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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!

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN PRAYER

God is everywhere, so close. All you have to do is stretch out and touch Him in all of His creatures and in His wonderful creation! He is always meeting you in new and exciting ways. And you, with child-like faith, open your eyes with wonder and expectancy to meet Him in the swiftness of each moment as it descends upon you to sweep you up into His eternal embrace.

Such intimacy, when God seemingly bends down to your littleness and lifts you suddenly into His immediate embrace, occurs from time to time with varying intensity and with varying responses on your part. Sometimes these moments of intimacy give you encouragement and consolation to continue the pilgrimage through the dry desert. At other times such touches by God give you a call and a direction which you have been seeking in conformity with His holy will. Many times we are confused at the psychic manifestations that accompany God's presence. What is real and what is illusion?

As you grow in deeper prayer, you enter into an increasing surrender of yourself to the activity of God in your prayer. The tendency is to move away from your conscious control in prayer to an opening of yourself to God by entering the innermost core of your being (Scriptural meaning of the "heart"). Here great discipline is required, for amazing and frightening things can happen.

As you pass through layers of psychic experiences to reach that inner "still-point" where God speaks to you in the cloud of unknowing, psychic powers can be released. Repressed material that has been buried in the unconscious can rise up threateningly to disturb you in prayer. Erotic feelings can influence your entire body. Flashes and lights, psychic powers of telepathy can come forth. Visions and locutions or voices can occur; temperature changes can come over your entire body. Shaking of certain bodily parts can occur. At times these experiences can bring you a wonderful sense of peace and contentment. At other times, such experiences can be filled with fearful images and threatening voices, as darkness belches over your entire psychic apparatus, leaving you in desolation and almost despair as to God's presence and His love for you.

In all these spiritual experiences, what is reality? What comes from God and what is hallucination in the beckoning visions of enticing forms that whirl over the screen of your consciousness? Visions, voices, levitational experiences, out-of-the-body experiences, touches, celestial odors can be intensely experienced. What are the meanings of such spiritual experiences? Before we discuss the meaning of these experiences, let us clearly distinguish the various kinds of experiences in deeper prayer---or even at the very beginning of the spiritual life---dealt with by spiritual writers.

TYPES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Dr. Gerald May, [Gerald G. May, M.D. (1940-2005), practiced medicine and psychiatry for twenty-five years before becoming a senior fellow in contemplative theology and psychology at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Bethesda, Maryland. He was the author of many books and articles blending spirituality and psychology, including *Addiction and Grace*, *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit*, *Will and Spirit*, and *The Dark Night of the Soul*] in his highly recommended book, *Care of the Mind; Care of Spirit* distinguishes two general experiences: 1. Spiritual experiences of union; and 2. Experiences in which the self-

image is preserved. In the first type of experience, all activities such as thinking, imaging, emoting that serve to define oneself become suspended, yet awareness remains open, clear and vibrant. Perhaps you had a sudden, spontaneous experience, whether religious or not, that allowed you to sense your complete oneness with someone or some creature of nature. The “yourself” seemingly disappears. You are not in the power seat directing reality but reality engulfs you so powerfully and suddenly that you only sense a global oneness with all around you. This is what the classic writers of the mystical life call “infused contemplation.” Its essence can be described as all self-definition becoming suspended while your awareness remains clear and wide open, excluding nothing.

The other general category of spiritual experiences stresses the preservation of the self-image. You are a free, positing agent, quite in charge experiencing something happening to you, of which you are fully aware. This category embraces all so-called non-unitive experiences, which comprise the majority of spiritual experiences.

Such experiences occurring in prayer can be of three main kinds: 1) **Sensory experiences** that range from activating one’s imagination, as St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* encourages the retreatant to “contemplate” Christ in the Gospel scenes as though the retreatant were sensibly present to the scenes contemplated, to spontaneous inner visions, the hearing of internal voices, the seeing of light and the feeling of hot flashes throughout the body; 2) **Intellectual insights** that partake of an inner “vision” without any sensible image involved; 3) **Extrasensory experiences** of a para-psychological nature such as out-of-the-body experiences, precognition, telepathy, seeing auras around others and even telekinetic experiences.

Not all experiences in prayer are consoling and pleasant and confirming. As you open deeper levels of the unconscious to the presence of God, the hidden areas of what can be called the “demonic” forces from within and from without, can be present themselves to you in a fierce, attacking way. Fr. Maloney has dealt with this problem in a published teaching on the occult that deals with obsession and possession and the seemingly schizophrenic condition that results from entering into deeper levels of prayer. We will cover this topic in greater detail in a future Inscape Newsletter.

ATTITUDE TOWARD SUCH EXPERIENCES

The great Christian mystics over the centuries have been unanimous in stressing humility and compunction as the true touchstone of a religious experience that is begun in God and completed in Him for His glory. St. John of the Cross gives us very sound advice in this matter: “And it must be known that although all these things may happen to the bodily senses in the way of God, we must never rely upon them or accept them, but must fly from them, without trying to ascertain whether they be good or evil; for, the more completely exterior and corporeal they are, the less certainly they are from God...So he that esteems such things errs greatly and exposes himself to great peril of being deceived; in any case he will have within himself a complete impediment to the attainment of spirituality.”

There has been a universal caution among the Eastern Fathers from St. Ephraim the Syrian (c306-373) to St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) in regard to any extraordinary psychic phenomena that have repercussions especially on the sense levels. The basic reason is that such spiritual experiences can be so satisfying to the false ego in all human beings that our self-centered drive for power and control, even over God, soon seeks such phenomena to build up a greater sense of illusion and separation from God. Pride can so easily convince us that we are becoming holy by enjoying experiences that all great saints also enjoyed.

Still we do believe that God wishes to give Himself to us directly through an immediate experience. His love is so overwhelming that He strives to draw us into the union of His Triune

Life (His Gift of Theosis or Divinization). Such communication and self-giving on the part of God is made to a human person, a whole being, an “embodied” being, calling that person not to be a separated soul or a detached intellect. As you begin your spiritual journey inward to that still-point to meet God as the ground of your being, God does flood you with graces of His felt presence. Such sensible consolations give you strength and help in the building up of true interior faith in God’s presence as love so that you can surrender more and more to meeting Him in the darkness of even purer and greater faith.

Spiritual discernment is necessary in such spiritual experiences to see whether they really are helping to lead you to greater union with God through faith, hope and love, or whether they are obstacles to that union. Psychologists are also interested in such phenomena, but more so because of the content experienced, while spiritual direction is concerned not only with what has been experienced in prayer, but above all the manner in which the individual person receives the experience and responds to it.

Dr. May gives us an important distinction so that we may avoid a simplistic and erroneous dualism that separates the workings of the Holy Spirit from the inner psychic dynamism which must necessarily be the stage on which we human individuals are to experience God calling us to greater oneness with Him in prayer: “Too much emphasis on self vs. God encourages an artificial and erroneous dualism, rashly separating one’s inner psychological experience from the workings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The fact is, of course, that God often speaks to us and works in us through our psychological experience. Mediated and altered as they may be by our personal attachments and preconceptions, the manifestations of grace are as truly present in our subjective psychology as in a sunset or a rainbow. Further, preoccupation with considerations of psyche vs. God can lead, paradoxically, to an unintended preoccupation with the psyche itself. The human mind presents so much material to deal with that it can easily become a quagmire for the curious. Thus to invest oneself in separating psychodynamics from the revelations of God can become a distortion not unlike excessive spiritual warfare; it can become as much of a distraction as seeking God solely *through* psychology. Both extremes occur because of our society’s ambivalent obsession with psychology.”

VISIONS

Today, especially through an increased interest in prayer within the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox Churches, the subject of visions is one of interest, mainly to Western Christianity, and also concern. When a person in a prayerful group witnesses in great detail to a vision that he or she received from the Lord, what sort of discernment should be given to such an experience? You perhaps have entered into a “presence” of God that was very real and intimate but without any sensible form. Was God presenting Himself to you in a real way or was this merely your own imagination?

The Roman Catholic Church has had a long tradition of teachings on this subject. Mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross teach a doctrine on visions. They distinguish visions as corporeal, imaginative or intellectual. Corporeal visions involve a sense form that seemingly originates outside of the one “seeing” it. Without passing judgment on their veracity, the visions of St. Bernadette of Lourdes and the three children of Fatima would be of this class.

In this type of vision, one must exercise great caution since such a sense vision can be of a hallucinatory nature. Teachers of tried virtue and wisdom warn us to flee from such a type of vision as well as sense locutions or sense experiences that appeal directly to the sense of smell, touch or taste. In the words of St. John of the Cross: “...a person must not fix the eyes of his soul upon the figure and object supernaturally according to him, whether the object pertains to the exterior senses (locutions and words to the sense of hearing; visions of saints

and beautifully resplendent lights to the sense of sight; fragrance to the sense of smell; delightful tastes to the other pleasures derived from the palate; and to the sense of touch...) or whether it is an interior imagination vision. He must instead renounce them all.”

The second type of vision is that of an imagination kind. These are formed in one’s imagination or outside. If the imagination is actively involved in furnishing the images, there is the great danger of self-delusion. There are two other types of imaginative visions: 1) Either the images take place within our imagination but the images arise from nothing that we have previously experienced through our senses; or 2) God gives us a vision not furnished by our imagination that seemingly takes place outside of ourselves. An example of an imaginative vision taking place within our imagination but with images not furnished by previous sense experiences would be a vision of Heaven with God in His glory. To see a vision outside of ourselves in the imagination without the imagination furnishing the images would be to see the saints with their glorified, spiritualized bodies.

The type of vision where God operates most directly is the intellectual vision that takes place in the human understanding without any medium of sense images. Here, there is the least possibility of your own selfish projection or the operations of the demonic upon you. God gives you an experiential knowledge, which He imprints directly upon you of a truth that He wishes to reveal to you. In this sense you can come from prayer, “seeing” a truth more clearly than ever before in your entire life and yet be unable to describe in images how you arrived at such new knowledge. Your life is changed by this vision. Perhaps, for example, you could receive a new intellectual vision of how Jesus is totally present in the Eucharist, without division, in His entire humanity and divinity, and that He continues always to extend that Eucharistic presence to you at all times. This powerful knowledge is an experience that could change your life.

VOICES

Voices or locutions are words that are spoken to you in prayer. Again we distinguish various levels. Words come to you as though they are spoken to you sensibly outside of yourself. These are very susceptible to delusion, as they are so rooted in your senses. But the more interior and intellectual these words are heard from within, the less they can lead you astray and the more God can operate to reveal to you words of wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Such interior words partake of a prophetic role and can serve to strengthen and encourage you to reveal hidden mysteries to be taught to others, or to rebuke you or others.

The distinctive characteristics of God’s interior words spoken to you in prayer are that such words are useful (to a holy purpose) and there is a precise clarity. You should normally hold yourself in inner attention and detachment as you surrender yourself to God’s leading. Then if such words are an illusion of the imagination or a suggestion from the devil, they will disappear or at least do you little harm. If, however, they are from God, the effects will be seen at once. St. John of the Cross gives us excellent advice that we should apply to all psychic phenomena of any kind: “If such experience be of God, it produces its effect upon the spirit at the very moment when it appears or is felt, without giving the soul time or opportunity to deliberate whether it will accept or reject it. For, even as God gives these things supernaturally, without effort on the part of the soul, and independent of its capacity, God produces in it the effect that He desires by means of such things;...it is as if fire were applied to a person’s naked body; it would matter little whether or not he wished to be burned; the fire would of necessity accomplish its work.”

Certain types of vision and voice experiences in prayer are not major factors in the mystical theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. They are primarily considered involuntary distractions to be dismissed.

TEARS AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In the area, however, of the gift of tears we find in the writings of the mystics, especially of the Christian Orthodox Churches of the East, an encouragement that, rather than be guarded, we should pray for this external manifestation. The gift of tears can happen so often and so readily and its supernatural source can be easily discerned. It admits of much intensity and duration that may vary from a few tears shed now and then in prayer, to a state that may last through several years of uninterrupted weeping.

For most Americans, weeping is often associated with weakness and emotionalism. But the common consensus of the good that such tears can produce in prayer when they flow as a gift from God, was taught unanimously both among the Western and Eastern Fathers. Tears were seen by such Fathers as a sign that the mind in prayer was leaving the prison of this world and entering into a new age.

Tears that are a gift from God have the power and action to destroy and uproot sin and passion and any obstacle preventing a person from letting God have His full way in one's life. Tears illumine the dark recesses of the soul to bring it under the light of Christ's teaching and powerful healing. Peace and joy result from experiencing the love of God toward a sinful individual.

The true test of the value of tears must not be found in the quantity of tears shed but in the brokenness of spirit experienced before the awesome majesty of God who is so tender, so loving and such a healing Father. The "Gift of Tears" will be the main topic in a future *Inscape*.

GUIDELINES

We can summarize what has already been said about spiritual experiences occurring in prayer by the following principles and guidelines.

1. Be cautious not to attribute every action in prayer to the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit. This is especially important, as it has already been pointed out in this teaching, in the cases of phenomena that are rooted in the sense of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. This does not deny that God could give you such a sense of His presence in such an experience. But we see many persons in mental hospitals and institutions or those using transcendental methods of meditation on a merely natural plane who receive such experiences with very little transcendent change in their lives. By their fruits shall you know them: "But the fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control...And those who belong to Christ have controlled their weaknesses and passions." (Gal. 5: 22-24).

2. Such experiences are never to be sought for in prayer. It is a great temptation to want such phenomena for the psychic satisfaction they bring to us. In no way should these experiences be construed as a measure of your advance in sanctity. The true test of greater growth in sanctity must be measured by your growth in forgetting your own selfish interests and living in loving service toward others, God and neighbor.

3. If such experiences happen with any frequency, consult a Spirit-filled and experienced spiritual director who can lead you to an indifference toward receiving such phenomena and guide you to a true discernment as to their real source, and your line of conduct and response toward them.

4. The true test of authentic prayer can never be measured by psychic phenomena and how many “spiritual experiences” one has had, but by one’s surrendering love and submission to God’s will. If you are touching God, with or without any psychic phenomena accompanying your prayer, this will be measured by the true thermometer of increasing love of God and humble service toward your neighbor, especially the ones that are closest to you in your family.

5. In experiencing erotic feelings in prayer, especially when you are praying to the human Christ, seek to rise beyond the erotic effects and desires. Do not entertain thoughts or take up positions in prayer or do any actions that would intensify such feelings. You need not give up praying to the human Christ, but greater humility and purity of heart are called for.

6. In cases of ecstasies, raptures or out-of-the-body experiences, the test of divine origin is what you may learn in such a state, which should lead you to greater charity and humility. If these experiences truly come from God, you will know it from the effects produced. You will be overwhelmed by the greatness of God and your own nothingness. This knowledge will fill you with peace and joy, a new detachment from everything created, and a firm adherence to seek always to please God. Such spiritual effects will separate the true gift of God in authentic ecstasy, rapture or out-of-the-body experiences from those induced by physical collapse, hallucination or auto suggestion.

ABANDONMENT

Prayer is truly a pilgrimage that moves gradually away from your own (so called) control over God through your words and images and affections that you conjure up in prayer to an ever-increasing abandonment to God’s immediate self-giving to you as He wishes and when He wishes. He becomes the free God that you allow to have total dominion over every facet of your life.

These are some of the problem areas that persons advancing in prayer may encounter along their journey into that mysterious union between themselves and God. Not all problems could be touched upon; above all, not all treated adequately. The closer you move toward the Burning Bush in profound reverence and awe, the more rules no longer can be an adequate guide. They serve only as signposts that it is hoped will allow you to run courageously in the ways of the Lord. True prayer is ultimately love experienced as the Presence of God.

To the degree that you surrender yourself freely to the leadership of the Indwelling Trinity in each moment, to that degree can you consider yourself as a person of authentic prayer and a true Christian. You will be led moment by moment into greater light, as you see God’s loving presence in all events by increased faith, hope and love. Complete abandonment is the Holy Spirit’s gift to you if you are available and ready to die to your false self and begin to live in the truth of the new creature that you are and have always been in the eyes of the Heavenly Father, Who eternally loves you in Jesus Christ through His Spirit.

Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1141), a Western theologian and writer on mystical theology, gives us the following: “Yes, it is truly the Beloved who visits you. But He comes---invisible, hidden, and incomprehensible. He comes to touch you, not to be seen; to intimate His presence to you, not to be understood; to make you taste of Him, not to pour Himself out in His entirety; to draw your affection, not to satisfy your desire; to bestow the first fruits of His love, not to communicate it in its fullness. Behold in this the most certain pledge of your future marriage: that you are destined to see Him, to possess Him eternally, because He already gives Himself to you at times to taste; with what sweetness you know. Therefore, in the times of His absence you shall console yourself; and during His visits you shall renew your courage, which is ever in need of heartening. We have spoken at great length, O my soul, I ask you to

think of none but Him, listen to none but Him, to take hold of none but Him, possess none but Him.”

May our Lord Jesus Christ grant you to see and experience Him, as He wishes.

Fr. John Michael Zboyovski