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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 Communion with the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

RECEIVING THE CHRIST

Rejecting our inauthentic self does not mean that we have turned around to face both God and our real self, integrating them in a single act of pure love. We must become totally convinced by the working of the Holy Spirit that we are in desperate need of God.

We cannot heal ourselves, locked as we are in the small, dark room of our false self, with the door handle on the other side. Only the healing power of love can let us out into the bright light of God and our true self. But love is relationship. We reach out toward another who will touch and hold us, affirm us as worthy of being loved. Alone, I cannot drive away the desperate fear that I will be rejected as unlovable, for I know in my heart how broken and sad my false self is. A folk tale tells of a prince who was turned into a frog by a witch. A beast he must remain, until a virgin looks through him to his heart and loves him. We are that poor frog and Christ the virgin who loves and marries us as we are, thus birthing us into our true selves, branches of his vine.

“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, For God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved” (John 3:16-17).

Jesus Christ announced that heaven is already here, inside us, where God lives. As our false selves evaporate like fog in the sun, we see where we are: in the presence of God. God’s love, concentrated in Jesus Christ, pierces through us until our false selves shrivel in its heat and our true selves unfurl like flowers in sunlight. As Jesus walked among the crowds, he loved, touched, and healed whomever he met. (Do you believe I AM able to do this?). In seeing him, they saw the Father and knew that God was love, they knew they were inseparable from God and from each other. Never did Jesus reject anyone nor did he burden anyone with guilt. Instead, he lifted such burdens off our backs and took them on himself. His healings were a sign that a new world, a new creation, could be the home of all who made themselves one with him in love.

God overturns the values that guide men and women to choose what their false egos say they should choose. Money, authority, power, aggression, and separation are to be replaced by the defenseless love of Jesus.

God chose, especially in the suffering and death of his Son, to confound the proud of this world. “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:22-25). God’s wisdom, so different from the wisdom of this world, flows out through the gently overwhelming Spirit of Truth, the same Spirit of Love. Within the trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit know that the true self has identity only when it loves in an emptying of itself.

Yet, we wonder, how can God love in this way, emptying himself, without ceasing to exist? Would we dare to surrender ourselves totally, at every moment, risking all we are, leaving everything to follow him, if God had not first abandoned himself to crucifixion? Probably not. Most of us hang onto whatever we have, even if we are miserable in the possession of it. If you hold onto your life, you will lose it.

If God's love had not reached out ecstatically through Jesus Christ, we would not have known how much God loved and wanted us; we would therefore have held onto all our dark doubts and ancestral fears. Because God sees us each as unique and worthy individual persons (made in the image [icon] of his Son), God gives birth to us again in a new life, overwhelmingly and completely enveloping our true self. God has left nothing undone to lead us back to Heaven...back to God's Kingdom!

We could not demand such love from God. Yet as though from some primeval knowledge, we hope for this unconditional love. In answer to our longing, God longed for us. God showed us the divine image, God's very self, in Jesus. When we see Jesus broken and emptied (kenosis) on the Precious and Life-Giving Cross, we truly see the Father (John 14:9). Jesus mirrors God's love for us in his free gift of himself out of love. Hearing his words, "The words that I speak are Spirit and Life" (John 6:23), we hear the voice of God, who promises to gather all men and women as healed children as they become one with Jesus in his gift of self.

Calvin Miller expresses the cost of God's love in his work *The Singer*. The troubadour who was killed comes back to life. He speaks to a young girl whom he had healed, and she in turn is moved to compassion by his scarred and wounded hands. She asks if they can be healed, and he responds: "Earthmaker leaves the scars, for they preserve the memory of pain. He will leave my hands this way so men will not forget what it can cost to be a singer in the theatre of hate....You will find, my child, that love rarely reaches out to save except it does it with a broken hand."

Convinced that violence and separation breed more violence and separation, we cry out with Saint Peter: "Lord! Save me!" (Matthew 14:31). By his love unto death, *Jesus*, whose name in Hebrew means: "God who saves or heals," becomes our Divine Physician. It is by his human life lived in defenselessness and forgiving love that he becomes the Way for us to find our true self.

In prayer alone with God on the mountain tops or in the desert, as well as in his ministry of preaching and healing, Jesus learned how to let go of any temptation that would separate him from oneness with God as well as with all human beings. He loved everyone because he allowed the Spirit of God's love for him to make him aware of his Godhood. He had no false ego and so could love others without a thought of self. In every human encounter, Jesus entered, as we must enter, more and more into his true self, the self that was one with God.

The Pharisees and the Scribes could attack him verbally and members of the Sanhedrin could charge him with blasphemy, yet he would not return violence with violence (Matthew 27:13-14). Hanging between his heavenly Father and his suffering people, over whom he wept and whom he wanted tenderly to gather as a hen does her chicks (Matthew 23:38), Jesus could plead only for forgiveness as he died: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

In choosing to die for mankind, Christ images the love of God for us all and at the same time passes over into a new existence, in mansions prepared for us also. God and humankind are one in the risen Jesus. By the Father's Spirit the humanity of Jesus reflects God's triune love for all human persons. Jesus is raised in glory and now has conquered sin and death, not only in his human-divine existence, but in ourselves if we accept the good news, and choose by our own free will, to live it.

Jesus Christ is the new Adam (the first-born of the dead), the first-born of a new race: the children of God (Colossians 1:15,18). He begets us into his triune family only if we are ready to deny our false ego and live according to that true self that accepts him. We have always been beautiful because God loves us unconditionally, but we have not seen ourselves: we're too

busy to look in our mirror, Christ. When we pass over from darkness to God's Uncreated Light by experiencing Jesus' new presence in our lives, outpouring love as he did on the Cross, then the illusory self drowns and our true selves awakens to new life in Jesus. Saint Paul writes to Christians in Corinth: "And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation...For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

Jesus at every moment is still exhorting us, as he did those who heard his preaching, to wake up from our sleep and come out of our shadowy existence into the daylight of his healing love. He tells us to pay attention (Luke 17:3) and to pray always (Luke 22:46; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). *Now* is the precious, God-given moment in which we not only cry out for the coming of the messiah, but in which we accept him as a healer sent by God, who raised Lazarus from the dead. Our desire for the Lord Jesus Christ to come and heal us, and our acceptance of his love can come only from his Spirit. Alone, we are powerless to call him, even powerless to hear him when he calls us. Only the Holy Spirit can link us to him, joining the unknown God to us, joining mystery to matter, God to mankind.

We were made to be vessels of God, to carry in ourselves the love that holds the universe together, sustaining it, and transforming and restoring it into God's image. The driving force in our lives, and in the life of every living thing, is to experience God's love and express it by returning that "love received" by our free will back to God. Our lives have worth only to the extent that we pass God's love on to others, the greatest form of a blessing (through us, to all your people).

As Christians, we believe that Jesus, true and perfect God and true and perfect man, promised to release in us God's Spirit of love. In that Spirit, whom Jesus could not give us until his Death on the Cross and his Ascension, we would be convinced of the truth he had taught by his life and death. "And when he [the Spirit] comes, he will show the world how wrong it was, about sin, and about Judgment: about sin: proved by their refusal to believe in me; about who was in the right: proved by my going to the Father and your seeing me no more; about judgment: proved by the prince of this world being already condemned....But when the Spirit of Truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt; and he will tell you of the things to come" (John 16:8-13).

The movement of the indwelling Spirit within us (Romans 8:9) resurrects a nostalgia in the depths of our being for the home of our Father. The Holy Spirit gives us the courage to be discontented with our inauthentic self and to remember, arise, and return to our Father. We need only to ask the Father in the name of Jesus to pour his Spirit into our consciousness (Like 11:9-13): "But all you will seek Yahweh your God from there, and if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul, you shall find him. In your distress, all that I have said will overtake you, but at the end of days you will return to Yahweh your God and listen to his voice. For Yahweh your God is a merciful God and will not desert or destroy you or forget the covenant he made on oath with your Fathers" (Deuteronomy 4:29-31).

The voice of the Beloved within us crumbles our self-invented prison-wall dividing us from the Father. The joy of being reconciled with us thrills the heart of the Father who had never left us, but lived silently in the tomb of our hearts waiting for resurrection unto eternal life. Our Father says: "we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he **was** lost and **is** found" (Luke 15:23-24).

Our separation from God and from our fellow human beings was a lie created by our false ego. The love of God shines through it like sunlight through stained glass.

All too often we have interpreted the atonement of Christ for our sins in static, legalistic courtroom style terms (verses God dealing with us in a hospital). But the atonement is the Holy Spirit moving through our darkness on wings infinitely bright into our heart's core, once we are emptied of false ego and longing to be filled with Christ's love. The Holy Spirit uncovers for us the good news—that we were always in God's loving plan as members of Christ.

“Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons, through Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

The Spirit first pours into our newly conscious hearts faith, hope, and love to comfort us in our exile. “They had left in tears, I will comfort them as I lead them back; I will guide them to streams of water, by a smooth path where they will not stumble. For I AM a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my first born son” (Jeremiah 31:9).

Our quaking fears and guilt are dissolved because perfect love casts out all fear. We see that God has never left us and that God's merciful love is above all God's works. In the experience of that love, in the now-moment, pouring into us from the fullness of the overflowing triune God, we live in love as God does. We wake up from the dark night of unreality to the daylight of God's perfect and everlasting love.

By leading us into deeper and deeper prayer, beyond all words and images and concepts, which can often be manipulated by the false ego's desires, the Spirit prays within us, to the Father through the Son (Romans 8:26-27). The Spirit of God teaches us all the things we need to know for our healing and salvation, and will bring back to our remembrance all that he has taught us. In such prayer we experience the true, forgiving merciful-love of Jesus, who in his Spirit adopts us as the children of God (1 John 3:1; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6), heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven and co-heirs with Christ forever.

Through Christ's death and resurrection and obedience to the Father, Jesus has healed and perfectly restored human nature and perfectly united (recapitulated) all of creation with the Holy Trinity through his personhood (hypostasis). God has left nothing undone to lead us back to Heaven! We now understand by the Spirit our authentic beauty in God's healing love. No longer are we beasts driven by the autism of our false selves. We uproot all thought and action contrary to the teachings of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and become the beautiful image of God: “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. This life I now live in this body I live in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake” (Galatians 2: 19-20).

EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The original source of Eastern Christian spirituality is, obviously, rooted in the very first communities of Christianity. That spirituality was a practical science, a way of life in God. The articulation of that science followed practical experience. The earliest Christians were mainly concerned with living the new-found faith in simple obedience to the message of the Gospel. In the midst of paganism, the followers of Christ gave witness to the “good news” that Jesus Christ came to bring to us all. We find a stark living-out of the commandments of Christ, especially those of fraternal charity, without any desire to speculate on the why. The event that Christ concretized by his incarnation was a vivid experience, not only through the mystical, resurrectional life of Christ living in the souls of his early followers through grace but also through a closeness in time and space to the historical person himself.

Gradually, especially through attempts to explain this living experience “in Christ” to neighboring pagans and Jews or to preserve the revealed truths from heretical teachings, there arose in the pristine Church not only among Christians philosophers and theologians but a living dynamic tradition accessible to all Christians, of reflective knowledge concerning the human relationship to God in his or her last end (telos). Christians felt the necessity of living reflectively and consciously their faith. They had no Christian heritage or culture that permeated society at each step and held them in a Christian milieu. They had to create this milieu for themselves. And they began this process of Christian reflection by asking themselves what was the “end meaning” of their lives.

THE GOAL OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The early Christian firmly seized this fundamental truth. The goal of life was simply *salvation*. The Greek word for salvation, *soteria*, was rich with nuances that are lost to us in our simple translation. For Plato, *soteria* meant security, a state of prosperity, good health, well-being. Human beings have a natural will, a *physicon thelema*, to seek their own happiness or well-being. But the pagan Hellenic philosophers did not agree as to what made up this goal of all human desires. The Epicureans sought their happiness in material and intellectual pleasures. The Platonists sought it in the contemplation of the eternal ideas. Stoics strove to acquire it through the acquisition of virtues and the deadening of inordinate passions.

The Christians knew that happiness was the fulfillment of the total person, according to the potentialities placed in him or her by the Creator. Saint Irenaeus (+c. 200), Bishop of Lyons, says the glory of God is humanity living fully. Saint Paul exhorts the early Christians to prepare in this life for the coming of the Lord: “and may you all be kept safe and blameless, spirit, soul and body, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Salvation or total human happiness and joy was effected in God and only by God. Plato and the early pagan philosophers at the time of the proximate dawning of Christianity seemed to sense this, as Festugiere writes: “Perfect happiness for human beings is the union with the ideas of more correctly, with the One, the good, with God.” Still, Plato felt that people could attain this state of complete happiness through their own innate powers. Christians, on the contrary, recognized that this was the goal of humanity, yet that it could be attained only through the gift of the Grace of God. The actual gift of “himself.”

In the Old Testament, God is praised as the savior. Human salvation, human happiness on this earth, consists in serving God. The most characteristic trait of the Old Testament and the most related bond to the concept of grace in the New Testament is that of *hesed*, the condescending merciful love of God in his covenant made with humanity. *Hesed* made the Israelite approach God with confidence because *hesed* was based on the eternal Word of God that he would not turn away from his chosen people but that he would protect them from all harm and make them prosper.

In the New Testament, this belief is the basic conviction commented on by the early Church Fathers in their writings and in the Eastern Liturgies; namely, that the aim of all human existence is to obtain salvation that has been promised by God, has been worked out for us by God, and is to be found totally in God. It was God through Jesus Christ that effected salvation, which, viewed negatively, salvation was a liberation from the fate that had filled the pagans with black, pessimistic fatalism in their inability to cope with the problems with the enigma and absurdity of speaking of evil and death.

The New Testament revealed to humanity a loving Father in Heaven who permitted evil in order to draw out greater good in his merciful providence. Salvation was a liberation from the despair of human loneliness by incorporating the individual person into a new society, a

community of the people of God, the *koinonia*, that gave individual Christians a social, spiritual life of unity with their neighbors by the bond of charity in Christ. Salvation as conceived by the New Testament, negatively, was liberation from death through the free gift of eschatological life; it was freedom from mortality and corruption, achieved by making the Christian enjoy the immortality (*aphtharsia*) of the risen savior who had conquered over death and its sting. Positively, salvation is the possession of God (the Un-Possessable) who alone is the good. Possessing him, we possess the happiness for which he created us.

SALVATION ONLY THROUGH CHRIST

Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's life, the *pleroma* of whom we have even in this life received. Christ is in some way the total Christianity. This seems so evident to any Christian that we would not be surprised to find this the central point in the early Christian writings.

Saint Peter insists, "For of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12). Against heresies such as Docetism, Gnosticism, and the Christological errors of Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism, the early Church mounted a strenuous battle of words to retain the full Christ and the centrality of his actions in and through us to effect our salvation. Correct thinking and worship (*Orthodoxia*) and correct ascetical life (*Orthopraxis*) concerning our salvation was intimately tied up with the correct notions on the fundamental truth of Christianity, that of the incarnation and person of Jesus Christ.

Thus imitation of Christ, following Saint Peter's constant exhortation "to become imitators of us and of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:6), became the way of virtues that led to salvation. If Christians were enjoined by their founder to be perfect as their Heavenly Father was perfect, how more readily would they find the way, the truth, and the life of that perfection that was closed to human eyes, but opened to them in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ? For the first three centuries, the imitation of Christ was the center of Christian living.

IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

This process of growth in Christ is effected by the Holy Spirit who is the Life-Giver, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who is in all places and fills all things, the *zoopoion*, the maker of life. Whatever the Church does by way of sanctifying its members in Christ, it does through the Holy Spirit. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). For the early Christians, *spiritual* meant not only some immaterial quality but also an effect that depended in origin and for continuation on the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit brings men and women to perfection, the spiritual person is the perfect human being. Only a spiritualized person, one in whom the Holy Spirit lives and acts, could discourse about God and give guidance in the spiritual life. From the fourth century onward, following this belief in the illumination of the Holy Spirit in true knowledge about God and his Logos, true theologians would be those who, under the illumination from the Holy Spirit, after a long purification and asceticism as preparation, wrote and discoursed about God.

Prayerfully yours in Christ Jesus our Lord,
Father John Michael Zboyovski