

## **INSCAPE April, 2013**

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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!**

God is love (1 John 4:8). God's love is (kenotic) pure emptying...a self-giving that knows no end of surrender in order to share His very life with His human creatures.

If God, a community of the three persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit sharing one uncreated essence, is always "toward" us in self-giving, are we not, therefore, called to experience God's triune, personalized love for us? This love is bursting all around us in the billions of creatures that shout out His loving presence.

The Good News that Jesus Christ came to reveal to us and make possible through His Spirit is that the Holy Trinity really lives within us through the gift of our Baptism. If such infinitely perfect love abounds in our hearts through the Spirit that is given to us (Rm. 5:5), why do you and I not experience this love daily, hourly, in this very moment?

Would you agree that there has been a tremendous release of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of many Christians that you know. Such persons desire ardently to pray in a more contemplative experiential way, rather than with the vocal and meditational forms of prayer traditionally taught them. Yet, many complain of the lack of spiritual guides and teachers to give adequate instruction concerning contemplative prayer. Many fear to leave the more secure forms of prayer in order to launch into a prayer that could easily lead them into error. However, they feel certain that God is calling them to a more immediate and direct encounter with Him through a silencing of their mental activities and a centering within themselves as the focus of their prayer. May you not only meet God, the "Consuming Fire" (Heb. 12:29), but may you form a contemplative prayer group. Share with each other the guidance of the Spirit that you receive, and pray with others in a contemplative setting, thus discovering the God of love, experiencing His presence in a loving community.

### **Are You Called To Be A Contemplative?**

Do you often have a burning feeling deep down within you, a real hunger that nothing created on the face of the earth can ever satisfy? You can stretch out feverishly to possess money, power, sex, fame, health, beauty and yet you will return always to that inside hunger that only God can satisfy because He put it there. And that is because God created you and me "...Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." (Gn.1:26). He has locked deeply within your heart seeds of infinite growth to become His child by grace, just as His Only-Begotten Son is by nature. This is theosis. This is divinization. You have been created that "you might be partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). We all are the ones that "He knew in advance and marked them with the likeness of the image of His Son that He might be the First-Born among the many brethren" (Rm. 8:29).

Look at your life and see how you have changed your set of values that have guided your motivation in what you do and think and say. So many of us think wealth, honors, powers can bring an end to the inner "sickness" that longs always for something greater than what we have or who we are. Perhaps it was learning or professional work or involvement in social causes that you thought could bring those inner yearnings to satisfying fulfillment. With King Solomon you can readily admit:

“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11). What vanity is it all, like chasing the wind.

For most of us, it takes several years of such futile searching to realize that nothing in the world can ever satisfy us but God. For it is God who has given us this basic drive to possess Him and to be possessed by Him. In the words of Francis Thompson in his *Hound of Heaven*, it is always a stretching out to possess the Unpossessable that makes all other possessions vain. St. Augustine discovered that God alone was the ultimate answer to a meaningful existence. “Too late have I loved Thee, O Thou, Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! Too late I have loved Thee! And behold, Thou were within and I abroad, and there I searched for Thee; deformed, I plunging amid those fair forms which Thou had made. Thou were with me, but I was not with Thee, which unless they were in Thee, were not at all.”

### **GOD LOVES US INFINITELY**

God is love. His presence as personalized relations of uncreated energies of love surround you, permeates you, bathes you constantly in His great loving communication of Himself. This is an ongoing self-giving on the part of God the Father through His Son in His Spirit. Or rather, isn't it more that it is an on-going discovery on your part of how completely self-giving God is always toward you and how intimately close He is to you?

One of the great contemplatives in Christianity is St. Symeon the New Theologian (+1022). For him the important question that all of us must answer, through experience that will radically change our lives, is not whether the Trinity lives within us; it is whether we are consciously aware, through a penitential conversion that must be a continued process, that we live in the Father's love in Jesus Christ through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. If the presence of the Holy Trinity is living and operating within all of us, how is it possible that we are not consciously experiencing this reality? St. Symeon uses a rather earthly example of a pregnant woman. She is aware that new life stirs within her. No one from the outside needs to tell her of that inner reality. If the Christian possesses this divine light, how is it possible that he or she is not aware of this light and its effects in daily living? St. Symeon expresses in Hymn #27 of his *Hymns of Divine Love*:

Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Divine Spirit.  
Do not say without Him you can be saved.  
Do not say, therefore, that one can possess Him without knowing it!  
Do not say that God is not able to be seen by men.  
Do not say that men do not see the divine light  
or that this is impossible in these present times!  
This is a thing never impossible, friends,  
but on the contrary it is very possible to those who desire it,  
but only to those who lead a life purified of passions  
and have purified, spiritual eyes.

### **DEGREES OF AWARENESS**

You know in your human experiences of loving another human being that you have grown in awareness of that union with the one loved. You also know that your awareness of union with God dwelling within you can grow in intensity. But you must distinguish between faith, an infused gift of the Holy Spirit leading you into new depths of conscious knowledge, and the effects in the affective order of an individual's psychological make-up, wherein there can be

room for special chrisms of mystical prayer as well as great self-deception. Hence, we ought to distinguish between true contemplation that can unfold gradually, even without great mystical gifts in the psychological, phenomenal order, and should be the continued growth of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the extraordinary gifts in prayer that depend so much upon psychological preparation of nature and condition of life.

Did not Jesus Christ promise to all that the pure of heart would be blessed and would see God (Matt 5:8)? As Christians, in ancient times and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on Mount Athos the Holy Mountain and in the Bronx of New York, have purified their hearts, they have entered into a contemplation of true realities unknown and unseen by others who do not pray deeply. In the deeper knowledge in which God communicates Himself to human beings more directly and immediately, Christians of deep prayer know, not through concepts or their intellectual reasoning powers, but by means of a direct “seeing” of God’s revelation.

### **WHAT IS CONTEMPLATION?**

But what then is contemplation? How does it differ from the basic pray that you learned from childhood? In your oral or verbal saying of prayers or in meditational type of “reasoned” prayer, you are the center of activity. God is conceived of as an “object” to which you direct your affectivity, your petitions, your sorrow, your deep gratitude for His kindness in His gifts given to you. Prayer, therefore, is that general art whereby you as a human being communicate with God in knowledge and love. You lift up your mind and your heart toward God.

As you grow in human friendships from talking to a person outside of yourself to silencing of all your own self-centered words, ideas and desires, and ultimately to a union of self-surrender toward the other, so you move in prayer, not primarily to receive gifts from God, but to surrender yourself as a self-giving gift to Him who has given you everything in Jesus Christ. Prayer becomes more and more your avenue to enter into God’s timeless and infinite, personal and perfect love for you individually. Prayer raises your consciousness to the primal experience that is the beginning and the end of all reality, namely your being grasped by God, known and loved uniquely by Him, so that, in such a re-creating experience, you rise to new levels of union and hence of spiritual perfection.

You enter into the land of contemplation when you move away from this or that act, that you are in charge of, to enter into a more total experience of oneness with God. God breaks through more immediately to you by His Spirit communicating to your “spirit” with your total self moving into a union with God. As you experience God by greater and greater infusion of faith, hope and love as gifts from the Holy Spirit, He is no longer in your awareness as someone outside of you only in His wondrous creations of nature or His studied perfections, but as also dwelling within you. Your response is one of more total self-surrendering love that pushes your consciousness of your new identity, your new *I-ness* in God’s *Thou-ness*, to new heights.

Such an expansion of self-identity and inner nobility as a child of God, due to His personal love for you, is never content with one such prayerful experience. An inner dynamism, the indwelling Holy Spirit, drives you to continue a more intense relationship. The sameness and stability of your love for God fills you with a restless motion, a stretching out (epectasis) quality toward God, the Unpossessable, that thrills you because you know that, try as you may, you can never exhaust this richness. Love always beckons you to partake of more of the joy that is already yours. Epectasis is the Greek word for stretching out, as St. Paul uses the word, stretch out for what is still to come (Phil. 3:13). St. Gregory of Nyssa builds a Christian mysticism of a process of ever-continuing growth, both in this life and in the life to come as we grow from glory to glory.

## **BORN FOR CONTEMPLATION**

Contemplation, therefore, is basically a “look, turned toward God”. It is you standing, as it were, outside of your habitual idea that you have had of yourself and of God and of others and of the whole world. It is getting down below that false everyday ego and getting into your deepest source where you stand before God, as you consciously turn toward your Source, your Origin. You can see that we are not dealing with anything that is dependent upon perseverance in a certain method, a way of breathing or sitting or what have you. Contemplation is something applicable to every human being, and, therefore, should be as natural as a baby looking on its father’s or mother’s face.

You, as a Christian baptized into the very life of the Trinity, are called by Jesus Christ in His Spirit to enter into a consciousness of communing with the Holy Trinity that knows no interruption. As you grow in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, you are to continue to grow in awareness of the greatest of all realities, that the Trinity dwells within you and loves you with an infinite, most intimate love. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn you” (Jeremiah 31:3). You are meant, by your Baptism and your living the Good News that Jesus preached and lived at every instant of His earthly life, to yield yourself in each moment to the uncreated energies of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, divinizing you into a child of God and an heir of the Heavenly Kingdom. You are to become vitally aware at each moment that you are loved as a child by an infinitely loving Father.

In this there can be no distinction between the laity and the clergy. All are called to live consciously in Christ Jesus and obey all His commandments. Everyone must hear His voice and follow Him. All too often, certain theologians in times past have accentuated the total gratuitousness of the gift of contemplation as God’s gift to certain individuals living a certain style of life. They have distinguished between “acquired contemplation” and “infused contemplation.” By doing certain things a person could “acquire” some type or level of contemplation. But only a very few privileged souls have received infused contemplation, which such theologians describe in terms of extraordinary psychic manifestations in prayer.

Infused contemplation was supposed to be real mysticism, a sheer gift, not given to everyone but only to very special persons as a special call. The stages that described the level of mysticism attained were called: Prayer of Quiet, Full Union, Ecstatic Union and Spiritual Marriage. Often certain mystical gifts were manifested in these stages and hence a distinction was made between the “concomitant phenomena” and “charismatic phenomena” of infused contemplation. The first set of gifts was centered around the gifts of the Spirit, especially wisdom and knowledge, deep inward peace, joy, love and the obscure sense of God’s presence. The charismatic phenomena were visions, ESP powers such as telepathy, clairvoyance, levitation, psycho-kinesis etc., trances, locutions and ecstasies. These were not considered essential and could be found outside Christianity.

Several modern theologians, such as Karl Rahner, join the Greek Fathers of the early Church to dispute such a distinction between acquired and infused contemplation. For them all grace is “special,” being in essence the self-communication of God. Rahner thus writes: “Mysticism...occurs within the framework of normal graces and within the experience of faith. To this extent, those who insist that mystical experience is not specifically different from the ordinary life of grace (as such) are certainly right.

## **STAGES OF PRAYER**

The beginning stage of prayer, as in the unfolding of a human friendship, is a prayer of simple reflection. When anyone in a friendship starts to know another extrinsically, he or she does not immediately plumb the depths of the other person. Deep communication evolves

through years of coming to know the person with one's mind and intellect, as well as with the senses. Gradually faith and trust are built up, so that one can be admitted into the inner sanctuary of the other's being.

In Christian prayer there is always a need for ordering the truths of faith. You begin with a method of "meditation" that enables you to reflect, ponder, measure, compare and organize. Here the basic activity revolves around the use of your own intellect and reasoning process on the matters of faith. We ought to distinguish here between this usual sense of meditation with our discursive reasoning and the use of the term "meditation" as used in TM or other (even Christian) forms of transcendental meditation or centering prayer that go beyond any discursive reasoning.

In the beginning stage of meditational prayer, the basic activity revolves around the use of your own intellect and reasoning process on the matters of faith. This activity moves one to affections, toward the union to feel, to touch the spiritual reality about which one is meditating. In a discursive manner, you may meditate on the Trinity, but always each mental activity is a preparatory step toward a living experience of the Trinity, not as a concept, but as the living God abiding within you.

This is the level at which you delve into Sacred Scripture and come to make contact with God through "meditating" or concentrating on revealed truth found in Scripture or on some scene from the Bible that will mediate to you the presence of the living God.

As the Holy Spirit infuses gifts of faith, hope and love as you become more affectively present to God through the use of your imagination, memory, understanding and will, you are able to move from the given biblical text to the presence of God and His divine action in your very being and life. This is the second stage of development in prayer-consciousness and is characterized by intense affections that surge up with ardent longings to be more intimately united with Jesus and the Heavenly Father. Many consolations are found in this second stage of your prayer life. God seems to be everywhere, even outside of your period of concentrated prayer alone with Him. Your daily living takes on an "affective" finding of God in places and persons where you had never before "seen" Him.

As you learn to yield your aggressive activity both in prayer and in your daily actions, gentleness and docility to the indwelling presence of God take over in your prayer life. There is a "letting go" of your own powers. A new sensitivity, a new listening to God's presence and loving activity within you and around you appears. You seem to be living on a new plateau of awareness of God's presence. The Holy Spirit has poured into your heart deeper infusions of faith, hope and love so that whether you find yourself in ardent consolation or aridity, there seems to be a deep peace and joy. An inner awareness that God is present is now yours by a new way of knowing that has not come from your own rational powers but from the Holy Spirit. This is the beginning stage of contemplation that we could call the prayer of faith or the prayer of the heart.

In the second book of his *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, St. John of the Cross describes this transitional prayer, leaving the discursive type of prayer or meditation to enter into contemplation: "The third and surest sign is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (At least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, memory and will; and that he prefers to remain only in general, loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned, without any particular knowledge or understanding."

The whole world now becomes a diaphanous presence of God's love, shining through to you. No longer do you find one world that is somehow sacred and a different world that is profane. You move, not as an angel ignoring this world around you; rather you see the world now in all its uniqueness, and yet precisely that uniqueness is discovered in the finality of

God's creative love.

You have entered into true freedom. No longer do you see blindly merely in the light of your own world built up by your desires and projections. You have died to yourself and now you are alive to Jesus Christ. You seek to love according to the Father's *Logos* found in each situation. Through deep faith, you see Christ everywhere. It is already a share in the vision that will be face-to-face in Heaven; the substance of God's immense love is already encountered in each moment made manifest through His Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. The world is now being transfigured by the presence and power of God in all things. You realize now that you are called by Him to be a reconciler of the whole world, as St. Paul writes: "and all things have become new through God who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation. For God was in Christ, who has reconciled the world with his majesty, not counting their sins against them; and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5: 18-19). The earth is already filled with God's "Glory" and you are privileged to see a part of it, depending on the purification to which you submit---the dying to your false self. The Glory of God is not some external attribute human beings assign to God. The Glory of God is the "majestic radiance" which manifests God's presence. It is the sublime majesty and splendor of God in all His creation. To give Glory to God simply means that one recognizes His Divinity. This revelation of His glory is manifested by God Himself as light or illumination. St. Irenaeus of the second century states; "the glory of God is man living fully".

St. Isaac of Nineveh (The Syrian) describes the movement into true contemplation in ways that now will become very desirable: "when your soul is nearing the way out of darkness, then this will be for you a sign: your heart is aflame, burns like fire day and night; and so the whole world seems to you like dust and dung; you even have no desire of food, for the sweetness of new flaming thoughts, constantly arising in your soul. Suddenly fountains of tears open up in you, flowing freely like an inexhaustible stream and mingling with all your activities, with your reading, your prayer or meditation, your eating or drinking or aught else. When you see this in your soul, be of good cheer, for you have crossed the sea".

### **TRUE TEST OF AUTHENTIC CONTEMPLATION**

Many Christians who would aspire to deeper contemplative prayer may forget that such a surrender to the Indwelling Word of God is a definite call to live seriously at every moment one's Baptism and the message of Christ that death is truly resurrection. This death is dying to self-centeredness and living in love according to the movement of the Spirit of the risen Lord. If one thinks being a contemplative in such a hidden life is egotistic and easy, then that one has not lived such a life to its fullest. God is calling you to be a contemplative in this sense: to love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, your whole mind, your whole strength---this is to be a contemplative, to look at God as the root of your being and to love Him in all things.

God calls you to love, and, now on earth as later in Heaven, you are to spend your eternity growing in the love of God as mirrored in "other" human beings. Heaven is going to be this whole wonderful world transfigured by the presence of God through an ever-increasing degree of consciousness of His presence and love.

You can test whether God has really brought you to a true experience of contemplating the Indwelling Trinity by your ability to go out and love others (neighbors and enemies) as God has loved you. The contemplative sees himself or herself as a person loved by God very much, and in this grace he or she discovers himself or herself more centered upon God, more one with God, and yet more one with all other beings. This is contemplation---a gift of God's loving presence within you so strongly felt that you can find God everywhere and praise Him in union with all the living and all the departed of this world. All are alive in Christ!

It is answering God's clarion call for you to become totally alive to God and God to you as you live each moment bathed in the wonder and beauty of His eternal light. Immersed in that light you open up to the fullness of Total Love for which you were created. It is you, as unique creature, responding to your Creator. You have spoken your "fiat" to your Beloved's call, and your Beloved responds to you. Absolute Love overflows from within you, pouring forth in all its abundant richness to the whole created world!

"He who loves Me keeps my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make a place of abode with him" (John 14:23).

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

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