

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!

CONTEMPLATION AND SELF EMPTYING LOVE

As you continue your spiritual journey through this penitential fasting season of Great Lent, this month's *Inscape* will help you focus on the great self-emptying love of God toward you through the sufferings and death of His image (icon), Jesus Christ. This theme is the *kenotic* or emptying, love of Jesus Christ. He is the human expression of the Trinity's great love for us. Both His love and that of the Trinity are measured by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit's outpouring, self-emptying gift of each Person to us. True love always is *kenosis*, as St. Paul describes Christ's love for us in Philippians 2: 6-13.

But both God's love for each other in the Undivided Trinity and for us, and our love in return to God and toward our neighbor are to be rooted in the "pass-over" experience of leaving a position of self-possession to live in loving service to others.

Jesus images God's love, and what our loving service should be like is His living for others in loving compassion. Love with compassion wishes to do all, to accept any and all sufferings, even death, in order to serve the goodness and happiness of another.

CONTEMPLATION AND SELF-EMPTYING LOVE

True love and genuine contemplation are not very much different from each other. Both demand a "pass-over" experience. In true love toward God or another human person and in deeper prayer we need to move away from our ego-centeredness and focus in utter availability and self-giving upon the other, be it God or loved one (neighbor or enemy) in a human relationship. Such love we can call "self-emptying."

St. Paul uses a most ancient Christian hymn to teach the Philippians how they are to be "self-emptying" in true love toward each other. He uses the Greek verb, *kenoo*, to mean simply "to empty" or also "to make void, of no effect."

"Who, being in the form of God (*His state was divine*);

did not consider it robbery to be equal with God (*did not cling to His equality with God*);

But made Himself of no reputation and took upon Himself the form of a servant and was in the likeness of men (*He assumed the condition of a slave, and became as men are*);

And being in the form of a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross (*He was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross*);

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name,

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, of those on earth, and those under the earth (*underworld*);

And every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord (***Kyrios***);

To the Glory of God His Father.

From now on, my beloved, just as you have always been obedient, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with reverence and trembling. For it is God Who inspires you with the will to do the good things which you desire to do" (Philippians 2: 6-13).

I believe most of us have misunderstood this important text to imply merely that Jesus is the pre-existent, eternal Word of God, equal to the Father in His divine nature. He puts aside His powerful, omniscient divinity to take upon Himself our weak humanity. The verb, "He emptied Himself," has no object to tell us of what He has emptied Himself. He empties Himself as one pouring Himself out. He is God! He is love, Incarnate!

WHO SEES ME, SEES THE FATHER

Such an interpretation seems to objectivize the two natures of Christ, divine and human, fully united together through the person of His mother, the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary. We could erroneously consider His divinity as having been put aside and His humanity would exist almost with its own act of existence, separated and independent from His divinity. If Jesus Christ is the true image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), let us see this text as a true manifestation of what the Father is like and what truly constitutes the nature of love within the Trinity.

"But Jesus said to them, My Father works even until now, so I also work. And for this the Jews wanted the more to kill him, not only because he was weakening the Sabbath, but also because he said concerning God that he was his father, and he was making himself equal with God. Jesus answered, saying to them, Truly, truly I say to you that the Son can do nothing of his own accord, except what he sees the Father doing; for the things which the Father does, the same the Son does also. For the Father loves his Son, and he shows him everything that he does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to those whom he will. For the Father does not judge any man, but he has entrusted all judgment to the Son; So that every man should honor the Son, just as he honors the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, He who hears my word and believes him who has sent me has everlasting life; and he does not come before the judgment, but he passes from death to life. Truly, truly I say to you, the time is coming, and it is now already here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear it will live. For as the Father has life in himself, even so he has given to the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given authority to execute also, for he is the Son of man. Do not wonder at this; for the time is coming, when all those who are in their graves will hear his voice" (John 5:16-28).

Precisely because Jesus Christ is in the form of God, "one with God," He lives out, in His incarnational form of the Word made flesh, the essence of God's true love. God is not God because He holds on to His life, always having His own way. He, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, shows us that God is love by self-giving, by being gift to others.

Only by God's becoming a human being and living a life of self-giving, of self-emptying love as a suffering servant for all human beings, but especially the poor, the sick, the outcasts and the sinners, we can come to know the real nature of God as compassionate merciful love. Now we know God is as Jesus lives. Jesus is not so much God because He performs superhuman miracles and healings worthy only of His omnipotence, but because he images God's self-emptying love for all His children.

Because Jesus is the image of God in human form, He shows this not by holding within Himself His power, but He shows Himself as non-grasping, non-self-centered, as a servant to those in need. Emptiness is thus in God a filling up; giving away means truly possessing. Now "losing one's life" in love means to find it in a greater manifestation and enrichment.

All the human limitations mentioned in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians were accepted by Jesus: human weakness, finiteness, temptations and even death. And this acceptance can be seen as a positive expression of His divinity, rather than a negative or curtailing of it. This is "God's foolishness (which) is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25). God's glory is shown in shame and weakness, accepted as self-emptying love for us. God is divine, and also Jesus of Nazareth, because the latter images the former in generous self-giving and not in self-centeredness.

JESUS---FRIEND OF THE OUTCASTS

One word, for me, most adequately expresses Jesus' mirroring to us the passionate love God, the Trinitarian community of perfect and eternal love, has for us. That word is *compassion*. It denotes an active "fellow-sufferer." It means that He took upon Himself the sufferings, pains, limitations and even sins of each of us out of love for us.

Jesus came among men and women, as gentle and kind. He told His followers that they were to give away their lives for love of one another. He was the "friend of sinners," and went about doing good to the consternation of the decadent religious leaders of His time. To any sick or disturbed person He brought comfort and healing. He was meek and humble and wanted no part of Caesar's power. The only power He possessed was love. He loved each person who came into His life with the love of God Himself. He touched the crowds, listened to their anxieties, and forgave their sins. He lived only to bring life, and that most abundantly, to all who wanted it (John 10:10). He was totally available to anyone who needed Him.

He had few disciples because many thought He was mad "Any many of them said, He is insane and rambles; why do you listen to Him" (John 10:20)? At least, like the rich young man, many walked away when He suggested the crazy idea that he who was wealthy should go and sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and follow Him "While he was on the way, a man came running and fell on his knees and asked him, saying O Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit life eternal? Jesus said to him, Why do you call me Good? There is no one who is Good except the one God. You know the commandments? Do not commit adultery, Do not Steal, Do not murder, Do not bear false witness, Do not oppress, Honor your father and mother. But he answered and said to him, Teacher, all of these I have obeyed from my boyhood. Then Jesus looked at him and loved him, and he said to him, you lack one thing; go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and take up your cross and follow me. But he felt sad because of this saying, and he went away depressed; for he had great wealth" (Mark 10:17-22).

Jesus was the most "impractical" person. People were not to worry about what they ate or put on, but they were to seek only the Kingdom of Heaven. But then He did not have a pillow to put His head on at night. His disciples were to love everyone, even those who hated them. But really? And then He absolutely insisted: "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, and bless those who curse you, and pray for those who compel you to carry burdens. And to him who strikes you on the cheek, offer to him the other; and to him who takes away your robe, do not refuse your shirt also. Give to everyone who asks you; and from him who takes away what is yours, do not demand it back again. Just as you want men to do to you, do to them likewise. For if you love those who love you, what is your blessing? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good only to those who do good to you, what is your blessing? For sinners also do the same. And if you lend only to him from whom you expect to be paid back, what is your blessing? For sinners also lend to sinners, to be paid back likewise. But love your enemies and do good to them, and lend and do not cut off any man's hope; so your reward will increase and you will become sons of the Highest; for he is gracious to the wicked and the cruel. Be therefore merciful, as your Father also is

merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you; good measure shaken down and running over they will pour into your robe. For with the measure that you measure, it will be measured to you" (Mark 6:27-38).

His language sounded extravagant, unreal and most impractical. If you had an eye that scandalized you, you were to gouge it out. If you really had faith, you could walk up to a mountain and tell it to move into the sea and it would do just that.

We were to visit the sick, the lonely, those deadly murders in prison and tell them that we loved them. We were to give and give, even losing our lives for others. We were to put aside our parents, brothers and sisters, and follow only Him. We were to be servants to everyone, washing their feet, binding up their wounds, meeting all their needs. For such God does!

And all that He asked of His followers, He did Himself! When He washed the feet of His disciples, He summarized who He was. He was the *Ebed Yahweh*, God's servant, suffering for His people.

Jesus was conscious that everything He did came from His Father. He lived only to please Him and bring Him glory. Jesus reveals an inner consciousness of His ultimate worth and meaning as a human being that derives from His complete dependence on the Father. In deep prayer and great intimacy Jesus would experience the self-giving of His Father, pouring the fullness of divinity into His Son "For in Him is embodied all the fullness of the Godhead" (Colossians 2:9). In His human weaknesses and temptations, He experienced the compassionate love of the Father for Him. And so He strove to live as He experienced the living activities of the emptying, loving Father in His life.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Jesus and His early disciples were aware that His whole mission in life was to serve the Father's will and reveal the Father's love for His creation. But it was clear in the consciousness of Christ made more detailed as He met the unfolding will of His Father each moment of His earthly life, that His service to the Father was a service on behalf of God's children. That service to the Father was a service pushed to such self-forgetting that Jesus would be brought to a free gift of Himself on behalf of the human race. There developed in Jesus an urgency of necessity that eventually His service of compassionate love to mankind would be concretized when He, the Good Shepherd, would lay down His life for all human beings.

The *kerygma* or preaching of the early Church, as found in the Gospel narratives and Pauline writings, clearly attests to the necessity of Jesus to serve unto humiliating death so that He might enter into glory. He Himself explained patiently to the two disciple on the road to Emmaus: "Then Jesus said to them, O dull-minded and heavy-hearted, slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken; Did not Christ have to suffer all these things in order to enter into his glory (Luke 24: 25-26)?

In the Gospel message of good news, Jesus is presented as predicting three times His humiliating death, indicating a certain necessity "From that time Jesus began to make known to his disciples that he would shortly have to go to Jerusalem and suffer a great deal from the elders and the high priests and scribes, and be killed, and rise up on the third day" (Matthew 16:21); "then he began to teach them that the Son of Man would have to suffer a great deal and be rejected by the elders and the high priests and the scribes, and be killed, and rise again on the third day. And he spoke that word openly. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But he turned around and looked on his disciples, and he rebuked Simon, saying, get behind me, Satan; for you are not thinking the things of God, but of men (Mark 8:31-33); "Jesus answered, saying to them, tear down this temple and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19).

It is easy to see in these texts, describing Jesus as suffering servant, the prophetic descriptions in the four songs of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-11; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12).

We learn why Jesus gives pleasure to the Father. He has come to serve with godly compassion the despised ones of the earth, the broken ones, the marginalized in order that we can understand in human communication of actions unto death what God is truly like.

THE LOGIC OF LOVE

We have often ask ourselves the question: "But why the cross? Could God not have been equally pleased that Jesus as servant, merely lived in that lowly state as man? Even if a blood offering were man's most basic symbol of total giving, could not the human race have been redeemed by one drop from the Lamb of God? Why such a prodigality of emptying, to the point of complete dehumanization? Jesus empties Himself not only for His divine glory but goes further even to emptying Himself of all control over His human existence "For he grew up before him like an infant and like a root out of the dry ground; he had no form nor comeliness; and when we saw that he had no beauty, we denied him. He is despised and humbled of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we turned our faces away from him; we despised him and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our sorrows and carried our griefs; but we considered him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was slain for our sins, he was afflicted for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have strayed; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the sins of us all" (Isaiah 53:2-6).

The terrifying sufferings, His service on our behalf, especially in Gethsemane and on Calvary, cannot theologically be understood only by a Western Christian legalistic theory of atonement. There must be more that the Word of God reveals to us in deep contemplation of Christ's sufferings, that only His Holy Spirit can reveal far beyond the reach of our intellect.

Just as our human love knows various degrees of acting out the love we have for one another, so Jesus grew in His freedom to surrender Himself completely to the Father. One returns love to the degree that he/she is aware consciously of how much another loves him/her. Jesus, in His long hours of solitary communion with the Father, must have received progressively deeper and deeper assurances of the Father's infinite love for Him. If mystics could lose consciousness under the ecstasy of God's piercing love for them, what must Jesus have experienced as the burning fire of the Father's love for Him poured over Him filling Him with light? "...Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father, through whom all things were made..." (Nicene-Constantinople Creed AD 325 & 381).

As Jesus experienced in prayerful communion His Heavenly Father's immense love for Him, especially at His Baptism, the forty days alone in the desert, His all-night vigils on the mountaintop, during His public ministry, in the Garden of Gethsemane and in dying on the cross, He grew in His sensitivity to that love and what it was asking of Him by way of a self-emptying in return.

LOVE MEANS SELF-SACRIFICE

Can we not say, therefore, that Jesus, becoming the suffering servant of Yahweh, freely wants to suffer and be poured out as spilt wax only because he wanted His human mind to be the perfect reflection of the Divine mind? His human consciousness was to become one with the consciousness of the Father. Jesus in His service to the world, entering into the very depths of sin and death and utter emptiness of self, was choosing humanly to be as God is in His self-emptying love toward Him. It was and is the most perfect plan of imaging the eternal

love of the Father for you and me. We have no other way of knowing the Father but through the Son. Here we have the perfect expression in human language of the very being of God who is love by nature “God is love” (1John 4:8).

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS EMPTYING LOVE

In our intimate prayer, grounded in ever-deepening faith, hope and love, we open up to God’s burning love and compassion for us in our many weaknesses and failures. You can experience daily as St. Paul did: “For me He dies!” Such an experience leads you into the awesome presence of the Heavenly Father as perfect Holiness, Beauty and Love. You realize that you are *now* being loved by your infinitely loving Father through the service of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, Jesus Christ.

Such a healing of your loneliness and self-absorption suddenly breaks the bonds that hold you imprisoned in your narcissistic prison. It begins a transformation of your entire life which is a process shown by service to others.

You learn to move away from yourself as the center of all your thinking and praying. You center more completely on Christ, who leads you into the similar self-emptying love of the Father and Holy Spirit which He continues to show you as He did in the Gospel, and above all, in His death on the Life-Giving Cross.

Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, let us worship the Holy Lord Jesus, the Only Sinless One. We venerate Your cross, O Christ, and we praise and glorify Your Holy Resurrection. You are our God, we are Your people, we know no other than You, and we call upon Your Name. Come, all faithful, let us venerate the holy Resurrection of Christ. For behold, through the Cross, joy has come to all the world. Blessing the Lord always, let us praise His Resurrection. For enduring the Cross for us, He has destroyed death by death.

(Divine Liturgy - St. John Chrysostom)

Contemplation begins when you let go of your so-called control in prayer, stop your long-winded speeches, above all, cease looking for consolations. As you experience God’s dynamic, self-giving to you, you open up and return yourself as a gift of self-emptying love. There is no need to do anything. You are being transformed and transfigured *into* love and compassion. You have been created in the image and likeness of God!

O Lord, compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and of great mercy, give heed to our prayer, and attend to the voice of our supplication...

O God, the only good and compassionate One, You dwell on high and yet behold the humble. Look with the eye of Your tender mercies upon all Your people and protect them... (from the Divine Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts).

Remember Thy compassions, O Lord, and Thy mercies, for they are from everlasting... All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth, unto them that seek after His covenant and His testimonies... (Third Hour Prayers; Psalm 24).

As you go forth from such deep prayer, you strive to live in compassionate, self-giving love to all. Loving, humble service to all whom you meet is the sign of contemplation for they are the same thing: self-emptying love.

May God’s saving Grace, the loving gift of Himself, be with all of you.

Fr. John Michael Zbojovski