

INSCAPE November 2015

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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!

CAN I REALLY EXPERIENCE GOD?

If you look over your life in reflective contemplation, you will surely be able to point out some experiences where you were aware in a special way of having met God in his uncreated energies of love. Perhaps you were in quiet prayer in solitude. Or it may have been after you had received the divine, holy, most pure, immortal heavenly and life-creating awesome Mysteries of Christ in the Eucharist. Perhaps it was in loving oneness with your dearest loved one or even as you watched the sun set with flaming colors spangling the entire western sky.

Whatever be the details, you felt God's in-breaking presence. Suddenly the person or created object or event burst forth and became transparent to you of God's intimate loving presence. You perhaps had no ideas or images of God. It was simply you present to Him and He to you in great intimacy. It was sudden. It was pure gift. You stretched out your spiritual arms to accept God as gift. You were flooded with deep peace and joy. Yet there was a tugging pain in your heart. You wanted so much more as you stretched out. Yet what sweetness flooded you as you surrendered everything to Him who graced you everything in that concrete moment.

GOD IS LOVE BY NATURE

In God's revelation made through Jesus Christ and extended to us through the first community of Christians that believed He was God's definitive Word spoken to the world, we can humbly *believe* that our God is not only our Creator but that He is not far from us. "Yet in fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and have our being..." (Acts 17:28). He, who is love (1 John 4:8), is constantly giving Himself as a gift of love to each of us as *Abba*, Father.

Jesus Christ lived in the constant presence of His Father from whom Jesus received His entire being. He found His Father working in all events (John 5:17) and He surrendered to work with Him in returning His love. He was His loving *Abba*, Daddy, who covered Jesus with His protective love. Jesus was the Father's loving Son who joyfully lived to do His will. Jesus experienced Himself as one with the Father, the Source and End of His entire being (John 17:22).

In every human encounter with other persons or in the daily events of His life, Jesus opened up to experience explicitly the Father. With complete awareness of this or that person or event encountered, He at the same time was equally attentive to the loving presence of the Father, whom He directly and immediately experienced in the concrete happening.

EXPERIENCING GOD

If God is love, this must mean, as Jesus has revealed it to us through Sacred Scripture and Holy Tradition which was handed down to us through the Church-Community of faith, that God, as community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, wishes to give Himself to us. True love is self-gift between the beloved and the lover. Jesus is proof by faith that God wishes us to receive His love and to know that love. "...the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy

Spirit which has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). Through God’s two hands, as Saint Irenaeus of the second century expressed it, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we are touched by God.

If Jesus promised that He and the Father would come and dwell within us (John 14:23), why should we not consciously experience that living presence within us? If Jesus taught us that “eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3), why should it be so extraordinary to experience such knowledge as God loving us and we being loved by God’s perfect gift of Himself as a Triune Community?

We know there are two ways of our knowing God. We can know that God exists and possesses many attributes, which by reason we can see participated in His creation. This is positive speculative knowledge, or as the Greek Fathers called it, *cataphatic* knowledge derived by our human discursive, reasoning powers. With our minds we can also negate any boundaries to the perfections of God we discover as participated in His creatures. This is a “negative way” of speculative theology that opens us up *apophatically* or through a sense of mystery to God’s presence as ineffable, inconceivable, invisible and incomprehensible to our minds. We know something about God, but we can never see in this life God as He is or is in His essence.

MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE

From Scripture [“...You cannot see my face; for no man can see me and live” (Exodus 33:20); “No man has ever seen God; but the first-born of God, who is in the bosom of his Father, he has declared him” (John 1:18)] and the constant teaching in the Church, we know that God’s Being is utterly transcendent and beyond our understanding Him directly as He truly is in His nature. Yet Scripture and our Orthodox Mystical Tradition assures us that positively, not by our intellectual or conceptual knowledge, but by God’s sheer gift of infusion through faith, hope and love, we can experience God as person-to-person in loving relationship. God and Moses communicated with each other in the tent of the meeting as friend with friend (Exodus 33:11). Moses did not see God’s face, but he looked upon God’s “back” (Exodus 33:23).

By faith in Jesus Christ, we believe that we can experience God as Trinity. By His Spirit we can come to know God experientially as our Father, providing for all our necessities because in our needs He is actively loving us through His providential caring. We can know that Jesus Christ is risen and lives in us only through the Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24). The Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, love us. Their very Divine Nature is love. They give us our human life, and all the gifts of this beautifully created Kosmos (Beautiful Universe). But the Incarnation convinces us that in and through Jesus Christ, God, who became human, one like us in all things (except sin) even in His temptations (Hebrews 4:15), the Triune Divine Persons really give themselves to us in surrendering love.

This is incredibly Good News: “Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). If eternal life is to *know* (in Semitic understanding this means to live in intimate loving oneness with the other) the Father and the Son (John 17:3) and this knowledge is made possible through the Holy Spirit, then God intends us to experience Him in His loving act of giving Himself to us through His Son in His Spirit.

REALLY CHILDREN OF GOD

God, through the incarnate Word’s Spirit, gives us the power to become “regenerated,” or reborn from above, by His Spirit (John 3:3,5). Our unspiritual or “carnal” mind can be transformed into a spiritual consciousness through the Holy Spirit. Through such a knowledge

of our being loved by God's self-giving through His Son in His Spirit, our spirit and God's indwelling Spirit "bear united witness we are children of God" (Romans 8:16). This makes us heirs of the kingdom of God and co-heirs with Christ. God's love as experienced within us and living around us in His uncreated energies of love sustaining all of creation allows us to know by not our knowing, to experience that we are truly children of God. "Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are! "See how abundant the love of the Father is toward us, for he has called us sons and made us; therefore the world does not know us because it did not know him. My Beloved, now we are the sons of God, and as yet it has not been revealed what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be in his likeness; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1-2).

But such a loving knowledge can be an ongoing experience in the context of our daily lives. As we experience God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, giving themselves directly and immediately to us individually (each of us as unique persons with unique gifts) from within our "heart," we are restored to Paradise where man and woman once listened in loving response in service to God who speaks His Word from within us and we loving obey.

We prove that we are who we are in God's divinizing us into His loving children when we live centered upon the indwelling presence of Christ, who continually speaks His Word within us. This is how we can pray constantly, as Saint Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to walk daily and at all times in the experience of God's goodness and love for us (1Thessalonians 5:17-18). To pray always is a state of awareness that can be reached only by the free working of the Holy Spirit in the depths of our hearts as we stand vigilant (nepsis) and call out for that presence of God to be realized through the medium of our human consciousness. We are called by God to experience constantly His active, loving presence at each moment of our human existence.

CHRIST TRULY LIVES IN US

When Saint Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus became for him the living Son of God, "the image (icon) of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature, because in him were created all creatures in the heavens and on the earth" (Colossians 1:15). He had truly experienced Jesus in an experience that changed his entire life and affected the entire world down through the ages of ages. Through continued experiences that Christ, the Risen Lord, lived within him and empowered Saint Paul by His Holy Spirit to preach with such amazing power and perform miracles and healings, Saint Paul could affirm: "I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake...I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:19-20).

Other Christian mystics from Saint Paul until the present day have also experienced the great mystery but nonetheless the great reality that Jesus, born of a woman (Mary, the Mother of God), is God-Man, who died out of love for all of us and is risen in glory. This risen Lord lives in us with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Such Good News God means that we are to experience. Representative of such Christian Mystics is Saint Symeon the New Theologian (+1022). He writes of his experience of the Indwelling Christ: "O immensity of ineffable glory. O excess of love! He who contains all things dwells in the interior of a corrupt and mortal man, whose every possession is in the power of Him who inhabits him. Man indeed becomes truly like a woman carrying a child. O stupendous prodigy, of an incomprehensible God, works and mysterious incomprehensible! A man bears consciously in himself God as light, Him who has produced and created all things, holding even the man who carries Him. Man carries Him interiorly as a treasure which transcends words, written or spoken, any quality, quantity, image, matter and figure, shaped in an inexplicable beauty, all entirely simple as light, He who transcends all light."

NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

When we say we have experienced God, what is meant by such a statement? What sort of knowledge or experience are we talking about? We say that a certain person has worked many years with computers (hardware and software) and is very experienced in all types of models. This would mean ordinarily that he or she knows such machines, their capabilities and how to operate them successfully to perform according to the designed function of such computers.

But what sort of an experience are we speaking of when we “experience” another human being, a human “personhood”, the “other.” It would mean a meeting in several encounters perhaps with that unique individual person. We would have “learned” certain facts and particularities about that person. We no doubt would have reflected on such information through our encounters and could articulate for others our impressions, our reflections of what we really “experienced” in the encounter and to some degree “knowing” him or her.

John Edwin Smith, (American philosopher, +2009) describes experience as “a product of the intersection of something encountered and a being capable of interpreting the results.” We can preserve what we have experienced and even pass the content (somewhat but never fully just as we had experienced it) to others.

You can experience God indirectly through experiences of natural beauties through your senses. You can also experience God in the love you experience for a friend. Such experiences of God are not direct or immediate but come to us through images. God is always beyond the experience!

Modern theologians insist that in the experience of loving intimately another human being, your best friend (and for married persons this other should be the husband or wife) there are three elements present. First, you experience deeply the other person in love beyond the mere physical characteristics that come to you through your senses. You have an experience of encountering the “inner self” of that person. You seemingly touch his or her “heart”, when you discover the uniqueness of that person over all other persons in the world.

Secondly, you have also a sense of your own uniqueness that seems to emerge as a butterfly emerging and springing out of a cocoon. The *I* is the child of the *WE*. You love the other but you also experience yourself as unique when the other calls you in love by your name.

INFINITE MYSTERY

Thirdly, there is an insistence that all human beings, when they deeply experience Transcendent Beauty or Goodness or true love, have at least an implicit sense of God as the fullness of beauty or true love beyond any limitations. Two persons in love, touching their mutual centers of uniqueness, are “hurled” beyond themselves toward God who is the Absolute Center and Source of all beauty and love, a Center without any circumference, without any limits.

But such an implicit “stretching” beyond the concrete human experience can remain blocked and remain a mere human encounter with finite beauty or love unless we can be informed through faith in God’s revealed Word in Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition through the Church’s teaching to learn from Jesus Christ that this mystery of infinite “beyondness” is God as a loving Trinitarian Community of Three Unique Hypostasis in One Essence or Nature.

We always will be thrilled to hear a beautiful symphony of Beethoven. But there will always be some pull of pain that such complexity in unified harmony cannot last always for us and cannot be infinite, all the time experienced. God has made us that way—to stretch out to make contact with the Absolute Being, to possess the Unpossessable who makes all other possessions vain.

The Blessed Augustine discovered what most of us **will** discover at some time in our lives, that God alone is the ultimate goal of our stretching out toward transcendent beauty and love. He writes: “Too late have I known Thee, O Beauty of Ancient Days, yet ever new! Too late I have loved Thee! And behold, Thou wert within and I abroad, and there I searched for Thee; deformed, I plunging amid those fair forms which Thou hast made. Thou wert with me, but I was not with Thee, which unless they were in Thee, were not at all.”

THE HIDDEN GOD OF JESUS

The Way to discover God in and beyond every experience of transcendence is Jesus Christ. In each moment of His earthly life, He learned to turn inwardly to find His Father at the center of His being (John 14:11). At His innermost consciousness, Jesus touched the holiness of His Father who was pouring Himself out as His *Abba*. He breathed, smiled, laughed and cried in that holy presence. He was bathed at all times in the Father’s uncreated energies of love and Jesus strove to return such personalized love by the same Spirit.

Everything that entered into Jesus’ experiences at Nazareth or in His public life in Jerusalem spoke in the silence of His heart that His loving Father was inside of each creature, giving Himself in loving service to His Son. The material wood He lovingly handled in the carpenter shop, the soft, fiery sunsets spangling the west with flaming colors, the sheep, vineyards, the bread and wine he partook of at table, all brought Him into deep, silent thanksgiving and worship to His Father. Nothing could take Him from the loving presence of His Father. Everything unveiled that inner presence of uncreated love.

This Jesus preached the same experience available to all who would accept His Holy Spirit. In His Spirit we can believe that the Father is in all things as uncreated energies of love. By faith, hope and love we can experience also as Jesus did His father as our *Abba* and that we are His loving children.

We can, as Jesus, experience also the Father, not only within us and loving us, but also in other human beings and in His entire created universe. The Father of us all calls us through Jesus and His Spirit to discover Him actively loving and freeing and healing each human being to experience also the same Father as the Ocean in which they swim. Edward Schillebeeckx writes: “Jesus’ *Abba* experience is an immediate awareness of God as a power cherishing people and making them free” (Jesus: An Experiment in Christology; pg. 268). The Good News that Jesus makes possible for all His disciples is that we can experience at all times and in all events of our human living our same *Abba*, Father, as intimately giving Himself to us through His active, protective love.

TO HEAR THE CRIES OF THE POOR

This loving Father is inside of all His creatures, but in a special way He is among His suffering children. He wishes to pick up the broken of this world, the sick, the poor, the oppressed, the lonely and the sinners and bring them all into His Kingdom. That Kingdom is to experience that we human beings share in the Trinitarian life of God Himself (2 Peter 1:4). This loving Father who counts the hairs on our heads is a concerned, suffering God who seeks only the happiness of His children. Our *Abba* offers unconditionally forgiveness and healing love to all who come to Him with a repentant heart.

In the Church, the very Body of Christ where Jesus Christ is the head and we are the members, we can be sure through faith, hope and love that we can experience the mystery of all reality, God as triune loving community, in all parts of His created world, but in a very special way whenever we build the Body of Christ. “Truly, truly I say to you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). Not only do

we believe in a new knowledge given by the Father's Spirit through Jesus Christ that we can experience directly the Trinity in partaking of the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist, but we break the Bread of Life and give it to others whenever we contemplate God in their lives and through our loving service to them. "...and deem it proper to impart to us with Your mighty hand, Your spotless Body and precious Blood, and through us, to all Your people...The Lamb of God is broken and distributed, broken but not divided, ever-eaten yet never consumed, but sanctifying those who partake of Him" (*Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*).

We, in a former type of view of Christian, loving service, did many "good acts" to others. Yet as we busily collected virtues and merit badges for eternal life, we may all too often have forgotten the Christ is each other, especially of the poor around us. The Christ in others is literally the same Jesus Christ, living in each person, made according to God's image that is Jesus in whom all things have been created. But the Christ is also the unique person in the other who stands out above all other men and women as different, as an incarnational point for us to meet God as the Ground of all being and of all love and beauty. We embrace the poor and become rich.

EXPERIENCING THE TRINITY

(*From Pilgrimage of the Heart, A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality, Fr. George A. Maloney*)

There is one God, the Father, of whom the One Son is begotten and from whom the One Holy Spirit flows; Unity unconfounded and Trinity undivided; Mind without beginning, and the Source of the One, everlasting Life, that is, the Holy Spirit. (*Saint Maximus the Confessor*).

The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament manifested the Son, and suggested the Deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit Himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of Himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; not when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further (if I may use so boldly an expression) with the Holy Spirit; lest perhaps people might, like men loaded with food beyond their strength, and presenting eyes as yet too weak to bare it to the sun's light, risk the loss even of that which was within the reach of their powers; but that by gradual additions, and, as David says, goings up, and advances and progress from glory to glory (Psalms 84:7), the Light of the Trinity might shine upon the more illuminated. (*Saint Gregory Nazianzus*).

We acknowledge the Trinity, holy and perfect, to consist of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this Trinity there is no intrusion of any alien element or of anything from outside, nor is the Trinity a blend of creative and created being. It is a wholly creative and energizing reality, self-consistent and undivided in its active power, for the Father makes all things through the Word and in the Holy Spirit, and in this way the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved. Accordingly, in the Church, one God is preached, one God who is above all things and through all things and in all things. God is above all things as Father, for he is Principal and Source; he is through all things through the Word; and he is in all things in the Holy Spirit.

...Even the gifts that the Spirit dispenses to individuals are given by the Father through the Word. For all that belongs to the Father belongs also to the Son, and so that graces given by the Son in the Spirit are true gifts of the Father. Similarly, when the Spirit dwells in us, the Word who bestows the Spirit is in us too, and the Father is present in the Word. This is the meaning of the text: My Father and I will come to him and make our home with him. For where the light is, there also is the radiance; and where the radiance is, there too are its power and its resplendent grace.

This is also Saint Paul's teaching in his second letter to the Corinthians: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. For grace and the gift of the Trinity are given by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Just as grace is given from the Father through the Son, so there could be no communication of the gift to us except in the Holy Spirit. But when we share in the Spirit, we possess the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Spirit himself. (Saint Athanasius).

When the Lord says, "I and my Father are one," He means their oneness of essence; and when He says, "the Father is in me, and I in him" He shows the inseparability of the Hypostases...According to the teaching of the Great Gregory we should preserve the unity of God and profess three Hypostases, each with His distinctive property. For, according to his teaching, the Trinity is divided but indivisibly; and is combined but dividedly. A wonderful union and division! But where is the wonder if the Father and the Son were combined and divided as man and man are combined and divided, and nothing more? (Saint Maximus the Confessor).

And, as for those who have managed to participate in Your secrets,
—in an immaterial sensation to share materially
in Your mysteries, formidable and for all unspeakable,
and to recognize, in visible things, the visible glory
and the strange mystery which has taken place in the world,
they are still less numerous well do I know it!
They are the ones who have received pure contemplation,
from the One who was in the beginning, before all creation,
begotten of the Father, and with the Spirit, God the Word,
triple light in unity but unique light in the three.
Two aspects of a unique light: Father, Son and Spirit,
for it is indivisible in the three Persons, without confusion,
these three Persons in whom, according to the divine nature, there is but
one power,
one glory, one authority and one will.
For all three appear to me, in one unique face,
like two beautiful eyes filled with light.
How will the eyes see without the face, tell me?
But, without eyes, it is useless to speak of the face,
deprived as it is of the essential, or, better still, of everything!
Likewise the sun, were one to extract from it the light which is its beauty,
would disappear first, and, after it, would disappear the entire creation
which receives light and vision from it.
Thus in the order of the intelligible: if God were deprived of one of the
two,
either of the Son or of the Spirit, He would no longer be Father.
He would no longer even be living, separated from the Spirit who gives
life and being to everyone.
Let every truly rational creature adore then...
the Divine Nature in three Hypostases transcending all explanation.
(Saint Symeon the New Theologian).

Trinity is simple unity; it is not merged together—it is three in one. The One three-hypostatical God has the three hypostases perfectly distinct in Himself.

God is known and understood in everything in three hypostases. He holds all things and provides for all things through His Son in the Holy Spirit; and no one of Them, wherever He is invoked, is named or thought of as existing apart or separately from the two others.

Just in the same way, man has a mind, word and spirit; and the mind cannot be without the word, nor the word without the spirit, but the three are always in one another, yet exist in themselves. The mind speaks by means of words, and the word is manifested through the spirit. This example shows that man bears in himself a feeble image of the ineffable prototype, the Trinity, thus demonstrating that he has been made in God's image.

Mind is the Father, word is the Son, spirit is the Holy Spirit, as the divine fathers teach in this example, expounding the dogmatic teaching of the consubstantial and pre-existing Trinity, of one God in three persons, thus transmitting to us the True Faith as an anchor of hope. According to the Scriptures, to know the One God is the root of immortality, and to know the dominion of the three-in-one is the whole of entire truth. The word of the Gospel on this subject can be understood thus: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God" in three hypostases, "and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" in two natures and two wills (John 17:3). (Saint Gregory of Sinai).

THE INDWELLING TRINITY

Now it is the proper substance of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the just and who sanctifies them and it belongs only to the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, to be able, by their substance, to penetrate into souls. (Saint Didymus the Blind of Alexandria).

It is untrue to say that we cannot be one with God except by union of will. For above that union there is another union more sublime and far superior, which is wrought by the communication of the Divinity to man, who, while keeping his own nature, is, so to speak, transformed into God, just as iron plunged into fire becomes fiery, and while remaining iron seems changed into fire...Union with God exists otherwise than by participation with the Holy Spirit, diffusing in us the sanctification proper to Himself, imprinting and engraving on our souls the divine likeness. (Saint Cyril of Alexandria).

Accordingly we are all one in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit; one, I say, in unity of relationship of love and concord with God and one another...one by conformity in godliness, by communion in the sacred Body of Christ, and by fellowship in the one and Holy Spirit and this is a real, physical union. (Saint Cyril of Alexandria).

May the Holy Spirit come upon you, purify and enlighten you!

Father John Michael Zboyovski