by listening to a recording of a highly respected spiritual teacher. Persons can take notes on insights discovered in the reading or applications to their own personal life or the tenor of that prayer-group.

The following is a time honored sequence in the gaining of any form of knowledge. Knowledge to be experienced must begin in the atmosphere of **silence**. This knowledge must be **learned** and then **remembered**. It is through recall and remembering that **practicing** the use of this enlightenment can then take place. Only after this sequence, can one then develop the ability to **teach** others.

## SHARING ONE'S FAITH

Your reaction to the study portion of the meeting should lead you and the other members to want to share your faith-experiences as they touch the matter discussed. This takes humility, courage and love that builds up the Body of Christ. Here the one in charge of the meeting must have presence of mind and discretion to keep any member from monopolizing the sharing; above all, from turning the period into a selfish aggrandizement or "ego trip."

Such sharing is given as briefly as possible with humility and sincerity and, of course, let it be pertinent to the material at hand!

## SILENT PRAYER

A good period of time, at least one half-hour of silent prayer should be the climax of the meeting. Let the members again become centered on the Indwelling Trinity through the use of techniques earlier discussed. For some, soft music can be used if the group through experience finds it helpful. Usually, the majority, from my personal observations, prefer

complete silence at this time.

In contemplative prayer, the accent is not on your “doing” through the use of your discursive powers of memory, imagination, understanding and will. The purpose of the period of study and sharing has brought the members of the group to the “still-point” where the Holy Spirit comes to the rescue when you do not know how to pray as you ought “likewise the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know what is right and proper for us to pray for; but the Spirit prays for us with that earnestness which cannot be described. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, for the Spirit prays for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8: 26-27). It would be good to fix your attention on the Indwelling Trinity by using a mantra as you mentally speak it softly within and synchronize it with your breathing. Let even good thoughts pass through your consciousness as you gently move closer to God, your Center. Do not be anxious to “think.” You have done enough of that. Rest in the truth studied. Let it be the water in which you swim. Do not worry about mental images. Let go of all thoughts and images and merely maintain an inner attitude of complete, open receptivity to God’s in-filling presence. You seek to remain fixed through faith, hope and love upon God’s loving presence as Father, Son and Spirit within you. Move gently away from your rational “speaking” to God through ideas, feelings and images to remain humbly on a meta-rational listening level as God speaks His word to you through His Holy Spirit.

### **INTERCESSORY PRAYER**

The final section, as the participants come out of their silent oneness with God and each other, should be a period of intercessory prayer for the individual needs of the members, their families and friends and the needs of human beings throughout the world. This facilitates a return to the larger experience of Church and of the world. Prayers for the departed must always be included. Every human being is a member of the same family, the Body of Christ, including both those now living on the face of this earth and those who have passed beyond the bounds of the physical universe. All are alive in Christ, there is no separation. All creation meets at God’s altar during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Timothy, St. Paul reminds all of us: “I beseech you, therefore, first of all to offer to God, petitions, prayers, supplications, and thanksgiving for all men. For kings and for all in authority; that we may live a quiet and peaceable life, in all purity and Godliness. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, Who desires all men to be saved and to return to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2: 1-5).

We do not understand exactly how such prayers of ours benefit the departed. We do not investigate. We pray for all because we love them as God loves them. Christ is risen from the dead, bestowing life to all those in the tombs.

### **SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN A GROUP**

It must be emphasized I am not proposing spiritual direction as the primary scope of your coming together in a prayer-group. It must be emphasized that all members, being aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit during the meeting, can act as vehicles of the guidance of the Spirit for the needs of the group, as well as, those of each individual.

Let us be aware of the healing that comes in a prayer-group when individuals follow St. James’ instructions: “confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man is powerful (James 5:16).

When we come together, we are first a sinful people. By acknowledging this in a group both communally and individually, we become freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and

open ourselves to great inner healing. Such healing can be extended by the members to an individual of the group by actually laying hands on a fellow member in need and praying for healing of body, soul and spirit.

### **AN “UPPER ROOM”**

As Christians living in the world today, we all need an “upper room” where we can join together in prayer. Such an “upper room” community established for your contemplative prayer group’s use, will fill a need not only for you to pray together, but to build a community of close, personal relationships founded on the love of God and each other. As the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Apostles gathered together after the Ascension of Jesus, so too we need to come into a “special place” to set aside time to be still and know that He is God. We need to listen to the sound of the “strong driving wind” of the Spirit, so that we can become open vessels, receptive to the infilling of His Spirit of Love “then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount which is called Olivet, Place of Olives, which is near to Jerusalem, about a mile away. And after they had entered into the city, they went into an upper room, where stayed Peter and John and James and Andrew, and also Philip and Thomas and Matthew and Bartholomew and James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judah the son of James. These all came together in prayer with one accord, also the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1: 12-14).

### **REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPLATION FROM THE DESERT FATHERS**

*From: Pilgrimage of the Heart*  
A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality  
Edited, with Introduction and Epilogue  
By Fr. George A. Maloney  
Harper and Row, Publishers

Therefore we must learn first of all that we ought always to pray and not to faint. For the effect of prayer is union with God, and if someone is with God, he is separated from the enemy...Prayer is the delight of the joyful as well as solace to the afflicted.

Prayer is intimacy with God and contemplation of the invisible. Through it good prospers, evil is destroyed, and sinners will be converted...of all the things valued in this life nothing is more precious than prayer. **(St. Gregory of Nyssa).**

Someone approaches God in prayer, but failing to appreciate the exalted greatness whom he is addressing, unwittingly insults His majesty with nothing but base petitions. It is just as if a very poor and uneducated man who thought earthenware precious, approaches a king who had decided to distribute riches and honors. But the poor man would not make requests worthy of the king, but ask from so great a personage to take clay and make it into something according to his own mind. In the same way, the man who makes prayer without being properly taught, will not lift himself up to the height of the Giver, but wants the Divine power to descend to the mean, earthly level of his own desires. Therefore, he offers unruly cravings to Him who sees into the hearts, not desiring Him to heal the perverse movements of his mind, but to make them worse, for through the help of God the evil desire would become a fact. Because someone gives me pain and my heart hates him it says to God: Strike him; almost crying out: Let my own passion be in Thee, and may my wickedness pass over into Thee. Obviously, just as in human fights one cannot support one of the parties without sharing in the anger of the person who is infuriated against his opponent, thus it is also clear that he who tries to set God against his enemy asks Him to share his own angry excitement. But this means that the Divine should succumb to passion, behave in a human manner and change from His own natural goodness into the ferocity of a beast. **(St. Gregory of Nyssa).**

Prayer by reason of its nature is the converse and union of man with God, and by reason of its action upholds the world and brings about reconciliation with God; it is the mother and daughter of tears...the propitiation for sins...enlightening of the mind...invisible progress...reduction of anger...the mirror of progress...a proof of one's condition...a revelation of the future...a sign of Glory. For him who truly prays, prayer is the court, the judgment hall and the tribunal of the Lord before the judgment to come. **(St. John Climacus).**

Let your prayer be completely simple. For both the publican and the prodigal son were reconciled to God by a single phrase. The attitude of prayer is one and the same for all, but there are many kinds of prayer and many different prayers.

Do not attempt to talk much when you pray, lest your mind be distracted in searching for words. One word of the publican propitiated God, and one cry of faith saved the thief. Loquacity in prayer often distracts the mind and leads to fantasy, whereby brevity makes for concentration.

Try to lift up, or rather, to shut off your thought within the words of your prayer, and if in its infant state it wearies and falls, lift it up again...If you persevere indefatigably in this labor, He who sets the bounds of the sea of the mind will visit you too, and during your prayer will say to the waves: Thus far shall you come, but no farther (Job 38:11). Spirit cannot be bound; but where the Creator of the spirit is, everything obeys. **(St. John Climacus).**

Prepare your self for your set times of prayer by unceasing prayer in your soul, and you will soon make progress. I have seen these who shone in obedience and who tried, as far as they could, to keep in mind the remembrance of God, and the moment they stood in prayer they were at once masters of their minds, and shed streams of tears; because they were prepared for this beforehand by holy obedience. **(St. John Climacus).**

The highest state of prayer, it is said, is when the mind while praying leaves the flesh and the world and is completely devoid of matter and form. He who keeps this state inviolate truly prays without ceasing. **(St. Maximus the Confessor).**

Prayer is a continual intercourse of the spirit with God. What state of soul then is required that the spirit might thus strain after its Master without wavering, living constantly with him without intermediary?

Stand resolute, fully intent on your prayer. Pay no heed to the concerns and thoughts that might arise the while. They do nothing better than disturb and upset you so as to dissolve the fixity of your purpose.

Strive to render your mind deaf and dumb at the time of prayer and then you will be able to pray.

When prayer knocks on the door hard enough it will be opened.

Pray not to this end, that your own desires be fulfilled. You can be sure that they do not fully accord with the will of God. Once you have learned to accept this point, pray instead that "thy will be done" in me.

Do not be overanxious and strain yourself so as to gain immediate hearing for your request. The Lord wishes to confer greater favors than those you ask for, in reward for your perseverance in praying to Him.

Prayer is an ascent of the spirit to God.

Whether you pray along with the brethren or alone, strive to make your prayer more than a mere habit. Make it a true inner experience.

When you pray keep your memory under close custody. Do not let it suggest your own fancies to you, but rather have it convey the awareness of your reaching out to God. Remember this---the memory has a powerful proclivity for causing detriment to the spirit at the time of prayer.

The state of prayer can be aptly described as a habitual state of imperturbable calm (apatheia).

The man who strives after true prayer must learn to master not only anger and his lust, but must free himself from every thought that is colored by passion.

The man who loves God constantly lives and speaks with him as a Father.

If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.

When your spirit withdraws, as it were, little by little from the flesh because of your ardent longing for God, and turns away from every thought that derives from sensibility or memory or temperament and is filled with reverence and joy at the same time, then you can be sure that you are drawing near that country whose name is prayer.

When you are praying do not fancy the Divinity like some image formed within yourself. Avoid also allowing your spirit to be impressed with the seal of some particular shape, but rather, free from all matter, draw near the immaterial Being and you will attain to understanding.

Stand guard (nepsis) over your spirit, keeping it free of concepts at the time of prayer so that it may remain in its own deep calm. Thus He who has compassion on the ignorant will come to visit even such an insignificant person as yourself, that is when you will receive the most glorious gift of prayer.

You will not be able to pray purely if you are all involved with material affairs and agitated with unremitting concerns. For prayer is the rejection of concepts.

Do not by any means strive to fashion some image or visualize some form at the time of prayer.

Do you wish to pray? Then banish the things of this world. Have heaven for your homeland and live there constantly---not in mere words but in actions that imitate the angels and in a more god-like knowledge.

The value of prayer is found not merely in its quantity but also in its quality. This is made clear by those two men who entered the temple, and also by this saying: "When you pray do not do a lot of empty chattering" (Luke 18:10; Matt. 6:7).

When you give yourself to prayer, rise above every other joy---then you will find true prayer. **(Evagrius).**

We are affected from the very bottom of the heart, so that we get at its meaning (of Holy Scripture) not by reading the text but by experience anticipating it. And so our mind will reach that incorruptible prayer...distinguished by the use of no words or utterances; but with the purpose of the mind all on fire. **(St. John Cassian).**

You should observe three things before all else: freedom from all cares, not only cares about bad and vain but even about good things, or in other words, you should become dead to everything; our conscious should be clear in all things, so that it denounces you in nothing; and you should have complete absence of passionate attachment, so that your thought inclines toward nothing worldly. Keep your attention within yourself (not in your head, but in your heart). Keep your mind there in your heart, trying by every possible means to find the place where the heart is, in order that, having found it, your mind should constantly abide there...From that moment onward, from whatever side a thought may appear, the mind immediately chases it away, before it has had time to enter, and become a thought or an image, destroying it by Jesus' name, the is, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!...one of the holy fathers says: "Sit in your cell and this prayer will teach you everything." **(Nicephorus).**

Prayer is one thing, and contemplation in prayer is another, although prayer and contemplation mutually engender one another. Prayer is sowing, contemplation the reaping of

the harvest, when the reaper is filled with wonder at the ineffable sight of the beautiful ears of corn, which have sprung up before him from the little naked seeds that he sowed. **(St. Isaac the Syrian).**

The highest state of pure prayer has two forms. One belongs to men of active life, the other to men of contemplative life. One is engendered in the soul by fear of God and good hope; the other by love of God and extreme purity. The sign of the first order is when a man collects his mind, freeing it of all worldly thoughts, and prays without distraction and disturbance, as if God Himself were present before him, as indeed He is. The sign of the second is when, in the very act of rising in prayer, the mind is ravished by the Divine boundless light and loses all sensation of itself or of any other creature, and is aware of Him alone, who, through love, has produced in him this illumination. In this state, moved to understand words about God, he receives pure and luminous knowledge of Him. **(St. Maximus the Confessor).**

By fulfilling the commandments, the mind becomes stripped of passions; by spiritual contemplation of the visible it is stripped of passionate representations of things; by knowledge of the invisible it withdraws from contemplation of visible things; finally, by knowledge of the Holy Trinity, it abandons even the knowledge of things invisible. **(St. Maximus the Confessor).**

On True Theology: There are three modes by which knowledge ascends and descends. These modes are: body, soul and spirit. Knowledge is the gift of God to the nature of rational beings and was bestowed on them at their very creation. In its nature it is as simple and indivisible as sunlight, but corresponding to its application it undergoes changes and divisions. Listen to the order of this application.

**The first degree of knowledge.** When knowledge follows desires of the flesh, it embraces the following modes: wealth, vainglory (pride), adornment, bodily comfort, care for book-learning...and all the other things which crown the body in this visible world. Because of these distinctive features knowledge becomes opposed to faith...

**The second degree of knowledge.** When a man renounces the first degree, he becomes occupied with thoughts and desires of the soul; then, in the light of the nature of his soul, he practices the following excellent deeds; fasting, prayer, alms, reading of the Divine Scriptures, virtuous life, struggle with passions and so on. For all the good deeds, all the excellent features seen in the soul and the wonderful means used for serving in the house of Christ in this second degree of knowledge are the work of the Holy Spirit, who lends power to its action...But even here knowledge is still material and multiple. It contains only the way which leads and speeds us toward faith. There is yet a higher degree of knowledge.

**The third degree of knowledge** is the degree of perfection. Hear how a man becomes finer, acquires that which is of the spirit, and in his life comes to resemble the invisible powers, which perform their service not through sensory actions but through vigilance of mind. When knowledge soars above earthly things and the cares of earthly activities, when it begins to experience thoughts belonging to what is within and hidden from the eyes, when it surges upward and follows faith in its solicitude, for the life to come, in its desire for what was promised us, and in searching deeply into the mysteries that are hidden; then faith itself absorbs this knowledge, is transformed and begets it anew, so that this knowledge becomes all spirit. **(St. Isaac the Syrian).**

May God grant to you the wisdom and knowledge of the First Christian Communities,

*Fr. John Michael Zboyovski*