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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!

CONTEMPLATION AS A STRETCHING OUT TOWARD GOD

Life is a journey and we are constantly taking to the road again! A melody comes to our lips. There is a spring to our walk as we set our eyes on the goal again. It is great to be alive. And part of that *joie de vivre* is to stretch out with open arms to embrace life and more abundance of that life. That is why Jesus came among us and why He pours out His Spirit upon us that we might have His life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

We know from our daily experiences shared with our loved ones that love begets love, desire for greater love begets greater desire. Simply put, the more we hunger for God, the more we hunger for God! Blaise Pascal once wrote that all we can really give God is *desire*. Let us desire with desire to journey more deeply into our hearts and there surrender more completely to God's Word, Jesus Christ, dwelling within us with His Father in their mutual Spirit of Love. Let us stretch out toward God in greater consciousness of loving union. Stretching is a sign of a pilgrim in the desert moving with joyful haste to go to Mount Zion, to meet his God in the Temple of the Heavenly Jerusalem. It is also a realistic acceptance of who we are in our historical situation and to stretch in and through those very circumstances to find God in the next step ahead.

In our modern world you and I are experiencing constantly the cry from within ourselves to discover ourselves more and more as unique persons, capable of loving others more intimately and being loved more personally by them. There is now a great need in our de-humanizing society for an "I-Thou," a person-to-person confrontation and mutual sharing within our families, among friends and above all in our prayerful relations with God.

We have engaged in past time in a great deal of repetitions, formal prayer, especially in our liturgical and communal prayers. But today the person is important. You feel that you must be free, free to say your "yes" to God and really mean it. You see that there can be no separation between your prayer-life and your life on the horizontal level of relating to those around you. And so you in your prayer-life feel the need to get down deeper into your intimate self, into that which Eastern Christian writers as well as those who wrote Sacred Scripture call the "heart". This refers as a symbol to that complexity which is not merely your physical heart but is the totality of your being. Standing before God Who is the ground of your being, you look up into His face and say, "Yes! I surrender!" This is the type of total prayer that we are searching for today.

The following familiar example is used to illustrate how we live on different levels of our being: A lake admits of different levels. There is the surface, the rock formation of the lake, the flora, the mud; all are parts of the lake, but these are not quite that which gives to the lake its "lake-ness." That spring bubbling new life into the lake is the source of the lake's being.

In you and me there are the various levels of the senses, emotions, affections, whose reactions often been predetermined through heredity, education and social conditioning. All are parts of you. But still, somehow or other, it is not the real you. You can go down deeper and deeper into the pit of your being until you hit the "bottom." Here you are most free, away from the predeterminations of the senses and the emotions, of your past hurting and painful memories, free to truly confront God and say "yes" to Him with your very being and not merely with some part of your sense life, not with simple words alone or pious sentiments flowing out

of your emotional life.

Even though the “cave” within you be in utter dryness and darkness, yet you call up the whole of your being to respond to God, not once in prayer, but as a continuous state of being. You maintain a constant attitude, a burning desire within your “heart”, your consciousness infused by the Spirit’s faith, hope and love, to stretch out in the totality of your being in self-surrendering love to God. When such a stretching toward God becomes habitual and penetrates every thought, word and deed, you could be called a “contemplative.” Prayer is then not so much a thing you do or words you say. God does not need such things from you. He wishes the gift of yourself so that in your surrender of yourself to Him you can find complete happiness as you live in love of God and neighbor. This is the state of being in communication and communion with God as the ultimate ground of your total being.

In previous Inscape Newsletters, I have described contemplation as basically a look turned toward God in faith, hope and love. It is you standing, as it were, outside of the habitual idea that you have both of yourself and of God. It is getting down below that false ego and reaching into your deepest source where you stand naked before God, consciously turning toward Him as your Source, your Origin in loving surrender.

This looking upon God is, therefore, the essential act of contemplation. It does not consist in having beautiful thoughts, nor in having any emotions, sentiments or piety. It consists fundamentally in standing before God, not with one faculty perceiving some facet of God but with your total being absorbed into the total being of God. It is heart speaking to heart. It is the return of your whole being back to God as a gift that expresses the attitude which we could call worship-prayer, the ultimate point of true love which is called contemplation.

A DIALOGUE IN BEING

True contemplation cannot be found solely in the “give me, give me, Lord,” of petition, nor even in thanksgiving nor even in expiation or sorrow. But it must ultimately overwhelm you in your praise and worship, because you understand from an experience infused into you by the Spirit of God what it means to be a created gift out of God’s personalized love. You begin humbly to understand through faith, hope and love what it means to belong to God. Jesus put it succinctly: “The Father Himself truly loves you” (John 16:27).

God is more intimate to you than you are to yourself, as St. Augustine wrote in the 4th century. The Trinity of Divine Persons, Father, Son and Spirit, live within you and are loving you infinitely at every moment. Nothing can ever separate you from the infinite love of God. This experience can come only in contemplation and you cannot reach this by your own natural powers alone. Only God can reveal Himself to you in a free offering just as only you can surrender yourself freely in love to your best friend.

Thus contemplation is in the form of a dialogue, but one on the level of being. It is not just a banal conversation. You can spend long hours talking to God. You say this; then it is God’s turn to say His part. His part can all too often be what you want God to say. Such a conversation is stacked in your favor, usually toward your “carnal mind,” as St. Paul describes a person not consciously surrendered to the moving presence of the Holy Spirit in prayer. You can spend years in this sort of prayer and it does not perceptibly change your personality. Again St. Paul reminds us, “Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses; 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. And we know that those who love God are helped by Him in everything for good” (Romans 8:26-28).

Does your prayer give you an immersion, an assimilation into God in which you truly understand that you live, no longer you yourself, but God lives in you? (Gal. 2:20). This immersion in God can come only from contemplation, the gift of the Spirit, not from a banal conversation directed by the world's greatest movie director, one's own false ego!

Thus your dialogue with God in prayer must participate in some type of intimate, real relationship that touches the core of your being, not just your intellect, not just your emotions or good sentiments, as would a prayer that might be empty of involvement of being. Contemplation involves your whole being and changes your life in your depths, bringing about a continuous stretching out in a process of growth in surrendering yourself completely to God's direction.

True contemplation is pushing yourself under the movement of God's Spirit toward God as the totally Other and yet as the indwelling Ground of your entire being. In such a state of being, you grow and mature, and yet such a growth admits of an infinity of growth. "But as it is written, the eye has not seen and the ear has not heard and the heart of man has not conceived the things which God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit;..."(1 Cor. 2 9-10). You are what you truly are before God through a gift from God, but it is a gift that is an ongoing process that calls for your constant desire to grow and receive more of God within your consciousness.

Every time you breathe, God is giving forth His word in you. And so you want to return this gift by that complete openness to God that looks into His face and says: "Yes, I am at Your service. Be it done to me according to Your Word." Love must be proved by deeds and the deed is precisely this attitude of complete service toward God Who first has loved you and Whose Spirit drives you out in loving service to your neighbor.

THE JOURNEY OF CONTEMPLATION

If you wish then to start out in search of God on the long, curving road of contemplation, you may feel that you are throwing yourself into the pursuit of the unknowable; that you have only in your favor your great desire to pursue God up the mountain as Moses climbed up Mount Sinai to encounter God in the dark cloud of unknowing. Even this desire has been given to you by the Holy Spirit Who comes to your weakness when you do not know how to pray as you ought "Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses; for we do not know what is right and proper 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). But God hides this fact from you. You think at least you can give Him this desire, you can stretch out in hunger and thirst to possess God, but even this has come from God.

The important thing now as you begin your journey is to desire to listen to God. You want to know Him deeply as person, not as a concept. You wish to destroy the idol you have been creating and call your God. You want to meet the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But He can only be met in the desert of your own being, in the depths where you encounter God in your dread of loss. So few of us have the courage to discipline ourselves to cut ourselves off from all the attachments that build up our self-centeredness, to go out into the desert and be at the mercy of God.

Using the beautiful description of St. Gregory of Nyssa of the 4th century classic on Christian Mysticism, *Life of Moses*, you set off on this search for God and begin ascending the great mountain. You prepare your bags, you saddle up the donkey and set off on the road. You set off at daybreak and it is a great departure. You are saying goodbye. To whom? To what? In a way, to everything and yet, in a way, to nothing. To everything, because you must be a pilgrim stripped of all things and you must let God, the Ground of your being, reveal Himself to

you as He wishes.

And yet you are not cutting yourself off from anything, because on that donkey you are putting your past history, your intelligence, your imagination, all your weaknesses along with your strengths. You are not throwing off the person that you existentially are for some ideal that you would like to be, for some rarified angel. God is going to meet you in the desert of your existential history with all its brokenness. And so you take along with you on this road of contemplation all that you are.

MOVEMENT FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

All Christian mystics, beginning with the Father of Christian Mysticism, St. Gregory of Nyssa, describe to us how the movement toward enlightenment begins in the darkness of our brokenness and sin (anything in us that separates us from God). The pilgrim, like Moses as he began his ascent of Mount Sinai, begins in the darkness of sin. You see a ray of the light of God which beckons you to leave the foothills and start climbing upward. The higher stages are degrees of your entrance into another darkness, that of God's incomprehensibility.

St. Gregory in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* well describes this higher form of darkness: "...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 sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which overshadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves behind all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and there she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by senses or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible."

You experience in contemplation a triple movement that has a spiral effect which moves you from lower to higher levels of experience of God. This is a cyclical movement from darkness to light to shadow---and back again---to darkness, to begin again; but now in a higher consciousness and greater oneness with God.

EPECTASIS---A STRETCHING FORTH

I shall always be grateful to the insight that Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa, his disciple, gave me which I would like to share with you in this teaching on contemplation as a process of stretching more and more toward God. Their key insight is that the love of God in us is a force (God's uncreated energies) expanding our being and making us infinitely capable of possessing God in an unending process of greater growth. St. Gregory describes true perfection as "never to stop growing towards what is better and never to place any limit on perfection...progress itself is perfection!"

I am so relieved that Heaven will not be an old-folks home! A place of perpetual choir practice! There are no old people in Heaven, but only persons always becoming younger and younger as they stretch out in loving relationship and service to become the whole universe as they discover in contemplation God at the heart of all His creation, especially in the imageness of Himself that He has placed within the heart of each and every human person.

Grace (God's gift of Himself) or the life of God within you, both in this life and in the life to come, presupposes growth in accepting a loving relationship with God and implies the necessity of constantly moving toward God. St. Gregory writes: "Seeing that it is of the nature of Goodness to attract those who raise their eyes towards it, the soul keeps rising even higher and higher."

St. Gregory gives us two reasons, always viable for all human beings for all time, why our progress toward God can never come to an end. The first reason is that Beauty, God Himself, is infinite. The second reason is that the Beautiful is of such nature that the desire for it can never be fully satisfied. He writes: "The soul that looks up towards God and conceives that good desire for His eternal beauty, constantly experiences an ever new yearning for that which lies ahead and her desire is never given its full satisfaction."

God has implanted within you the seed according to His own image and likeness to be developed *until*---but then, it will never reach an *until* according to St. Gregory. When can you love God enough, the Supreme Being? Can you ever experience enough love when that love is God Himself? This stretching out to possess ever more the Unpossessable God is not a sadness or frustration but it fills you with joy and youthfulness. Contemplation is ever more the deepening of your consciousness and experience "that the true satisfaction of your desire consists in constantly going on with your quest and never ceasing in your ascent to God, seeing that every fulfillment of your desire continually generates a further desire for the Transcendent."

St. Gregory takes the Greek word *epectasis* from St. Paul to describe the Christian's constant state of stretching always more and more toward God. "Not as though I had already attained or were already perfect; but I am striving that I may reach that for which Jesus Christ has appointed me. My brethren, I do not consider that I have reached the goal; but this one thing I do know, forgetting those things which are behind, I strive for those things which are before me; I press toward the goal to receive the prize of victory of God's highest calling through Jesus Christ (Philippians 3: 12-14).

God as love is limitless. Our desire to possess that perfect and eternal love also should be limitless. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. St. Gregory put it succinctly: "...for it may be that human perfection consists precisely in this constant growth in the good." Such a stretching forth to higher perfection, greater assimilation into the Absolute, is a motion toward greater being and yet is also a state of stability, of entering into the seventh day of God's rest. Motion for St. Gregory and for the true contemplative means more than moving from one state to another of perfection. The very transcendence of God is the reason that perfection itself is constant motion. God is eternally at rest; yet He exists always in His uncreated energies as an outgoing motion of love to share Himself with the other.

Thus as God purifies you of all taint of self-absorption, He draws you continually to "keep rising ever higher and higher, stretching with its desire for heavenly things to those that are before (Philippians 3:13), as the Apostle Paul tells us, and thus it will always continue to soar ever higher...And thus the soul moves ceaselessly upwards, always reviving its tension for its onward flight by means of the progress it has already realized. Indeed, it is only spiritual activity that nourishes its force by exercise; it does not slacken its tension by action but rather increases it."

Your desire for God is insatiable. You stretch out at every moment with burning desire to possess more of God, to be more penetrated by God's *Allness*. You do reach some stage of resting in the Lord, but then the movement starts again. From light to shadow to darkness. You come back, as T.S. Eliot writes, to the beginning and see it for the first time. "We shall not cease from exploration; and the end of all our exploring; will be to arrive where we started; and know the place for the first time." Your stability and grounding in God's infinite love is the beginning of motion toward greater perfection, the possession of God in greater consciousness. It is the motion toward greater love and promise of greater life of the Bride in *The Song of Songs*: "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. (Song of Solomon 3:1-2).

A STRETCHING TOWARD OTHERS

Your greater desire in life among all desires, your wisdom above all other knowledge, is to be more one with God, your Beloved. This is love experienced that begets love toward others. True contemplation is authenticated by the love you show toward others in humble service, for this alone---the acceptance of others in self-sacrificing love---proves that you have truly experienced a genuine love from the Source of all beauty and goodness. God's beauty becomes your participated beauty and such beauty always spreads itself outward, stretches toward others in loving gift. Contemplation that does not reap a harvest in shared love toward others is a deception and in the end is dehumanizing. A true contemplative is always begetting, becoming the other in greater unity of love as he/she stretches out to become *love*.

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

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