

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!

THE SILENT HEART

The image on an icon of Saint Isaac of Syria (7th Century hesychastic desert dweller) depicts him writing on a scroll “above all things, love silence.” He also, in his ascetical writings related to his life experience of prayer and stillness, reminds us moderns “The key to Divine gifts is given to the *heart* by love of neighbor, and, in proportion to the heart's freedom from the bonds of the flesh, the door of knowledge begins to open before it.”

We concluded last months *Inscape* with the exhortation, “go to the desert in silence—and listen to the real world for the First Time—The Silent Heart.”

Christianity is a religion built upon “desert” spirituality. The historical exodus of the Israelites—from their slavery in Egypt, through a forty-year period of illumination, purification and vision of God in the Sinai Desert, to their eventual entrance into the Promised Land—has become an archetype for all Christians. We, too, have been called by God from “slavery to sin” into our own inner desert, that of the *heart*. There we are to come into different levels of conversion, measured by the degree of freedom and affective will to surrender to the purifying love and guidance of our heavenly Father throughout all our earthly pilgrimage.

How easily we see ourselves in the stubbornness of the Israelites and their grumbling against God. We, too, cry out for living water and bread to eat “and when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, Manna-ho? [What is it?] For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, this is the bread which the Lord has given to you to eat” (Exodus 16:15). We, too, often yearn for a return to our unforgotten, if shameful, past of slavery and confinement and ask: “and the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, would God we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would God that we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us into this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should be a prey? We were better off when we dwelt in Egypt. And they said one to another, let us appoint a leader, and let us return to Egypt” (Numbers 14:2-4).

God never forsakes his people. The only question for us is this: How deeply into the desert of our own hearts do we wish to enter and there learn—by trial and tribulation—by purification and testing—how to surrender to the supremacy of his love? Jesus, also, was led into the desert of his heart by the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:12), where he was given a choice between the isolation of self-centered concerns and the true solitude of surrendering in love to the Father’s providential care.

The desert experience was for Jesus a daily struggle in his heart between the power and plan of his heavenly Father, and the lure and empty promises of evil. Often during his public life, following some thirty years of relative solitude in Nazareth, Jesus would retire into the desert, or other barren, quite places, where he could be alone with the Father. He needed “connected aloneness” and “space” in his heart to experience his true self in his encounter with his loving Father as the Center of his being.

We are desert pilgrims also, because we are followers of those early Christians who learned to enter into the desert of their hearts and, by faith, hope, and love, consciously welcome the Risen Lord who alone could conquer all the sin and evil in their lives. The desert Christians of the 4th century, following the example of the Israelites and of Jesus himself, were

led by the Holy Spirit into the physical desert where they could be reminded of the inner desert places within their hearts.

There they remained in silence and solitude, advancing to new levels of oneness with Christ and with the entire world as they came in touch with him, the Center of all reality, in whom God creates all things. Jesus often preached to his followers, including us in the 21st century, that if we wanted to have a part of him, we would have to deny ourselves, take up our cross each day, and follow in his footsteps.

This following will inevitably take us into the inner desert of our hearts where the forces of light and darkness constantly battle. But in the aridity and emptiness of that desert God brings forth something new. He re-creates us in the image of his Divine Son, sharing with us his own divine life: “Whoever from now on is a follower of Christ is a new creation; old things have passed away; and all things have become new through God who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; for God was in Christ, who has reconciled the world with his majesty, not counting their sins against them; and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).

NEED FOR WITHDRAWAL

Whoever aspires to attain this most intimate union with God must imitate the Israelites who fled from the Egyptians into the desert where they met God as their only Source of being and happiness. Among the early hermits dwelling in the arid and parched desert lands, as Saint Antony taught, such physical removal from the many temptations and cares of the world was considered the first condition at attain purity of heart...thereby capable of experiencing the vision of God “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

Exterior and interior silence, in the words of Saint Basil the Great, is the beginning of purity of heart. Withdrawal from the things of this world would make no sense unless there was an inner withdrawal from “brokenness”—the attachments to persons, places, and things that impede a total attachment solely to the Indwelling God.

INNER SILENCE

Contemporary theologians write about the different stages of “conversion” as an ongoing process. Such theological reflection on the different levels of conversion must be concerned with an individual’s seeking God in his/her life and in relationships with others in active ministry. Such an understanding brings us close to the biblical sense of conversion as an ongoing process of moving through deepening faith, hope, and love to a new, inner vision, a transformation out of the slavery to self-centeredness to the freedom of being children of God and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. It takes place on all levels of body, soul, and spirit relationships of one’s daily life experiences.

Let us examine the important elements of inner silence and solitude that are the necessary concomitants to a true conversion on any and all levels. These two are the very breath that gives life to any inner conversion that transforms our human life from the worldly ego to one’s true self in Christ Jesus. In a word, there would be no authentic conversion possible without inner silence and solitude.

There can be no true growth in deeper prayer and union with God without silence on all levels of our being; physical, psychic, and spiritual. Silence, especially on the spiritual level, becomes the inner poverty of spirit that Jesus calls blessed, for to such the Kingdom of God is given (Matthew 5:3), and is experienced in what Scripture and all Christian mystics down through the centuries have called the *heart*.

Karl Rahner describes what happens when we enter into authentic silence: “If we are silent, if we forgive, if without reward we give ourselves wholeheartedly and are detached from ourselves, we are reaching out into a limitlessness which exceeds any assignable bound and which is nameless. We are reaching out towards the holy mystery that pervades and is the ground of our life. We are dealing with God.”

THE SILENCE OF GOD

To understand the silence of our heart as the foundation for conversion, we need first to understand the silence that exists within the loving community of the triune God, between the Father and his Word through the self-emptying love, the Holy Spirit. God is love, and silence is the perfect communication of the Father and Son through the Holy Spirit. Love needs no language, but it does express itself in perfect silence; the silence of surrendering love.

God needs no multiplicity and variety to express his eternal continuity in love. He loves through his one Word. His silence is not broken by speaking his Word, his Word issues forth eternally in silence. We need to punctuate our words with pauses in silence because we need to reflect, search out further ideals, correct or amplify what has just been said. God, however, speaks continually his unchanging Word. He never needs to utter a second or third because in his Word he expresses perfectly all that he is since he expresses his Word through the loving, silent sigh of Love—the Holy Spirit.

Speaking his Word in eternal silence through his outpouring Love, the Holy Spirit, the Father hears his Word come back to him in a perfect, eternal “Yes” or total, surrendering Love, again the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the deepest expression of love uttered in ecstatic silence! Love pours itself out in silence of one Word uttered. But Divine Love is also the silence of repose in which the Word freely comes back to rest in the eternal embrace of his Father. “And he who sent me is with me; and my Father has never left me alone, because I always do what pleases him” (John 8:29).

But when God’s uncreative energy fashions us human beings as his masterpiece of all material creation, he turns within and the *I* of God speaks to us within and in that loving silence says: “Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves” (Genesis 1:26). Of all God’s material creatures we human beings are the only ones capable of hearing God’s Word uttering in flaming Love, the Spirit, who invites us to respond to his very own nature (2 Peter 1:4). Only in prayer (listening in total silence) can we become aware of being personally loved by God Trinity. Only in prayer can we alone return that love—as in a godly silence, we still our own desires, plans, ideas of God, ourselves, and the world we constantly create according to our own inner noisy desires.

RETURNING TO OUR TRUE SELVES WITHIN

We need to turn within our heart and in silence we must enter deeply into our true selves and hear God’s Word (again), Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, dwelling in oneness with the Father and Spirit, speak our name. This can only be discovered through the Holy Spirit in all our unique personhood as God’s unique word in his Word, manifesting in human, material existence in a given time and space a unique unfolding of God’s perfections as “othered”—outside of the infinite circle of the Trinity’s self-giving that can never know any circumference.

It is in silence that the Christian learns as Moses to stand before the Burning Bush. We find our greatest struggle in becoming silent before God’s silent love. It entails a letting go of the control we think we possess over our own life. It is a call to die to our false life in order to find our true life in the *Other*, dwelling intimately within us.

Nikos Kazantzakis (Greek writer of *-Zorba the Greek-*, poet and philosopher; 1883-1957) describes how difficult it is for us to surrender to God; “God is fire and you must walk on it...dance on it. At that moment the fire will become cool water. But until you reach that point, what a struggle, my Lord, what agony!”

We need to turn into our “heart” and in silence we must enter deeply into ourselves and hear God Trinity, the Absolute Ground of all being, reveal to us through experiential knowledge, through enlightenment given by the Holy Spirit, that we alone are one with all being. Yet how reluctantly we are to return to that inner place of the heart to discover in the silencing of all our noises in our minds; our true selves.

Dag Hammarskjold, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, describes in his diary (*Markings*) the difficulty of this journey inward: “The longest journey is the journey inward, of him who has chosen his destiny, who has started his quest for the source of his being.”

SILENCING OUR HEART

If we are to meet God deeply at the core of our being, in our heart, as Scripture continually refers to that center within us, we must learn to silence our heart. What a lost art is this! We are drowning in a swirling ocean of noises all about us that tends to take us away from living at the center of our being. But how noisy are we within our minds and hearts! How agitated with thoughts (incessantly bombarded by the Internet, Facebook, Blogs, Tweets, iPhones, streaming audio/video, email, voice mail, postal junk mail, radio, mass communication and entertainment via television, movies and video games, advertisements and marketing ploys...all this seems unending), desires, fears, anxieties are we when we do come before the Lord in prayer! No wonder at Divine Liturgy we attempt with such difficulty “Let us put aside all our earthly cares.”

The greater our distraction or diffusion, the less unifying is our union with God and neighbor, “heart to heart.” We of the Western culture are especially prone by our highly developed rational powers through science toward a chattering mind, like a cage of chattering monkeys. We find it very difficult to “let go” and surrender to a God that must be encountered through a true faith that presents Him as dark, as in a mirror “for now we see through a mirror, darkly; but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). We want to be the master, sure of ourselves. We are afraid to step out beyond the controls of our senses and our scientific method.

Yet God continually speaks to us from within our hearts: “repent, be still, and know that / AM God” (Psalms 46:10). God is always calling us into a silence of the heart where all artificiality crumbles, new psychic and spiritual powers burgeon forth and are released through the uncreated energies of God. Silence is the interior air that the spirit of our human nature needs in order to grow and mature spiritually. Such silence leads us into the inner recess, and there our heavenly Father will recompense us.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, differently from reciting oral prayers of the Pharisees and Scribes on the street corner, he told them: “But as for you, when you pray, enter into your inner chamber and lock your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret shall himself reward you openly. And when you pray, do not repeat your words like the pagans, for they think that because of much talking they will be heard. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need, before you ask him” (Matthew 6:6-8).

THE RECOMPENSE (repayment, as for gifts) OF THE FATHER

The Father recompenses anyone who seeks this inner, private room, the heart, and desires valiantly to stay there in the silence of surrendering love. This recompensing comes to us in the healing of psychic disturbances, the chaotic meaninglessness of so many past experiences that hang like dried skeletons within our memories, the anxieties that force us into an isolation of deadly loneliness. We become consoled and loved by God in an experience that is beyond any human concepts. We know that God loves us! This being-loved-by-God experience at the deepest level of our consciousness restores our inner strength and pushes us to new self-giving to God and neighbor in creative work.

PHYSICAL SILENCE

Silence takes place on several levels just as heart is a reality for us on various levels of meaning. Silence within the heart on these levels is moving toward total integration of all our God-given powers. There is the silence on the physical, bodily level first. Here we need to learn how to bring an exterior silence into our bodies, our speech, the manner of our walking, our gestures, and our general composure that radiates a deep interior centering. One cannot be centered if one is continually babbling like a shallow mountain stream, not weighing our words and thoughts before the indwelling God.

Saint Paul exhorts us to such inner physical and psychic silence that requires great vigilance and self-discipline through faith in the abiding presence of the risen Lord Jesus: “Casting down imaginations, and every false thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and capturing every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Moving from noise to silence is always an uprooting, a leaving of something for something else. Yet there cannot be any movement into the inner silencing of the heart unless there be a movement away from physical noise that we allow our bodies to produce when we are not centered upon God as the Center of our being. “Therefore thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel: When you will repent and rest, you will be saved; in *quietness* and in hope shall be your strength; but you would not listen” (Isaiah 30:15).

SILENCING THE MIND

This conversion consists in an inward turning, to attain an interior silence of the soul’s faculties of memory, imagination, emotions, understanding, and will. Many persons seeking to become more prayerful have turned inwardly away from the noises of the physical world only to find deafening noises inside their minds. Great discipline of the mind is needed to uproot such noise and find inner peace and tranquility that can come only if our minds are focused more deeply upon God as the inner fortress of our strength (in a future Inscape newsletter, we shall see how to silence the noises in our mind).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa of the 4th century (The Father of Orthodox Mysticism) captures well the value of centering all our soul-faculties upon God as the inner Center: “So, too, I think, it is with the human mind. If it spreads itself out in all directions, constantly flowing out and dispersing to whatever pleases the senses, it will never have any notable force in its progress towards the true Good. But now recall the mind from all sides, and make it collect itself, so that itself, so that it may begin to operate in that function which is preferably connatural to it, without scattering and wasting itself: then the mind will find no obstacle in its rise to heaven and in its grasp of the true meaning of reality.”

NEED FOR DAILY SILENCE

Our silence and being alone with the Alone must become a living experience, some time during each day if we are to grow in deeper union with the indwelling Trinity. Such silence and solitude must be created in the heart in early morning before our day begins to unfold at its hectic pace and then again in the evening before retiring. Amidst our activities throughout the day we must learn to “lift up our minds and hearts to God” (Liturgy of Saint James) by re-touching that oneness with God as our Center living within us. It will be an interior desert that cries out for a new spring of lush fertility (oasis) and new richness of life.

We will learn to stand before God in honesty, humility, and silent to our own powers to tell God what we have been doing for him. It will be a period of stripping ourselves of all our artificial masks and rationalizations that we so easily hide behind during the day’s activities. It will be a centering upon God as the Source of all our energies and desires. Soon we will look forward to such moments of silence and solitude.

The beginning of fears of being alone with God will soon yield to peace and even joy at “pulling” ourselves together before our Ultimate Concern. From focusing in utter silence upon God there will come over us an inner strength, equipping ourselves for the sometimes confusing rapid movements within the activities of the day.

AVOIDING INNER SILENCE

We can easily see where the fault lies in our spiritual relationships with God and neighbor. It is because we do not think and act out of our true selves in God’s living Word abiding within our hearts. We avoid turning deeply within ourselves and remaining in silence, because our illusory self seeks to hold on to the false securities that are truly insecurities, since they are the only world in which we have lived from early consciousness.

Our fragmented, sinful fallen nature does not like to live in silence because silence has a way of revealing ourselves beyond all role-playing and posturing before a God we believe, in our ignorance, we can manipulate to our ways of seeing reality. We pray with distractions and without force because we are afraid of our true selves in God’s Word. We refuse to be ourselves by refusing to enter into silence in the depth of our hearts to experience an inner transformation by surrendering to the unseen God.

SPIRITUAL SILENCE

We have said that silence is more than mere physical silence, especially of speaking to God solely when we pray. True silence opens us up to an inner state of humility and poverty. As the Spirit of God lets his light of truth shine upon our true selves, our unique person as enspirited and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:15), we are filled with a spiritual sense of not only our nothingness and sinfulness before the beauty of the All-Holy. We die on the spirit level to our false self, worldly ego as we become broken in our spirit.

No longer is there the arrogant, self-assured human being who has been convinced that he or she has truly met the Lord in every rationalization and action done out of self-centeredness. We begin now to stand more habitually empty before the richness of God, a beggar with nothing to command oneself. “My sacrifice is this broken spirit. You will not scorn this crushed and broken heart” (Psalms 51:17).

We realize God cannot be manipulated any longer by ourselves. He must be approached with fear and trembling. “God, examine me and know my heart, probe me and know my thoughts; make sure I do not follow pernicious ways, and guide me in the way that is everlasting” (Psalms 139:23-24).

THE PARADOX OF SILENCE

What seems to be living in light when we live on the surface of our being is really to live in illusion and darkness. When we withdraw from noise and our own control over our lives and enter into a waiting, surrendering silence before God to speak his Word, we truly make a transition from darkness to light. There comes to us a “deeper awareness” of hidden things. We begin to move freely into the inner world of the invisible, but yet most real. At first it seems to be our own weakness to comprehend God and our true selves. But it becomes a keener and keener realization as we persevere in inner silence. This is because of God’s great transcendence living within us that fills us with an inner silence that becomes the most intense manner of our communicating with God, not by doing anything, but by becoming our true selves in his love by self-surrendering love.

Thomas Merton captured the paradox of emptying silence in these words: “But true emptiness is that which transcends all things, and yet is immanent in all. For what seems to be emptiness in this case is pure being. It is not this, not that. Whatever you say of it, it is other than what you say. The character of emptiness, at least for a Christian contemplative, is pure love, true freedom. Love that is free of everything not determined by any things or held down by any special relationship. It is a sharing, through the Holy Spirit, in the infinite charity of God. And so when Jesus told His disciples to love, He told them to love as universally as the Father who sends His rain on the just and the unjust. ‘Be you perfect as Your heavenly Father.’ This purity, freedom and indeterminateness of love is the very essence of Christianity.”

TRANSITION FROM KNOWLEDGE ABOUT GOD TO LOVE

Darkness and silence are the realms of the indwelling Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—living within and acting lovingly through their uncreated energies of love. The Trinity, God as a community of loving, self-sacrificing divine persons, is the uncreated Ground of all being, the abyss of mystery that exceeds all human knowledge. Yet the heavenly Father speaks his Word, Jesus Christ, who is light, revelation, speech, and meaning to us who wish to attune ourselves to his silent speaking of himself as Divine Word.

We must simply wait upon God’s gratuitous gift of his Word, spoken when we surrender ourselves in the silence of all our own powers to become through the working of the Holy Spirit receptivity before God’s mysterious gift of love. To understand this basic paradox of hearing in silence the Word spoken by God, of seeing by not seeing, of darkness that is light, of “luminous darkness,” and “sober inebriation” to quote Saint Gregory of Nyssa, is to understand the movement of ourselves in our relations to God in a transition from knowledge to love. Knowledge that leads to love mingles God’s Transcendence and his Immanence within our deepest cave; our heart.

For us to turn within and to accept the silence surrounding us as remote yet present, to accept our humility and poverty as part of our true existential being, but also to accept God’s presence as loving and healing of our brokenness is to live in true faith, graced by the ineffable presence of him who grounds all human reality. It is in the silenced heart that we learn to know that God is God, but also a community of an *I-Thou* in a *We* of persons, each giving himself in self-emptying love to us. As we discover through the illumination of the work of the Holy Spirit our heavenly Father in his imaged love through his Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, we are called to stretch upward to become always more our true selves as we paradoxically lose our false selves only to be birthed into greater oneness and yet greater uniqueness of a beautiful son or daughter of so loving a heavenly Father.

MEDITATION: BE STILL—I AM YOUR GOD

The aim of this meditation is to experience entering into inner silence on the body, soul, and spirit levels and experience your oneness in the Indwelling Trinity.

1. **Silence On the Body Level.** Relax all parts of your body. Breathe deeply. Breathe diaphragmatically. As you breathe, **inhale**, feel the diaphragm muscle (controls breathing by moving the lungs for filling and then emptying air; the diaphragm expanding and contracting makes your belly go in and out) **in the abdominal area extend itself outwardly** (stomach movement is a sign that you're performing the activity correctly). As you **exhale** slowly, feel the diaphragm seemingly move **inward**. Feel that basic rhythm, so much like the ebb and flow of the ocean tide. Close your eyes and reflect on all the individual parts of your body. Start with the top of your head, the forehead, the eyelids. Relax the tension in the muscles around your eyes, your cheeks, your chin and jaw. Let your shoulders relax without sagging. Give attention to your chest, heart area, abdomen, the genital area. Relax your arms, elbows, wrists, hands and fingers. Let go of the tenseness in your hips, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, and toes. Believe by true faith as you let go of any tension that God is present in all parts of your body, “your body is a temple of the God” as (Indwelling Trinity). Breathe deeply and enjoy that loving presence of the triune God within you. Let go of the control of your life and experience the pulsating energies of the love of God within you. Desire to surrender your entire being in returning to God in childlike, trusting love.

2. **Silence On the Mind Level.** Enter that *Stillpoint*, still your mind of the many images, phantasms, thoughts, worries, and fears by a descending movement into your *heart*, that core or center of your being that is the center of your gravity deep down around your pelvic area.

Picture in your mind's eye that you are on the 20th floor of a tall building. You enter an elevator that takes you ever-so-slowly down into the lowest level of the basement. As you see yourself passing the various floors from the 20th to the basement floor, feel your entire being (true self) sinking down below your rational control in your mental activities that brings you into a oneness with the Trinity dwelling in the darkness of your heart, that surrenders the seeming light of your controlling reason.

Stop at each floor, each level of your consciousness, and tell yourself that you are becoming more relaxed, more centered upon the Indwelling Father, Son, and Spirit: 20–19–18–17–...–1–0. God is your total strength, support, refuge and deliverer; and you are in the presence of and spiritually touching the Trinity. You are totally relaxed and at peace with God and all his creation.

3. **Silence On the Spirit Level.** Breathe in and out rhythmically and begin to think your Christian mantra: “Be Still!” as you breathe **in**; “I am your God” as you breathe **out**. Repeat, lengthening your breathing, as you maintain your relaxation.

Feel yourself becoming integrated as a whole person, a Child of God and an Heir to the Heavenly Kingdom, as you surrender yourself totally into the loving hands of the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit of Love.

Any Christian mantra can be utilized, the Jesus Prayer, Sacred Scripture verses, e.g. breathe in: “I am the Vine”, breathe out: “you are the branches.”

Next months Inscape: A BROKEN AND A CONTRITE HEART—GOD WILL NOT DISPISE.

The Lord Blesses All His Creation!

Father John Michael Zbojovski