

INSCAPE July 2014

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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!

BE INTERCESSORS

We have seen the true light, we have received the Heavenly Spirit. We have found the true faith, we adore the Undivided Holy Trinity, Who has saved us. (From the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom)

During June 2014 we celebrated the feast of Trinity Sunday (Pentecost, The Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles), followed by Sunday's that commemorated "All Saints", "Regional Saints", and the Holy Apostles; Saints Peter and Paul.

This month let us focus exclusively on the intercessory role Jesus Christ and His Spirit Who call us to embrace within the Church, Christ's Body.

For most Christians there exists a confused understanding of petitional and intercessory prayer. In all the Christian Liturgies there are places found for petitions by individuals of the worshipping community, as well as those general petitions offered by the presiding bishop, priest or minister. Yet, many Christians, through a better biblical understanding of intercessory prayer, take on the greater responsibility of doing more than merely offering God petitions for their own needs and the needs of others.

A REAL DIFFERENCE

This is the real difference between petitional prayer and that of intercession. The Petitioner, so to speak, "stays out of it," is asking God to do something for nothing, presents Christ's merits (for has He not done it all?), but personally does not obey Jesus' command to love others as He loves us. The Intercessor is moved by a oneness with the Spirit of the risen Jesus to become the go-between with God and the sinner or person(s) in need.

The intercessor moved by the experienced indwelling presence of Jesus crucified, desires ardently to enflesh His love for the sinner, ready even to lay down his life for the needy. The intercessor is totally involved in wanting to do all with Christ and His Spirit to combat evil and sinfulness. Such a Christian wants to break down any wall that divided God from His children. He knows, unlike the petitioner, that true intercession demands sacrifice.

JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY REDEEMER

Sharing in Christ's intercessory power does not take away from Christ's power to be the sole intercessor unto salvation. It is important now to show that the unique intercession of Jesus for all creatures, including angels, allows us to become true intercessors when we put on His mind and ask, as He promised us, in His name.

One of the most heart-gnawing experiences common to all human beings is that of loneliness. We all know what it means to feel isolated from everyone. There seems at times to be no one who understands us, give us a pat on the back, look lovingly into our eyes and assure us of their unselfish love and devotion. When we project this feeling of loneliness and estrangement to the whole human race, we begin to understand a bit better what it meant in God's design that Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh out of love for us, should empty Himself of all dignity to take upon Himself the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7) to win our

trust. "He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

HE BECAME SIN FOR OUR SAKES

He became sin for our sakes that we might be delivered from sin. St. Peter powerfully describes Christ's infinite love for mankind: "Who in his own self, bore our sins in his own body on the tree that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness, by whose wounds you were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus Christ, being God, always merited to stand before His heavenly Father, to intercede with Him for the whole world with infinite dignity and power. Yet, His mediation for mankind had to be first a winning of man's trust in Him. He was by nature the mediator of the Father. All things were created in and through Him.

Yet, to qualify to become the mediator of mankind, to be the spanning bridge into humanity, He had to dip into the other side, to be rooted in the bank of humanity as He was from all eternity by nature rooted in the bank of divinity. Our human alienation from God through sin caused an abyss of loneliness within the human heart that could not be alleviated except by an experience of love at first hand. In the fullness of time, God became man, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

The beginning of redemption is the moving out of my loneliness by an experience that God really loves me to the folly of the cross and that, as St. Paul would say so often, "For me He died" (Galatians 2:20). Jesus Christ, therefore, becomes the greatest of all prophets because He literally stands between God and us and through the love of His Holy Spirit He goes to the Father in perfect, self-surrendering love while, at the same time, He goes toward each human being in that same perfect love. Jesus Christ, therefore, mediates us to God, not so much by words said, but by a presence of self-surrendering love.

The human intercessor today is primarily this type of mediator. We know that there is only one, unique Mediator and that is Jesus Christ. He has replaced all other mediators such as Moses and the early prophets, all other sacrifices of the Temple unto blood of animals. He is the Mediator Who can reconcile the two separated parties, God and the human race, because He belongs to both worlds. He is God and man. He is the only ultimate High Priest because He, the Offerer, is also the Gift offered. He is the Priest and the gift offered at the same time. "...I come to You with my head bowed low and implore You: turn not Your face away from me, nor exclude me from among Your children, but allow these gifts to be offered to You by me, Your sinful and unworthy servant. For it is You, O Christ, Who offer and are offered, Who receive and are received, and we give glory to You and to Your eternal Father and Your Life-Giving Spirit, always, now, and unto the ages of ages. Amen." (Priestly Prayer before Great Entrance; Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)

"And for this cause he is the mediator of the New Testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first Testament, they who are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15).

THE CHRISTIAN INTERCESSOR

Yet, the Christian intercessor, by participating through the power of the Holy Spirit as intimately as possible with the sufferings of the human race, its sinfulness and alienation from God, seeks also by deep, prayerful union to abide in Jesus Christ, and through His powerful intercession to beg the Father for forgiveness and reconciliation. The prophet Jeremiah is a very special model of human intercessors. No other prophet shows such intense feeling and

compassion for the fate of his people. He associates with their infidelity, pleads before God with confidence, is torn asunder by their coldness and rejection of him and of God's covenant.

Jeremiah becomes a model of Jesus Christ and of the modern Christian through mediating God's message of conversion by his own example. We know how the kings had been chosen by God as mediators of His people. The king of Israel, through his anointing, became officially the representative of his people, the one to speak to Yahweh on behalf of the Chosen People. He rendered thanks to God for his people. He spoke lamentations in times of national crisis. As he functioned on behalf of God's People, he was obligated to function as God by ruling the people with justice.

The prophets from the 8th century B.C. on, replaced the kings and they mediated God's mercy toward a people that was turning away from God. Jeremiah brings in his own life the fullness of prophetic mediation, as he becomes a model of what Jesus Christ would be toward God's new people. Jeremiah pleads with God even though he feels it is hopeless. He, the intercessor, the mediator, and his people become one and the same person. Yet he is also one with Yahweh. He understands why God should not renew His covenant with them. "You walk, everyone of you, in the hardness of your evil heart" (Jeremiah 16:12). His heart is torn by his people's coldness to Yahweh. "Cleanse your heart of evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved" (Jeremiah 4:14). Yet he stands with boldness before Yahweh, never forgetting his people. He is aware of being called by God, even from the womb to be dedicated to this mission of mediation of God and His people. Though he would like to run away from his calling, yet he continues in faith to stand before Yahweh and intercede.

And God heaps upon Jeremiah, as upon a microcosm of Israel, His wrath to the point of breaking him. Yet, in faith he mediates his people by being totally obedient to Yahweh. God has His complete way with Jeremiah until Jeremiah is cut off completely from his people, rejected, alone. "Know that for thy sake I have suffered rebuke...I sat not in the assembly of the mockers, not rejoiced. I sat alone because of thy hand, for thou has filled me with indignation" (Jeremiah 15:15-17).

ALONE BEFORE GOD

You, as intercessor, are called to "aloneness," to stand between God and your people. Out of your great love for your people that has forgotten God, you share in their alienation from God. Although you love God and seek at each moment to do God's will, yet your love for your fellow human beings becomes so great that you associate their sins with your own, as though you were the guilty one. With Moses you stand before the face of God and pray boldly that, if God does not forgive the sins of your people, "blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou has written" (Exodus 32:32).

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

So great is the love of the modern intercessor for his people that he pleads in prayer that God may grant him to suffer for their punishment. Saint Symeon the New Theologian (+1022) grasped the role of prophet as mediator and intercessor for his people in writing the following words: "...he would wish with such zeal the salvation of his brothers, that often he would beg God, the Lover of Mankind, with all his soul, with burning tears; either to save them with him or to condemn him with them, refusing absolutely to be saved alone and in this imitating the attitude of God and that of Moses. So greatly tied spiritually to them by holy charity in the Holy Spirit, he would not even wish to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven if he had to be separated from them."

Like Jesus Christ, you, as intercessor, live in two regions: you live totally among other human persons, feeling every tear, every suffering and anguish of your brother or sister as your own. Yet you move through life as though you were already in the presence of your Heavenly Father. You experience daily that you are already a child of God and co-heir with Jesus Christ of heaven forever (Romans 8:17).

You, as intercessor, act much as a chemical catalyst. You begin a process of internal action, of conversion of the heart. For this you must be completely within the process. Yet, you must not become immersed in the process so that you are swept into the process that goes on in another's soul. We read, "And *almost* all things are by the law purged with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22). There is a perfecting; a cleansing that comes by ministering the word of God. It is the perfecting of the saints to render themselves supple instruments under the Holy Spirit to become true mediators through whom the Word of God may be communicated to others.

God puts His hand on the intercessor called to mediate the Word. He cleanses His chosen instrument, not only in body, but also in soul and spirit. Every thought is placed under God's scrutiny. It is God's living Word within you that cleanses you. "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he has consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-20).

This cleansing pure water is the Word of God. Can you mediate God's word before you have been completely "washed" in it? The Word washes out of you all that is false doctrine, all that comes from yourself and is not of God's Word. It is losing your own identity by putting on the mind of Jesus Christ in all things. "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). To remain in Christ, the Word, you must be listening attentively to His voice in watchfulness.

To become a mediator, you must have an open mind to learn more and more about the riches of the Divine Word. Remaining in that Word means constantly to study and think and pray about what the Divine Word has said in Holy Scripture and is saying in your own life today. Your response is complete obedience to that Word and it leads you through contemplation to action. The greatest function of mediating the Word is to mirror the Word completely in your own life as though your life were to be a lived Gospel story told in modern terms understandable by your contemporaries. Thus you mediate the Word of God by being completely under the Word at all times in all your thoughts, words and actions.

A SPECIAL CALL TO BE AN INTERCESSOR

Jesus Christ, we have seen, is the only true Mediator, Who can adequately stand between the awesome holiness of His Father and the dark and evil sinfulness of humanity. Yet He calls all of us, His followers, to believe that He needs us to extend His intercessory presence into a certain time and place of this world. He, by giving us the gift of Baptism, has already enfolded us into Him and, therefore, into His intercessory power.

Salvation is a pure gift from God, not anything we have done (Ephesians 2:8-9). "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). He calls us to abide in Him and through His Spirit's life flowing within us, we, as branches are to extend His reconciling love outward to the world (John 15:5-17).

He asks us to be fellow-intercessors with Him before the heavenly Father on behalf of the entire world that is groaning in travail (Romans 8:22) to be brought out of death into a new

creation. Are you your brother's and sister's keeper? Yes, your very concern to love actively every human being demands that you join Jesus Christ in becoming His mediating presence of love, which reflects to an unloving world that our Father truly loves us.

As we look around our world today, we are overwhelmed by the forces of evil and ungodliness that seemingly increase daily over the weakening moral forces of loving unity. Selfishness of individuals, as well as of nations, shows the lack of sacrifice for the well-being of others. We wonder how long will God's patience be tested by His sinful children? Are we much different today than those in the time of the prophet Ezekiel? "The people of the country have taken to extortion and banditry; they have oppressed the poor and needy and ill-treated the settler for no reason. I have been looking for someone among them to build a wall and man the breach in front of me, to defend the country and prevent me from destroying it, but I have not found anyone. Hence, I have discharged my anger on them; I have destroyed them in the fire of my fury. I have made their conduct recoil on their own heads. It is the Lord Yahweh who speaks" (Ezekiel 22:29-31). We have stressed that Jesus Christ, by His very nature as God-Man alone, is *the* Mediator, Who brings us redemption and reconciliation of the sinful to God. Now, we need to see how we can, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (received by each of us at our personal Pentecost), be sharers and extenders of Jesus' intercessory powers before the Father.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS INTERCESSOR

If the Holy Spirit makes us into sharers of Jesus' intercessory power, it is because God's Spirit is also an intercessor. His intercessory power is different from that of Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the personified love uniting the Father with the Son within the Trinity. His role is always a meditational relationship of love. Love operates always in freedom of choice to accept love and to return it.

The same Holy Spirit operates, therefore, in filling us with His gifts of faith, hope and love and, thus, He enables us to be moved to the maximum of love for others as Jesus has loved us. He has loved us with such a depth of caring love that He laid down His life for us. Jesus and the Father release their Spirit of love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), so that we too may be able to love others as Jesus has. The Spirit brings us into an increased awareness of how truly beautiful we are in Jesus' love, which is the very image of the Father's love for us. Then He intercedes by calling us in His love to be with Christ a co-intercessor toward all human beings.

The Spirit makes us aware of our oneness with Christ, that in our wholeness and healthiness of divine life within us, we can go in haste to bring that same divinizing life to those members of the Body who are weak and dying from lack of full health. We are impelled to bring Jesus Christ, the Head, to the millions of human beings who do not yet know Him as Lord, God-Man.

Unfortunately, we can freely close ourselves off from the call of the Spirit to become intercessors with Christ. Thus, we can block off the relational intercession of the Holy Spirit which depends always on our cooperation. We need to distinguish a specific call of the Holy Spirit to embrace a style of life of heroic generosity, so filled with love of God and neighbor that such a person, day and night, lives as a *victim*, taking on the sins of the world in his oneness with the suffering Christ. This vocation is obviously not a universal call for all to embrace and can come only after long years of generous preparation and guidance by holy and well-balanced spiritual guides in harmony with the teachings of the Church (Orthodoxia and Orthopraxis). Only the true Contemplative, who sees God working in all people and in all places, all events, and everywhere present in all His creation, can be bold enough through humility and merciful-loving compassion approach the Heavenly Throne in behalf of others.

CALLED TO LOVE IS TO INTERCEDE

Yet, all Christians are called to love others as Jesus has. To love others has to imply a readiness to move beyond mere words or gestures and to embrace sacrifices as part of proving our love for others, “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Thus, as we offer up our prayers on behalf of others, for those living now on this physical earth or those who have fallen asleep and passed beyond this world, we must be open to the Spirit leading us to make sacrifices to act out this loving concern and empathy.

We are free to choose to follow Christ’s teachings and His way of life or not. But if we truly understand what it means to be a Christian and a living member building the Body of Christ by loving service, we have implicitly chosen to be intercessors, who offer prayers and supplications and sacrifices in loving oneness with Christ as He suffers in His members (Mark 9:29).

It is important to guard against our doing anything alone under our own power. We need to be constantly open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit in order to be guided always by His power, prudence and love. He will inspire what sacrifices are to accompany our prayers of petitions in order that our love for others will be truly intercessory.

FILLING UP THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (German Theologian 1906-1945) wrote, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him to come and die” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 99). This is nothing but to paraphrase the teaching of Christ reiterated in identical terms in the Synoptic Gospels: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but anyone who loses his life for My sake and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34. Cf. also: Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Luke 9:23, 14:27).

But because of an unhealthy, negative contempt for the human body in medieval asceticism, suffering was self-imposed to bring about in the mind of the ascetic a sense of identity with the sufferings of Christ. All too often such sufferings were used by the intercessor as a point of “bargaining” with God for graces won for the sinful and lost.

Today, especially through biblical exegesis and deeper insights into the Pauline doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, we see the call to suffer with Christ as the inevitable result of obeying Christ against the kingdom of the “world”.

St. Peter, the brother of St. Andrew the first called apostle, teaches us the necessity of suffering, not because we have done something wrong, but out of obedience to Christ’s teachings (1 Peter 3:14-17). If Jesus warned His disciples to expect persecutions for His Name’s sake (Matthew 10:16-25), then it is important to understand the relationship of sufferings and the communion within the Body of Christ.

St. Paul boldly declares, “It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church” (Colossians 1:24). This text has always been difficult to understand in its fullest sense. In what way can Paul or we think Christ’s sufferings are incomplete and, therefore, we can fill them up? We must reject any false understanding that would assert Christ’s personal sufferings in His passion and death were insufficient for our redemption and we would need to fill up the necessary sufferings.

MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

If we keep in mind St. Paul's powerful analogy of the Church as similar to a human body made up of many members and each member composed of cells that are interrelated with all other living cells of the entire body, then we can understand how Jesus extends His intercession through us to other members and to all human beings the world over, both among the living and the departed (Eternal memory-Blessed Repose).

Saint Paul teaches, "So when one member is in pain, all the members suffer with it; and if one member is honored, all members will glory in it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). Within the Body of Christ, therefore, we are all so interconnected since we have one Head, Jesus Christ, over us and His life, the Holy Spirit, flows through all of us, bringing us a sharing in the very Triune Divine Life. We share weaknesses, strengths, sufferings, as well as honors.

We have an example of this Pauline teaching in action, given by St. Gregory the Great (The Dialogist; c.540-604) to the Bishop of Carthage at a time of great suffering in the African Church: "By this charity, the same members, when personally afflicted, respond to the joy of others or, on the other hand, in personal joy they are consumed by the sorrows of others. The Master of the Gentiles, in fact, bears witness: whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, one member honored, all members rejoice with it. I do not doubt that you sigh for our distress while, you may be assured, we rejoice at your peace" (*Dialogue* 47).

We do not fill up the physical sufferings of Jesus' passion, but because we are tied one with Christ, we are able to suffer with Christ and fill up His sufferings as we work with Him in overcoming the evil of the Kingdom of darkness.

What Saint Paul and the other early disciples, the martyrs, the living witnesses down to our present day, as even you and I suffer is still a continuation of what Christ first endured. We do not fill up anything lacking in His sufferings by knowing ours are part of His, as we are a part of Him.

It is always in the context of our ministry that we become suffering intercessors, building up Christ's Body by joyfully accepting the sufferings that bring a new resurrectional life to individual persons and to the entire Body of Christ, the Church. This is what St. Paul meant when he wrote these meaningful words: "Indeed, as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so through Christ does our consolation overflow. When we are made to suffer, it is for your consolation and salvation. When, instead, we are comforted, this should be a consolation to you, supporting you in patient bearing the same sufferings as we bear. And our hope for you is confident, since we know that, sharing our sufferings, you will also share our consolation" (2 Corinthians 1: 5-7).

BUILDING THE TOTAL CHRIST

The sufferings of us believers, therefore, are not independent of Christ's. As Christ once underwent His unique, individual sufferings, especially in His passion and death, so now He endures or shares in our daily sufferings, for He will always be one with the members of His Body, the Church. What we suffer out of love in His Spirit, He, as Head, also suffers in the same Spirit that makes Him one with His members.

Yet, we see that such sufferings have an eschatological effect. Such trials and tribulations bring about the future of the fulfilled Christ, the total Christ, the Head and His members. But, also, in the very moment of being accepted out of love for each other, we also share now in a corporate raising of the entire Body to a higher level of loving union (Theosis, Divinization).

BLOOD OF MARTYRS---SEED OF CHRISTAINITY

This is why instinctively from earliest times, Christians held in highest esteem the gift of martyrdom. To freely give one's life out of love for Christ and His message was considered as the highest, most perfecting way of ministering to the Word preached to the world, as well as the most efficacious means of building by "edifying" the Church into the extension of the living, loving Jesus Christ, true God and true man.

St. Paul wished to bear his "chains", ultimately his pending martyrdom to build up the Church. "So I bear it all for the sake of those who are chosen, so that in the end they may have the salvation that is in Christ Jesus and the eternal glory that comes with it" (2 Timothy 2:10). This witness to help others to be strengthened in their faith under trials, St. Paul powerfully highlights as he writes, from his captivity, to the Philippians. His text is worthy of our constant meditation: "Now I would have you know this, my brethren, that my work has been greatly furthered by the Gospel; and the reasons for my imprisonments have been made manifest by Christ to all Caesar's court and to all men. And many of the brethren in our Lord have grown confident by my imprisonment and, with increasing boldness, speak the word of God without fear. While some of them preach only because of envy and strife, others preach Christ in good will and love; for they know that I am appointed for the defense of the Gospel; but those who preach Christ out of contention, do it not sincerely, but do it expecting to increase the hardship of my imprisonment. And I have rejoiced and still do rejoice in this, that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached. For I know that through your prayers and the gift of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, all these things will ultimately turn out for my salvation. Just as it is my earnest hope and expectation that in nothing shall I be ashamed, but that openly as always, so also now will Christ be magnified through my body, whether in life or death. For Christ is my life, and to die is gain. Even if in this life of the flesh my labors bear fruits, I do not know what to choose. For I am torn between two desires, the one to depart, that I may be with Christ, which is far better; nevertheless, for me to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And this I surely know, that I shall be spared and remain for your joy and for the furtherance of your faith, so that when I come again to you, your rejoicing in Jesus Christ will abound through me" (Philippians 1:12-26).

The power of intercessory prayer, through complete self-giving in sacrificial love even unto death, is brought out dramatically in the case of the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen. Saint Luke in his account of the martyrdom of the first Christian martyr presents Stephen as teaching the "message" about Christ risen to glory, the conqueror of sin and death. For this he is to be stoned to death. Yet, "Stephen, full of faith and Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and with one accord shouted threats against Stephen. And they seized him and took him outside the city and began to stone him. Those who testified against him placed their clothes under the care of a young man called Saul. And they stoned Stephen as he prayed, saying, Our Lord Jesus, accept my spirit. And as he knelt down, he cried with a loud voice and said, Our Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And with these words, he fell asleep" (Acts of the Apostles 7:55-60).

St. Luke implies here that the Apostle to the gentiles would receive the grace of conversion through the powerful intercessory prayer of Stephen, backed up by the heroic giving of his life in witness to the divinity of Jesus Christ.

CO-PRIESTS WITH CHRIST THE HIGH PRIEST

The peak of our understanding of intercessory prayer and sacrifice is found in the teaching of Christ as the sole and perfect High Priest Who calls us to partake in a sharing of His one high priesthood. This is where we see true intercession on behalf of others as consisting ultimately in love offered to God in worshipful self-emptying sacrifice, united with the priestly offering of Christ to the eternal Father on behalf of all of us.

We have already said that Jesus Christ alone is our Mediator. He came to die for our sins and, in the offering and sacrifice of Himself completely for us (Ephesians 5:2), He removes our sinful condition before the heavenly Father and makes it possible that we can now have “communion” as children with the Father. Jesus still is our High Priest before the Father now and unto the ages of ages: “Jesus, made a high priest forever after the order of Melchisedek” (Hebrews 6:20).

Jesus Christ differs from all priests before Him in the Old Testament and after Him in the New Covenant. He is completely without sin. His sacrifice was made once and for all. He needs not to die for us again. But the amazing point of Jesus’ priesthood is that the sacrifice He offers on our behalf is of Himself. He offers and is offered. “For this is the kind of high priest proper for us: pure, without evil, and undefiled, far away from sin, and made higher than the heavens; and who needs not daily, as do those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for their own sins and then for the people’s; for this he did once when he offered up Himself” (Hebrews 7:26-27).

Still, Jesus Christ calls everyone baptized in the name of the Trinity to share in His one priesthood. That priesthood consists in offering up in union with Jesus Christ spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. “You also, as living stones, build up yourselves and become spiritual temples and holy priests to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ...but you are a chosen people, ministers to the kingdom, a holy people, a congregation redeemed to proclaim the glories of him who has called you out of darkness to his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:5,9).

Besides the cultic priest of Christianity, ordained to renew the sacrifice of Christ and to gather up the united sacrifices of the Church that gather in Jesus Christ’s name to mediate the mercy of the Father in the blood of His Son, each Christian is called upon by his/her Baptism to mediate the priesthood of Jesus Christ before the Father on their own behalf and that of their fellow beings. “O Lord God Almighty, Who alone are holy and receive the sacrifice of praise from those who call upon You with all their heart, accept the prayers of us sinners also, bring us to Your holy altar, enable us to offer gifts and spiritual sacrifices for our sins and for the transgressions of all Your people; allow us also to be worthy to find favor in Your sight, that our sacrifice may be pleasing to You, and that the Good Spirit of Your grace may rest upon us and upon these gifts lying before us, and upon all of Your people” (*Pray of the Proskomedia; Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*).

We can participate in this priestly mediation to the degree that we have first allowed the priestly mediation of Jesus to have its full reconciling effects to come upon us and transform us according to the priestly heart of Christ.

Although we modern Christians know Jesus Christ alone is the Mediator of the human race with the Heavenly Father, yet we know through God’s transforming grace what God has made of us. “And all things are of God who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). We are called into the awesome redemptive work by the merits of Jesus Christ to reconcile the sinful world to God. Jesus Christ has worked a work of purification in us so we can already triumphantly cry out with St. Paul: “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me and the life which I

now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Jesus Christ shares His divine life with us, as He lives in us as the vine is the life-giving source to the living branches. He is the Head. We, in whom Jesus lives, are the Body. We are totally new in Him and share in His power to intercede before the throne of the Father. He “has raised us up together and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). We have been empowered to use His merits and His Name, which is the only Name whereby we shall be saved (Acts 4:12). It is His mediation, His intercession that we share, as we, too, groan in the Spirit of Jesus on behalf of a race of people that has forgotten God. Like Abraham, we beg, not of our own merits, but because of God’s goodness made known through Jesus Christ, that men and women, cities and nations, the sick and suffering, the mentally confused and disturbed be spared and be healed and be reconciled with God.

NEED OF INTERCESSORS

Today, the world has desperate need for intercessors who mediate Jesus Christ and His intercessory power before the Father’s throne on behalf of the human race (living or departed). Jesus Christ wants to share His power, His loving mercy, His compassionate kindness, and His wisdom with the world, yet He still mediates His priestly mediation through human beings in whom He can have absolute power and freedom to work as He wishes. Absolute oneness with Christ does not make the Christian an intercessor distinct from Jesus Christ, but renders the mediation of Jesus Christ concretized in human terms on this earth.

As we are crucified with Christ Jesus, have died with Him, are justified with Him, made alive by Him, so we are raised with Him and are now seated with Him before the throne. All of our intercession comes from Jesus Christ. We are nothing; Jesus is all! There is only the High Priest, Jesus Christ. But still, we Christians, like the forerunner St. John the Baptist, mediate Jesus Christ. We are constantly pointing out to others, “There is the Lamb of God. It is He Who takes away the sins of the world! He must increase. I must decrease. All glory be to the Lamb of God!”

“And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first to arise from the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. To him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood. And has made us a spiritual kingdom (kings and priests) unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (Revelation 1:5-6).

“O Thou Who by Your inscrutable providence did prepare the world for eternal beatitude, Who appointed to ‘all’, the time and manner of their end: Forgive, O Lord the sins of those who have died in past ages, and receive them into habitations of light and rejoicing, and open Your Fatherly embrace to them in mercy, and listen attentively unto us who celebrate their memory and sing: O Lord, whose love for mankind is beyond expression, remember Your servants who have fallen asleep” (Akathist for the Repose of the Departed).

May you enter into the Heart of Jesus!

Fr. John Michael Zboyovski