

INSCAPE January 2016

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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!

A NEW BEGINNING

Each and every January presents us with the possibility of a new beginning. A whole new year lies before us, with every minute of every day and of every detail, to be a grace-filled opportunity to grow and mature in God's love and mercy, and share his beauty with each and every one of our sisters and brothers in Christ.

"Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Though we may mourn the passing of the old year for all its unfulfilled dreams and desires and regret of our lack of response to God's many gifts during those months, this January encapsulates the seed potential and fills us with great hope. Life is a journey into the unknown providence of God, and of which we who are willing are gradually transformed from a false self to an *authentic* one in the Lord Jesus Christ. He who has promised to perfect the work he began in us is forever and ever faithful. Such hope renews our joy and strengthens our resolve to live for God as well as for our neighbor.

With **joie de vivre** (French phrase often used in English to express a cheerful enjoyment of life with an exultation of the human spirit), we stretch out to embrace life in all its great richness and spiritual wealth. Jesus still lives among us (expressed within the Orthodox Faith; Christ is among us. He is and always shall be!) and pours out his Spirit upon us and upon all of his creation that we might partake of his life abundantly (John 10:10). Let all of us desire with full determination to journey this new year more deeply into our hearts and there surrender more completely to God's Word, the GOD-LOGOS, Jesus Christ.

SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTIC FREEDOM

When you shop for personal items or for gift items that are authentic, most likely you want "the real thing," and not just the appearance of it. In our spiritual life we are given the opportunity here on earth to move toward an authentic freedom through our choices and preferences. To accomplish this we must awaken from the "illusory world" that each of us creates, in which our choices are determined most often by a *false self*. We must spend our lives developing the true self, that unique person we really are in Jesus Christ, reflecting from glory to glory God's goodness and holiness and love in every thought, word and deed.

CALLED TO BE FREE

Saint Paul insists "you were called to freedom" (Galatians 5:13). We are not born free but are called by God daily as his dear children and heirs to the heavenly throne to enter into a process of continued growth in freedom measured by the love we have for each other and for God. We are called not to feel "saved" but to experience an absolute freedom in communion with the Trinitarian Community of Love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The German poet Schiller says "man is free and he was born in chains." Our chains break when we respond to God's call. The liberation to which we are called is a process whereby we cooperate (synergy) with God's grace to be delivered from the forces of "sin," "Death," and "Flesh (Saint Paul metaphors that hold us in slavish bondage).

CHOOSE LIFE, NOT DEATH

“I call heaven and earth to bear witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and cursings; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendents may live; that you may love the Lord your God, and that you may cleave to him; for he is your life and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to you” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Liberation sets us on the path to becoming truly “human.” To be human we must become the unique person we were meant to be in God “according to the image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26-27), that is Jesus Christ. Two divergent paths always confront us (of the World; of the spirit). On one we choose by the “flesh,” out of selfishness or self-love. On the other we surrender to the Spirit of the Risen Jesus and move into true freedom. The degree of freedom we attain must be measured by a process of continued growth whereby we accept our beautiful self in the redeeming love of Jesus. Therefore, we become empowered to love others as we experience his eternal and perfect love for us. We now live and love in Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit by unselfishly giving ourselves to God and neighbor.

If our love for God is an authentic gift from the deepest core of our being, it must be concretized by our freedom to live unselfishly toward all those who come into our lives. Such freedom is a true conversion in which we regard others as unique persons, living in relationships of the body and soul and spirit, worthy of our respect and reverence, born as we are in the image and, “after the likeness” of God himself. No longer are others mere objects. Somehow they become an extension of ourselves and vital components of the Mystical Body of Christ. We find we cannot live independently of others or be indifferent to them or look down in judgment upon them. “O Lord, grant me to see my own sins, and not judge my brother” (Lenten Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian).

God calls us to freedom in Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit by the outpouring of his passionate love for each of us. It is only through love experienced that we become freed from isolation, loneliness and self-centeredness and are enabled to lovingly share with others in community. God’s love, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, heals and delivers us from the illusion of our self-sufficiency and mindless autonomy to realize our true selves in Christ. God’s Word, spoken by the Father from all eternity, is now received by us, definitively in Jesus, especially in his suffering and crucifixion unto death on the Cross. By his liberating love we are set free to love others. Jesus becomes a “slave,” a “suffering servant,” dying for us in order to free us and allow us to live in loving service toward every person we meet during our earthly existence.

A DIATHANY OF GOD, THE TRUE THEOPHANY

For truly free, Spirit-filled Christians, the dichotomy between secular and sacred, holy and profane dissolves into non-existence. The Holy Spirit allows the open-hearted to penetrate God’s meaning at deeper levels in Holy Scripture (Hebrews 4:12). One prays, and once one hears the voice of the Master, then one listens with upmost attention to the Spirit speak in each and every event and each relationship. One begins to experience the liberating power of God as aggressive moods and violent attitudes yield to the loving movements of the Spirit.

God’s beauty in each flower, in the seasons, in the smile of a baby, in the etched face of an old man is experienced deeply. Meaning beyond rationality for human suffering, crime, terrorism, war and all evil perpetrated against the defenseless is understood. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, “Jesus Christ shines diaphanously through the whole world.” God Trinity is no longer an object or abstraction. The Holy Spirit has effected and continues to effect an ever-increasing inner communication and interpenetration between the Indwelling Trinity and the human spirit.

Saint Paul's words become a moment-by-moment experience: "Yet, in fact, he is not far from any of us since it is in him that we live and move and exist..." (Acts 17:28). The sacraments (mysterion), especially that of the Holy Eucharist (truly Your most Precious Body and truly Your Life-Giving Blood), become living realities that perpetuate the presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit, divinizing us into true children of God. The Eucharist is lived, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor, as a "Cosmic Liturgy." Each breaking of the bread and sharing the fruit-of-the-vine with friend or stranger becomes for the free, Spirit-filled Christian a continuous living of the Eucharist (Thanksgiving), a perpetual recognition of our Lord Jesus Christ, invisibly present and living among us and within us.

CHRISTIAN MORALITY

We are to listen attentively under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, within us. The Spirit reveals to us God's will through the fabric of our daily life, our family, our larger community, the Church, the whole human race. In particular we respond to the living Word within us through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, "Illuminate our hearts with the pure light of Your Divine Knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of the teaching of Your Holy Gospel." The norm for right conduct (Orthopraxis) flowing from right worship and belief (Orthodoxia) can never be merely an extrinsic law or our own rational way of guiding our behavior. It is a response to the Living Word in us and a response to the Holy Spirit speaking also within the Church through Sacred Tradition and the teaching body, empowered by the same Spirit of Jesus to instruct us without error. Finally, it is a response to our union with others experienced in the Eucharistic Community which unites all of us to one another, which becomes a model of our larger union with all human beings, living now upon this earth or departed from this physical existence. When we celebrate "Pascha Incorruptible," we believe in the depth of our hearts that in God's power He unites all the living and the dead in unending joy.

Jesus Christ did not give us a highly involved moral system or code of conduct and Saint Paul, along with the other New testament writers, confirms it: "...the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). Charity or *agape* is the touchstone to the law of the Spirit. Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets, are forever fulfilled and united to Jesus Christ, Who is Himself "The Good News", "The Gospel." It was Divine Love, the Father (Godhead) and Source of everyone and everything, that moved God to send us His Only-Begotten Son, our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. That same love is powerful enough in us to uproot inordinate self-love which holds us in slavery to sin and death and the evil one.

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

True freedom is self-determination in the inmost depths of our being. It is opposed to every kind of external determination which is a force of compulsion from without or from within ourselves. We enter into true self-determination only when we touch God's Spirit within our heart Who releases our own spirit to lovingly move in freedom toward others. True self-determination and self-giving love to others become synonymous and are the freeing work of the Holy Spirit, for the fruit of the Spirit is "Love" (Galatians 5:22).

The basis for true love of other human beings is always the love of God that is experienced within our spirits. This love is not only the work of the Holy Spirit; it **is** the Holy Spirit! He is the personified applied love of the crucified Jesus, now risen and living within us by the Indwelling Spirit. Jesus is one with the heavenly Father, living within us and loving us eternally and immutably. In prayer, the Spirit comes to our spirit and bears united witness that we are truly

loved as the Father loves his eternal Son (Romans 8:15). God's very own dynamic current love, between Father and Son, captures us and regenerates us into new creatures, ever more consciously aware of our inner dignity. We are so privileged to be loved infinitely by God! Saint Paul describes this work of the Holy Spirit thus: "...the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us (Romans 5:5). This is not merely an experience of *feeling* loved by God. The Spirit *is* the actual Love of God dwelling in our hearts. We carry his Love about us wherever we go.

Our very physical bodies are holy because the Spirit dwells as in a temple in our bodies (Galatians 3:16; 6:19). This Love is operating at all times, even when we sleep. "It is in vain for those who rise up early, who sit up late; they eat the bread of sorrows, for so he gives in sleep to his beloved" (Psalm 127:2). The Spirit governs our spirit as we yield our mind and heart to God's Word through an inner revolution.

SIGNS OF OUR AUTHENTIC SELF

We begin to live on a new level of true freedom. We perceive ourselves in a new light. We walk with inner dignity because of what Christ Jesus has accomplished. "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it" (Ephesians 2:10). We perceive other human beings differently. It is no longer with our own human perception, distorted by sinful separation and the ignorance of spiritual darkness of our true being in Christ, that we view others.

We now are able to see "inside" the same world we have always only known extrinsically. We see with our earthly eyes and our spiritual eyes that all creatures are loved infinitely by God, even though they might not have experienced that same Spirit of love within themselves. We understand that we really are one with others. We are all related as members of Christ's Body. How then could we harm ourselves? And how can we judge others who in their ignorance do not realize their true identity in Christ Jesus?

Love becomes, therefore, not an act that we strive to *do*. Love is the Spirit of God informing our spirit, the deepest level of our consciousness, with the unifying force of God's very own uncreated energies. As we seek to perform every thought, word and deed in the spirit of love we are united with God and with our neighbors. "Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

THE SIGN OF TRUE DISCIPLESHIP

The sign, Jesus said, that we are his disciples, that we are part of him, that he and his Father dwell within us, is our love for one another as he loves us. We are called as free children of God to above all, love even our enemies, as the Only-Begotten Son loves all. When we understand this as no mere moral virtue but as a freeing of ourselves in total submission to God, then we will be grasped into the loving embrace of his Spirit that lives and operates within us as his personalized love. True freedom can never be license to do whatever we wish on a body or soul level. It consists in utter submission as our spirit conforms our relationships to the authority of the Spirit. "And you too have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, the pledge of our inheritance which brings freedom for those whom God has taken for his own, to make his glory praised" (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We are to live as authentic Christians in an environment of love, living and loving truth at all cost.

Prayerfully in Christ,

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