

## **INSCAPE July, 2013**

©Stillpoint Contemplative Ministries

### **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!**

I ask you to continue to encourage your friends to read Inscape, and if you wish, to share some “feed-back” with me on how this newsletter can be of even greater service to you and your contemplative prayer group.

Reflect back on the beauty of the beginnings of spring. After a long dull winter, during which frost and snow have stripped nature of all signs of verdant life and covered each created thing with the sign of cold death, spring comes with its clarion call of hope that announces that what lay so many months in apparent death is about to stir unto new, fresh life.

### **DISCIPLINE AS AN AID TO PRAYER**

There is a fundamental law in nature that could be formulated in these words: “There is nothing that lives but that something must die. There is nothing that dies but that something else will live.” Jesus Christ taught this law many times in quite blunt language. He had seen in His growing years in Nazareth the sower that sowed seed in spring. And so He taught: “Truly, truly I say to you that unless a grain of wheat falls and dies in the ground, it will be left alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who has no concern for his life in this world will keep it to eternal life” (John 12: 24-25).

In paradoxical language Jesus insisted that if anyone wanted to be His disciple and obtain eternal life (the Indwelling, Trinitarian Life), he had to begin by a “dying” process. He had to enter into a suffering, but one that would deliver him unto new life. He had to take the risk of surrendering himself to Him by giving up a lower level of existence which allowed him to be in dominance, ruling his own life, in order to accept Christ’s offer to move into a higher level of existence to be guided by His Holy Spirit.

### **PRAYER DEMANDS DISCIPLINE**

I have often said that the two words most misunderstood by many Christians are *mysticism* and *asceticism*. You are beginning to understand contemplative life no longer as a rare state for rarefied individuals but as the call God gives to all His children to live ever more consciously in His love and to return that experienced love to other human beings. It is imperative that you understand the necessity of discipline if you are to attain any degree of intimate union in prayer with God and neighbor.

No doubt you see in the young generation the inroads that materialism and affluence have made, rendering them very self-centered individuals. Without discipline, no student can ever master any subject requiring concentration and intense mental application. A concert violinist or pianist must give up many other pursuits in order to practice the long hours required for achieving their skills. They must even give up some legitimate sport activities if the practice of these might injure their delicate fingers.

Consider your life and see whether there is a habitual attitude of self-control and inner discipline. Would you say that in all your body, soul and spirit relationships you exercise a mental “alertness” and an inner turning to the Indwelling Word of God to put all things in proper proportion? St. Paul exhorted the new Christians of Corinth “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 Cor. 10:5).

The mode of living throughout your entire Christian life is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might and with all your mind...and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22: 37-39). But there can be no new level of awareness in prayer that God is our all, unless there be a wrenching of ourselves out of the self-containment of a lower level. Orthopraxis, the life of asceticism that is grounded in Orthodoxy, therefore, is more of a mental attitude that comes through an experience in prayer that God is by His very nature All-Loving. As you learn that He alone must be worshiped, glorified, praised and thanked, you manfully strive to put to death all affections and attachments to lesser loves that may become obstacles to your full love of God and neighbor.

## **TRUE LIBERATION**

All too long (and this might explain in your own case why discipline in your spiritual life may have become lessened) we have heard distorted teachings on asceticism. And we were right in rejecting a faulty view of Christianity and human nature. Asceticism for many Christians had become an unhealthy withdrawal from this material world. Through influence from pagan philosophies of Platonism, Manichaeism, Stoicism etc., some in the early Church through monasticism presented the material body as a source of evil, therefore it was to be beaten into submission to the spirit.

Appetites that were basically good were held in check by certain extreme practices in areas such as fasting, abstinence, sexual continence etc. The more you "tortured" the body and writhed in pain, the more pleasing you were supposed to be in God's eyes. You were to accept humiliations and always consider yourself the least of all human beings. Is it any wonder that with a more holistic, biblical approach to theology and anthropology, informed by the behavioral sciences such as psychology and sociology, we have justly turned from some of the old "traditional" views of asceticism? But have we replaced them with a more informed teaching?

You cannot grow in contemplative prayer nor can you grow into becoming even a successful, loving human being without discipline in all body, soul and spirit relationships. In deep prayer you learn to penetrate within yourself to levels beyond your habitual control, to enter the core of your being and there to find the spark of Divine creativity which enables you to give yourself consistently in unselfish love to God and others. This is true liberation, a true expansion of your human consciousness as a person, freely taking your life in hand and giving it back to God who has given you "all things" in Christ Jesus. This is a resurrection to a new and higher level of a transfigured life.

The law of God universally operating on all levels of nature holds true also in regard to your self-development. To "ascend" to a higher form of existence, a greater liberation, you must undergo a "descending" process, a dying to the elements in your total make-up that act as obstacles to a higher mode of existence. The more you live on a purely secular level with no reflective reference to God, the less asceticism will be in your life. The more you give up your selfish aggrandizement by thinking in terms of others in loving service, the more you prepare yourself for a fuller living according to your total nature as God destined you to live.

## **NEED FOR DISCIPLINE**

Today, in our modern pleasure-oriented culture, our bodily appetites are more in need of discipline than ever. But just what forms are to be used will be determined by the goal intended, namely, to love God and neighbor as perfectly as possible. The life of Jesus demonstrates that He had to "go against" His own desires in order to attain His life's goal of

doing at all times whatever most pleased His Heavenly Father. The asceticism of Jesus was not separated from His mystical union with the Father. His ascetical practices of going against His own will in order to please the Father were always subordinated to the Father and had full meaning insofar as they brought Him into a greater intimate union with His Father. "...O Father, if Thou wilt let this cup pass from me; but not as I will, but Thy will be done" (Lk. 22:42). St. Paul expresses such discipline thus: "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, who is created by God in righteous and true holiness" (Eph. 4: 23-24).

In such inner discipline there is always a seemingly negative aspect. Christianity teaches us that there is sin in our members, as St. Paul discovered in his own life "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and it makes me a captive to the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:23). Jesus insisted on the inner guarding of the "heart", the deepest level of consciousness within us where motivation for actions is engendered. "But what comes out of the mouth comes out from the heart; and that is what defiles man" (Matt. 15:18). The vessel had to be cleansed from within and the first step to that cleansing was an inner attentiveness to the thoughts. Jesus knew "for where your treasure is, there also will be your heart" (Luke 12:34).

Jesus insisted upon the cross of self-denial in order that you might have a part with Him. "And whoever does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:38). "Then Jesus said to His disciples, he who wishes to follow Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). "And Jesus called the people together with His disciples, and said to them. He who wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34). "Then He said in the presence of everyone, he who wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross every day and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). "And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me cannot be a disciple to Me" (Luke 14:27).

All too often you might think that you would like to follow Jesus Christ, but like the rich young man in St. Mark's Gospel, you have too many "possessions", "Then Jesus looked at him and loved him, and He said to him, you lack one thing; go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have a treasure in heaven; and take up your cross and follow Me. But he felt sad because of this saying, and he went away depressed; for he had great wealth" (Mark 10: 21-22). There are "enemies", forces both within you and outside of you, attacking you and setting up obstacles against your being your true self as a loving child of God.

St. Peter comes on quite strongly in stressing the need for discipline in the sense of vigilance against the attacks of an enemy: "Be vigilant and be cautious, because your adversary, the devil, like a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

St Paul describes at length the spiritual life in terms of a struggle, a battle, a warfare engaged against spiritual forces that seek his destruction. The aim is to seek always the will of God out of loving submission to Him. But this means to enter into the lists, the arena, and stand manfully against the attacks of the evil forces. "From henceforth, my brethren, be strong in our Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For your conflict is not only with flesh and blood, but also with the angels, and with powers, with the rulers of this world of darkness, and with the evil spirits under the heavens. Therefore put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to meet the evil one, and being prepared you shall prevail. Arise, therefore, gird your loins with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness; and have your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; together with these, take for yourselves the shield of faith, for with it you shall be able to quench all the flaming darts of the wicked. Put on the helmet of salvation and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God; and pray always, with all prayer and supplications in the Spirit; and in that prayer be watchful at all times, praying

constantly and supplicating for all the saint” (Eph. 6: 10-18).

## **PUTTING ON THE MIND OF CHRIST**

Inner discipline is not merely negative. Therapy takes on a positive aspect as it is a means that leads to health. But the spiritual life is more a challenge to embrace full health, the full realization of our spiritual potential (theosis), to accept the life that Jesus has come to bring us, that we might have it more abundantly. “...I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd; a good shepherd risks his life for the sake of the sheep (John 10: 10-11). Self-denial, needed to become what you should be in God’s eyes, is the therapy that excises your “false-ego” which holds back your true growth. The Orthodox Church has always expressed sin as a sickness, which is in need of great healing by the Divine Physician, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Healing is the restoration to that wholeness required to effect total healing of man’s body, soul and spirit relationships. When sin is viewed as a transgression of the law, then the breaking of the law requires a justice system to carry out the punishment that is necessary for order within society.

In asceticism there is a more positive aspect: that of putting on the mind of Christ, of imitating Him who alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:56). Putting on the virtues that Jesus lived in His earthly life is, therefore, a necessary part of spiritual discipline that frees us from our sinful-self; imitating Him becomes our most powerful motive for living as free children of God. Jesus Himself exhorted all His followers: “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and meek in My heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is pleasant and My burden is light (Matt. 11: 29-30).

His disciples are to turn the other cheek, love all enemies, do good even to those who hurt them. The epistles of the New Testament are nothing but a continued exhortation, not only to avoid sin, but to practice Christ-like virtues. Christianity must be the motive of your doing, always presupposing God’s grace, in moving your will to desire to live virtuously. This is your “*praxis*”, your “doing” in order that you may cooperate to live “according to the image and likeness” of God that is Jesus Christ.

But such cooperation again necessitates a control of our appetites, which tend toward immoderation. It means imposing limits according to the mind of God communicating the extent of our moderation. And this spells for all of us suffering, a going against ourselves, in a word, the cross that Jesus Christ promised to those who would have a part with Him.

## **LISTENING TO GOD’S WORD**

If God is love, He cannot cease to love you with anything less than an everlasting, perfect love. This means that He is loving you precisely at this moment, in this human encounter with this person, in this moment of physical or emotional sickness, confusion, desire for success, in this situation of humiliation and seeming failure, in that joy and in this cross.

Asceticism for modern Christians must primarily consist in a gentle spirit that listens attentively to God’s Spirit revealing that God is now at this moment in-breaking with His infinite love in your daily life. You practice asceticism and inner discipline when you see that this duty, this action, this passive acceptance of what is being done and cannot be undone, is a part of God’s presence. This “place” is holy because God is about to manifest His love and goodness to you in this place.

It will always be beyond you and me to see with our puny minds what is willed by God at every moment in our lives and what God may be permitting to happen. But true discipline in the spiritual life demands of the Christian a faith vision that wants to see God present somehow in each moment and thus to trust and love Him in that moment, to cooperate with

His loving activity and in this way seek to glorify Him. "Go, therefore, and convert all nations; and baptize them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you; and lo and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the ages. Amen". (Matt. 28: 19-20).

A housewife is being ascetical when she sees that she is praising God more at this moment by preparing food for her hungry family than by going off to a Bible meeting. A student is practicing asceticism when he or she works in the library on a term paper, knowing that it is pleasing to God and part of his or her personal fulfillment at that moment. A child is practicing asceticism when it is time to play, and plays with joy. A husband could please God in no better way than to do his work with energy and joy, honestly and with love for God and family. The best way for a husband to express his love for his children, is to love and respect their mother. Thus asceticism looks to the whole person as he or she brings himself or herself in this or that moment under the guiding merciful love of God.

### **BE ATTENTIVE! PEACE BE UNTO ALL! WISDOM, BE ATTENTIVE!**

If you have ever participated in the celebration of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom or St. Basil the Great, you would be struck by the many times during the Liturgy that the priest or deacon loudly proclaims to the members of the congregation: "Wisdom! Be Attentive!" In the Divine Liturgy of Saint James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, the celebrant commands "Let us attend in Wisdom." It is a call to become attentive bodily and in spirit, for Christ, God's Wisdom, is about to come into this community in a distinctive and new way.

It is this interior activity of one's mind that is all-important in prayer and in the proper use of all creatures to praise God. All external activity, unless the mind and heart accompanies it and directs it to God's praise and glory, is useless before God. If your heart, the deepest level of consciousness, is fixed in loving adoration and obedience to God, no enemy can touch you. In fact, then the world of temptations becomes the arena where you, in conflict, can be tested and grow into a deeper, purer love for God and neighbor.

It is in such temptations that you will discipline yourself to resist the very beginnings of such thoughts. If you allow the temptation to carry you away without going to God, your center, you may set yourself up to accept the suggestion that now has become so attractive to you that you feel you must have it through to action. The best resistance to such temptations is to turn within and cry out with St. John Cassian, one of the early Fathers of the desert, "Oh, Lord, come to my assistance! Oh, Lord, make haste to help me?" The Jesus Prayer is the Eastern Christian's weapon to disperse the demonic suggestions by crying out in confidence for the mercy of Jesus: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

### **NEPSIS**

We can learn from the early fathers of the desert and their teaching about *nepsis*. This word comes from the Greek word, *nepo*, which means to be sober, not inebriated or intoxicated. It refers to a mental sobriety, a mental balance, an internal disposition of attention to the movement of God's Spirit leading you to true discernment of how you should react to a given situation or temptation according to your true dignity as God's loving child. In this state, you are not moved impulsively by your own desires or passions, but you hold yourself in abeyance until you know what this or that thought is all about in God's *Logos*. God is the living criterion of your choices and as often as you choose according to His holy will, the freer you will become as His child. Freedom, therefore, is not primarily having the possibility of choosing good or evil, but ultimately choosing always the good according to God's *Logos*. This is true integration according to the likeness of God, brought about by fidelity to the interior living Word

of God within you.

If you allow yourself to go through the day without being inwardly attentive to the presence of God within you, you become progressively more dispersed and more self-centered. The self in you becomes the criterion of your choices, your words and actions. This is the state of vagueness described earlier, as a lack of desire to seek God and therefore a movement away from faith in God's hidden presence and the realization that He is the beginning and end of your life.

As you live, so you pray! You can see how important discipline is both in controlling your thoughts and in putting on the mind of Christ. As you positively seek at every moment to bring your will under the dominance of God's holy will, you truly find that you are praying incessantly as St. Paul exhorts the early Christians to do. "Be joyful always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ concerning you" (1 Thess. 5: 16-18).

### SOME PRINCIPLES

In a 30 page special teaching prepared by Fr. Maloney, at the request of a publisher, he answers questions about the spiritual life entitled: *Following Jesus in the Real World: Asceticism Today*. He brought together some principles that may be helpful for you as you seek to bring discipline into your spiritual life.

1. **Any and all ascetical practices must always be considered as means to attain the end of the full perfection of the spiritual life.** The spiritual life does not exist for ascetical practices but vice versa. There is in the Christian life no value as such in suffering pain or hardship. The value of any such ascetical practices derives from the interior motivation to aid one's growth in the spiritual life through therapeutic correctives to offset the influences of sin in all of its self-centeredness and in the positive development of Christ-like virtues. Some ascetical practices may be eliminated and new ones can be developed, all based on this principle of all ascetical practices as such are only useful insofar as they produce a vibrant Christian life of obedience to God's holy will.

2. **The whole person must be the subject of continual discipline.** For many of us who have tried with varying degrees of success to practice asceticism over the years, we find that our temptations are stronger, our basic predominant tendencies seem to be more powerful, and that our mortified side of the ascetical life begins to fit into a pattern of do's and don'ts, of pigeon-holed procedures, that do not seem to bring forth the hundredfold promised by the Saviour if the seed should fall into the earth and die. All too often our ascetical practices are not seen as a part of a whole spiritual life. Individual acts of mortification are not seen in the role that they are to perform as a part of a whole picture.

Before all else, therefore, we must realize that the whole person must be the subject of continuous mortification. One cannot focus his attention and curb only his bodily appetites while giving free rein to his interior senses. For example: A person may have brought under control their sexuality but still allows pride to have full sway in their thoughts and actions. A housewife may have disciplined herself to do her household duties faithfully but may be very neglectful in loving her husband, by not caring to listen to him. A monk or a nun may be very abstemious at table, observing perfect modesty of the eyes, and be so perfectly in control of bodily senses and passions that seem more like an angel than a human being. And yet, interiorly, they may be judging their neighbor constantly in an uncharitable way.

We are whole persons, made up of body, soul and spirit relationships. We cannot "specialize" in a few ascetical concentrations while allowing whole areas of our relationships to develop without any ascetical discipline.

3. **Yet, there must be a hierarchy in our ascetical practices.** The whole person must be continuously brought under the moderation of Jesus Christ, but certain areas of our being are more important in determining our choices than others. Hence, without yielding any area of our life to a lack of control, still we must place more importance upon some ascetical practices over others. It should be fairly easy for a seriously committed Christian to reach a relative control over the baser, bodily appetites toward food and drink and sex. But the interior faculties of our memory, understanding and will, require a more constant control since these faculties relate closely to spiritual activity which can easily vacillate from thought to thought. Such interior faculties are where moral decisions are made to sin or to practice virtuous acts.

4. **Mortification seeks to moderate pleasure.** St. John of the Cross, in a statement not always understood by serious-minded Christians, wrote: "Whatever pleases should be repudiated for the sole reason that it pleases; whatever displeases should be embraced for the sole reason that it displeases. Seek rather not what is easier but what is more difficult, not what pleases more but what displeases more, to have not more but less, not to desire anything, but to be indifferent." If one were to follow this advice without greater understanding of this principle, great danger could arise in one's spiritual life.

Pleasure is not in itself an evil; in fact it can be very helpful and can be a source of finding God inside of such pleasure. He gives us a pleasure in eating food that is well prepared, a certain reposefulness in sleep, joy and pleasure in intimate sharing with friends. But this principle calls us to an awareness and an attentiveness that pleasure can be most pleasant to our fallen nature. It can be sought by us as an end in itself and not in accordance with God's plan. When pleasure accompanies the performance of our duties, e.g., eating and drinking in moderation, doing our work well according to our state of life, talents, and according to the will of God, then such pleasure serves to give glory to God, as St. Paul exhorts us: "Whether therefore you eat or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

To seek pleasures for themselves as an end is to fail not only in asceticism but above all it is to fail in fulfilling our primary end: To live totally according to the mind of God who creates pleasures as means. Mortification is the constant state of vigilance over our sinful nature that turn so easily from the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ toward self-centeredness. It is in this area of seeking to attain the proper, moderate control of pleasures to serve our spiritual, ultimate end, that we find the need to go beyond the median from time to time so that we can build up a proper command over the more serious parts of our human nature.

5. **All ascetical practices, especially those of mortification, should be practiced with prudence and discretion.** Today it is so evident that no two persons are identical in their body, soul and spirit endowments. We can readily observe that God Himself does create inequality as part of His plan of salvation for humanity. Each person has unique body relationships as well as psychic and spiritual ones. Hence, the ascetical needs and intensity of mortifications as well as the quality and the kind chosen will vary from person to person. Each person varies in bodily and moral strength. Hence the state of life and our level of the spiritual life must be a serious consideration in determining prudently what ascetical practices are to be used, how much, how long, when and where, etc.

Prudence dictates, that whatever practices are used, we must always be able to perform adequately our duties of life. You may want to fast on a certain day but your specific duties may demand that you have sufficient, bodily strength. Then your mortification might consist in doing a good job and seeing that you do it with cheerfulness and energy. Prudence would insist that a housewife be at home to prepare meals for her husband and children before she seeks asceticism in volunteer work.

## AREAS OF DISCIPLINE

If you are to grow in deeper prayer and oneness with God, striving at every moment to seek to please Him, you must concretely zero in upon the various areas that make up your life. Although many of our former ascetical practices no longer have a part to play in our present lives, perhaps for some of the reasons touched on above (but also perhaps because of some slothfulness and neglect), it would be good to make an examination of the particular areas of our own makeup to see whether there is not a need to return to a disciplining in those areas.

1. ***Discipline of the body and exterior senses.*** There are many hindrances to success in prayer, such as preoccupation with work, ill-health, sluggishness and sleeplessness in the morning etc., but these eventually are overcome and do not bar real success. But lack of consistent discipline in the control of the body and the exterior senses will always bring about a state of dispassion and self-centeredness, which destroys any true, self-surrendering prayer. Can we bring ourselves to moderation in regard to sense attachments merely out of love for God and our zeal for deeper prayer and greater growth in perfection?

Here we might examine our indulgences in the matter of food, drink, sleep, sex, even the habit of smoking and the use of time.

Does fasting have any place in your life? One of the lost practices of asceticism is that of fasting. Fasting helps us to overcome temptations and live solely unto the Lord. Such fasting that is pleasing to God and not merely an exercise of vanity or mere preservation of temporal life is accompanied by humility, repentance and true sincerity of heart. Fasting must be fundamentally an act of offering oneself to God through the sacrifice of a humble and contrite heart. Such an impulse must first come from God and not be of our own planning. The movement and timing of the Lord are important so that our fasting may be a true, religious act of loving worship and self-surrender to God. It must be the Holy Spirit who leads us into deeper Christian values of fasting. This prevents fasting from becoming a technique taken on solely for health purposes or expanded consciousness or for whatever purpose that could so easily turn it into another idol.

Fasting is not mere renunciation or self-discipline, arduously forged by human will. It is an action that flows from a reflex consequent to experiencing what it means to live in Christ. The Spirit teaches us how to integrate the three levels of the body, soul and spirit into a "new man" in Christ Jesus. He teaches us to fast so that such an experience under His power will engender a state of balance and truthfulness that is called humility. This allows us to conduct ourselves properly towards God, our neighbor, and the world according to God's mind.

There are all kinds of fasts. The normal fast consists of nothing but water. Other fasts allow liquids. If solid foods are eaten, then it is considered a cutting down or an abstinence but not a true fast. This is usually associated with giving up all solid food for a portion of a day, a whole day or a series of days. Again, prudence demands that one work up to an extended fast and always be able to perform his or her duties of life. With added time not given to meals, one should find more time to pray.

Today, with millions of people suffering from hunger throughout the world, true Christian love urges us to fast and make sacrifices to obtain God's mercy upon our unfortunate sisters and brothers and to touch the hearts of those most capable of coming to the help of such destitute people. Once one has developed a disciplined attitude in controlling such basic urges as desire for food and drink, he can easily move the fasting discipline into other areas of controlling not only sense pleasures but also the interior senses, especially those of imagination, intellect and will. Fasting becomes a habitual mind-set of securing moderation in all things. This shows itself in the matter of food and drink at meals. It is most beneficial that we should always leave the table still somewhat hungry? Full satiety is not moderation.



One of the more modern areas for discipline use, unknown in earlier times as a field of asceticism, is the control we exercise over our involvement in the areas of expanded communication, media television and even photography. These inventions are without a doubt a tremendous feat of technocracy and we have all profited enormously from these gifts. But we have also seen in our modern generation some of the great evils that come from indiscriminate “watching” or “participating” without any discipline. Modern television and video games and cellular communication have produced a generation of pseudo-contemplatives.

Children from earliest childhood watch for hour after hour programs that allow a maximum of passivity in the viewer while at the same time fill the mind with mental pictures and oral dialogue that often tend to make the individual see himself as a powerful human being, the center of a world of fantasy and violence. The subliminal suggestions in programs---and above all in the consumerism of advertisements---can wear down the strongest faith vision of a Christian eager to advance in the spiritual life. I believe excessive, indiscriminate viewing of TV programs (entertainment movies, political, economic, or social topics) is the greatest deterrent to a life of deeper prayer. True prayer demands so much self-activity in a milieu of faith, hope, and love---elements that are discouraged, at best, by the instant sense satisfaction in utter passivity that is the natural result of the TV habit.

Above all, in watching TV (now available in three dimension), we see this principle verified so often: gratification of the senses grows in its demands. A cult of the comfortable with self-absorption takes over with (1) almost complete neglect of our few positive practices of mortification, (2) disregard of the fine modesty in managing the body, (3) little guard of the senses, especially the eyes, which allows every kind of picture or sight thereafter to enter into the imagination. Movies, video games, Internet availability, magazines and other forms of amusements take on undue interest and place in one’s life. The indiscriminate watching of television or Internet usage without discipline can destroy any desire to pray. Do you watch TV excessively? What type or category of program do you watch? How many hours a day do you devote to watching TV? With today’s technology in communication and entertainment, and the capability of recording programs to be viewed at a later chosen time, you can fill up a twenty-four hour day within minutes of preparation, already planning ahead how one will spent future time.

**2. Discipline of the Inner Senses.** True Christian asceticism does not teach that the faculties of imagination and memory should ever be ignored or allowed to atrophy. We are to bring these God-given faculties under the submission to the hegemony of our right reason and a Grace-filled will, and these are to be in obedience to the Indwelling Spirit of Jesus. It is often in this area of imagination and memory that most of our temptations arise as imaged suggestions from out of past sense experiences. What we do with these temptations by way of *nepsis*, that inner vigilance of bring every thought and imagination under the authority of Jesus Christ, as St. Paul writes (2 Cor. 10:5), will determine whether we belong to the Kingdom of light or that of darkness (spiritual ignorance).

Here are some suggestions for the ascetical disciplining of our imagination and memory:

A. Strive to expel from the very first moment of awareness any fancies and reveries that seem to be a dangerous occasion for sin. Idle daydreaming, useless musings and fancies not only waste a great deal of time, but surely pave the way to more sinful thoughts of self-absorption.

B. One of the best remedies against interior dispassion is energy and attention to the performance of our duties, our work at hand, done for the glory of God in His holy presence. We should take pride in doing well for His glory whatever is at hand.

C. Another way of controlling such idle fancies is to feed the imagination and direct the

memory with wholesome thoughts and images, thoughts from Holy Scripture and Liturgical celebrations, spiritual writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Desert, and from the beauties of nature. By using well, in a disciplined manner, these faculties, we will be served by them in prayer and constant recollection of God's presence throughout the day.

**3. Control of the Emotions.** Many spiritual authors in the past discussed control of the passions. Today psychology discusses the role of emotions or inner drives in our anima-animus roles. Whatever word we give to these emotions or sensible appetites, we have all had experience of what power for good or evil they possess. Some passions are rooted in the pleasure or "concupiscible" appetites toward sensible goods with a reaction more or less strong on the bodily organism. The concupiscible emotions are love, hatred, desire, aversion, joy and sadness. The "irascible" or aggressive passions are courage, fear, hope, despair, and anger. You can see at an instance and with slight reflection over your past how helpful and how dangerous these have been for the developing of virtues and for sinning.

There never was a saint who did not become one by the help of his or her strong passions, brought under the dominance of grace informing the intellect and will. The greatest sinners were so because they have allowed their passions full liberty, led on by the attraction or pleasure for some material, sense object. These sensitive appetites are blind and they rush powerfully toward their proper object unless the intellect and will can control them through the illumination of grace.

If we wish to please God and grow in greater union with Him, we must redirect all inordinate movements toward God by sublimation or rechanneling. When we are led by blind passions, perfect union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot be attained for a seemingly greater force propels us---unless there be that inner discipline, consciously directing these forces toward God-centeredness.

**4. Discipline of the Intellect.** Our intellect is the God-given faculty, which enlightens the will to do good and avoid what is conceived as evil. Under the name of conscience, it is our guide for our moral life. All of us have need to discipline how we use our intellects, what we allow to enter into our minds from our reading and curious thinking. Asceticism in this regard will consist firstly in dispelling ignorance by a constant and systematic study. Often we need discipline in the positive manner of developing our intellect by ways of disciplined study, above all, of Holy Scripture and Sacred Tradition and the liturgical and theological writings by those experienced in the Desert Spirituality.

Overcoming any inordinate curiosity that clutters our mind with useless information is important if we are to grow into deep spiritual persons in touch with God. Here we see the necessity of personal censorship of the magazines and novels and romances and trivial reading we allow ourselves to do. Pride of intellect must also be subjected to a vigorous faith and humility which are the basic virtues in our relationships with God and fellow human beings.

**5. Asceticism of the will.** It is here that we make our choices for good or evil. It is ultimately in our will that we are able to deliberate and decide in freedom the course of action that will determine whether we live virtuously or sinfully. Such a powerful and ultimate faculty for good or evil must be brought under constant discipline. Some of the chief deterrents of a concentrated will, supple and docile to God's inspirations, are:

**A. A lack of reflection.** So often we act without concentration and awareness, out of habit, impulse or a distracted state of mind. The results are actions performed perfunctorily without much direction towards ultimate concern. We offset such a lack of reflection by seeking the ascetical practice of living in the presence of God as much as we can. It means throughout the day that we seek to push ourselves to "remember" God's presence in every moment of our life.

**B.** Discipline is needed to avoid a lack of reflection, over-eagerness, fretting, worry in a needless manner, indicating a state of insecurity and pride and a lack of loving surrender in deep faith and trust in God. We want to succeed well in any given work. We should bring this same drive to succeed; to our sleep and to our prayer and to Divine Liturgy. The asceticism of the virtues, especially a child-like abandonment to God's loving providence in each event, will go far to eliminate such over-anxiety.

Basically, self-love in the will is at the root of all movement away from God. The Fathers of the Desert remind us constantly in their writings that the one and greatest of all sins is that of autonomy. Actually believing you could live your gift of life apart from God's life and perfect eternal love, the cause of your existence. You can certainly observe what happens when individual human will feels it ought to be governed by its own principles, rules and laws, attempting to exist in a selfish freedom to determine one's own behavior.

**C.** Sloth or a general tone of torpor or indifference destroys our will energy and destroys the power of our intellectual convictions by not putting them into action. This must be warred against by a strong spirit of deliberateness carried through, at whatever cost to our own personal convenience---provided that is the line of action we see clearly as indicated by our reasoning and the movement of grace.

**D.** Fear of failure can be a crippling force that necessitates the asceticism of the virtues of confidence in God and a proper self-love and basic humility to know our own capabilities. God wants us to have a certain amount of proper self-love and knowledge of what we are capable of doing with the infusion of His grace. Akin to this fear of failure is human respect, another enemy that weakens our will. Because we fear what others might think, we are rendered incapable of making strong decisions. Pride is at the root of this weakness and it must be replaced by a strong development of faith, hope and love to do all to please God and not for any acclaim from others.

To offset such debilitating of our wills we need to develop the ascetical habits of strong intellectual convictions, rooted in the burning desire to do all to please God, to learn to act with decision, firmness and constancy and, finally, to beg God for His continued grace with humility and confidence, convinced that without His help we can do nothing, but that His help will always be given unto our greater good and happiness, our healing and our salvation.

These inner disciplines, when constantly practiced, enable you to become "seed". Seed must remain in the ground to die, bear fruit and give its yield to others. The immersion of this "seed" into the deep, still waters of a disciplined life in prayer feeds, nurtures and produces a union (theosis) of the integrated person with God. From this comes a "bursting forth" into vibrant life, a putting away of the old and taking on the new. It is your whole person constantly evolving into a closer assimilation to the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26).

The basic principle is to accept the ordinary events of life as the "locus" or place where asceticism, both negative and positive, is to be practiced. In our families, parishes, city, state, country and world, we will find the means according to "passive" or "active" diminishments to die to self-centeredness in order to put on Jesus Christ and live according to His Spirit of Love in all of our relationships.

It is especially in the context of our daily activities, done with full energy and joy and with as much completion and perfection as possible, that we find the milieu in which to create a better world by going against our own selfishness, to strive for union with Jesus, to act with Christ-like virtues.

May our Lord bless you with a prayerful heart, full of His Merciful Love and Compassion,

*Fr. John Michael Zboyovski*