

INSCAPE December 2015

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and the communion of the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

In this final month of 2015, we have, again, been gifted by God to prepare for the celebration of the Incarnation, where Jesus Christ has entered into the fullness of human existence for the salvation and healing of all humanity.

The theme of this month's teaching through *Inscape* is "Finding God in All Things." This important teaching is given because we can observe how many modern Christians seem to separate prayer from their work, contemplation from action, vertical relations with God from horizontal relations with people and material creatures. Is it not true that you find it difficult to find God in all moments of your daily life? You find it easier to be in God's presence celebrating Divine Liturgy or in your prayer alone with God than at a party, or in accepting insults from those around you. It truly is difficult to be present to God when you have to work so hard in concentrating on your duties.

This is the goal of our prayer-life to live so grounded in God's presence within us and around us that our activities not only do not take us away from God, but they actually become occasions for us to be constantly in prayer as we are present to Him in His creative co-working in love with us.

We are constantly invited by God to become with Him "co-creators" of this world, to bring it into a harmonious whole through loving unity of all God's creation in Christ. But we do not go from created things up to our Creator. Rather we always are to move from God, Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit toward the created world. We discover by faith, hope and love God's immanent indwelling and "laboring" inside of each atom and sub-atomic particle and we are to work in loving service with the Triune God. This requires great discipline on our part to stand inwardly attentive to God's presence in matter. Prayer and work must go together. One cannot exist without the other. It takes us, however, most of our earthly pilgrimage to acquire facility in that which is the best preparation for Heaven which is a seeing all things in God and God in all things.

FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

You and I have lived most of our lives in a separation between our prayer and our activities. God's two main commandments seem to pull us in two directions at once. We have the vertical relationship to God in His command: "Love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, thy whole soul, thy whole mind and thy whole strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). This is a seeming call to the desert, to silence (hesychia), to interior prayer alone with God.

But, then, on the other hand, we are commanded by God to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). Do we not very often feel that our "horizontal" relationships with other human beings, when we truly love them, can pose a threat to our "vertical" relationships with God? How many priests, monks, nuns, clergy and even laity have been trained to solve this paradox of the two commands of God by a loving, prayerful, self-surrendering of themselves only to God? To other human beings we give service through our virtuous deeds. But were such religious and also other Christians taught that, when we love others, God's love for us is being perfected (1 John 4:12)?

But surely God would not command us to love Him and all other human beings in any anxiety or fear of the impossibility. The Saints bear witness that the more they are centered upon God as the core of their being, the more they were united in true, loving service to other human persons. The Christian spiritual life is not a problem that opposes prayer to action. The spiritual life is fidelity to God which demands fidelity to prove love by loving deeds.

Saint Ignatius, the founder of the Society of Jesus (The Jesuits), shares his teachings and experiences in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Here we can find a synthesis for our own lives. He based his doctrine on personal experiences that came through meditating upon the living out the Gospels. In the cave at Manresa, Spain, at the beginning of his spiritual growth for ten months he knew no other activity than continual prayer alone with God. He struggled against temptations and illusions, but he also experienced great joys and consolations. This left Ignatius with one desire, to live completely for God alone.

After consecrating Himself to God's glory and service, he pilgrimaged to the Holy Land where he felt God wanted him to live close to the places blessed by the physical presence of Jesus while He was on earth. But he soon learned that God was leading him through his meditations on the Gospels to go forth in union with Christ, His Lord and Saviour, to bring others into God's Kingdom.

This meant hard work and, above all, a lessening of his many hours alone with God. He returned to Spain and sat in school with children, learning Latin. Saint Ignatius turned away from the consolations of his life of deep prayer to immerse himself in the occupations of the mind in order that he might be ordained a priest and help people come to know God more intimately, love Him more ardently and follow Him in Christ Jesus more closely. He moved to busy, distracting Paris to study theology at the university for several more years.

We see a principle in his life. When he had no occupations at hand for God's greater glory, he gave more time to devotions, study of Scripture and to asceticism. But when he was involved in teaching and preaching Christian doctrine or with the important work of studying in order one day to help others know God, he shortened his time of formal prayer. He thought it to be more pleasing to God to give more time and effort in loving services, undertaken for God's glory. Over eleven years of such study and labor, he developed a great interior liberty. He had shown himself faithful to human means in loving his Master, indifferent toward further spiritual consolations as opposed to what he saw clearly as unto God's greater glory to other human beings.

What is important is for us to achieve a spiritual liberty (in total freedom), a "purity of heart" that enables us to see God everywhere, or to find God in all things. This is the contemplative life. Fidelity to do all work in union with God and unto His glory never should take us away from God nor from prayer. This is continual prayer in the midst of our lives filled with great moments and action. We, and our brothers and sisters need to find God in hard work performed in all areas of our life. The market place was not in opposition to the monastery or a hidden, contemplative life. God is everywhere; above all, He lives within each baptized Christian in a very dynamic, acting, loving way. God's creative love unfolds in the context of our human work as well as in aloneless with the Alone.

MARY AND MARTHA

In the Gospel account of Mary and Martha, sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus loved, we see in the patristic tradition the reference to them as symbols or types of the contemplative and the active lives, the anima (diffused awareness) and the animus (focused consciousness) that must be integrated and not opposed in all human beings. Mary sat lovingly at the feet of Christ and listened to His words. Martha was very busy in the kitchen, but apparently very anxious about her work in preparing the meal that it was taking her away from hearing Christ.

If Mary chose the better part, as Jesus said (Luke 10:42), it was because she was centered with complete attention upon Him to receive His words. Martha was preoccupied with herself and was “anxious and troubled about many things.” She wanted to please the Lord, as all of us Christians wish but she focused upon herself and her desires, while Mary was totally turned toward Christ in lovingly attention.

This Gospel narrative should teach us that we are to give full attention to Christ who dwells within us. Then we busy “Marthas” will be able to work well and still not lose the “Mary” in us. We will seek to see God in all things. In our busy activities, conversations, in all that we see, hear, taste and think, we will seek to find the presence of God. His divine majesty is in all things by His power and beauty, His presence, His uncreated energies of love. We should not be surprised to find ourselves in the early years of developing this more contemplative habit of finding God in all things to be at times without devotion and to experience distractions, especially in performing our duties. If we bear these with patience and vigilantly check where we fail out of our false egos to remain close to our center where Christ dwells with His Father and Holy Spirit, we will gradually enhance and increase our faith so that we readily live in a constant “Divine Milieu.”

ACTIVE PRAYER

Little by little we should observe that there is little separation between what we do and the motive for which we do it. We will be one with God in all our activities through the same will act that focuses us by faith, hope and love only upon God, even though we need to concentrate on the work at hand. Such an ability to live in the presence of God can be attained only by commitment to interior purification and humble fidelity to some disciplined time daily for formal prayer. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

Faithful exercise of prayer at definite times is an indispensable condition for remaining united to God and for finding Him in all things during our busy activities. We will never discover God in the multiplicity of our daily life if we have not found Him in any concentrated time each day within ourselves. Yet we must not conceive formal prayer as a time of building up “spiritual capital,” something we acquire in the morning and spend during the day, burning it up in a multitude of activities. Far from ruining the fruits of formal prayer, our activities must stir up new prayer, a deeper consciousness of God’s immanent presence within us and without all of his creatures.

If we reluctantly leave prayer thinking that now we must leave God and go out where He is not, this will make impossible the devotion and reverence we need in all we undertake for the love of God and neighbor. We return to prayer after a busy day of work that ought not to take us away from God’s loving presence and creative activity to which we have joined our own free-willed creativity in love, to realize that our actions are at once the happiness and torment of love. We are happy and joyful at finding God in our work and in all human encounters. We experience torment at not being able to remain completely absorbed in God. There is a sort of violence that our love for God and God’s love for His creation sends us into exterior works as a sort of a crucifixion. Our only desire is Christ and Him Crucified, as Saint Paul so often writes.

Love cannot be diminished in work undertaken for love of God and neighbor. But if we are not faithful to prayer, we must not think we can replace such lovingly surrender with action. Action, deprived of this necessary centering upon God in faith, hope and love through formal prayer, is scattered and lost among creatures of the world. All too often our hearts will be filled with the focus upon our own self-centeredness. This is why Jesus says: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:34). Desire for prayer keeps us attentive to the needs of the Kingdom and the presence of God throughout all His material creation. We join His creativity and our free will response to His merciful love to work together in synergy.

NOT PANTHEISM BUT PAN-EN-THEISM

We are not asked to turn our mind away from what we are doing in order to make ourselves conscious of God's presence. Trying to divide our mind would soon become intolerable and the source of thousand anxieties. We have only one thought-process. We cannot at the same time concentrate with equal strength both upon God and upon persons whom we are encountering. But unity of prayer and action must come rather from the union of our will with God's will. God is constantly present and willfully working in each moment of our lives. We can unite our will with His will to do all for love and glory to Him.

Saint Paul teaches us that we are to find God in all things and all things in God. This will be the transfiguration of this material world that will be a continuing contemplation of all things in God. This can never be conceived as pantheism which doctrine holds that all things are God. God absorbs all material creation into Himself so nothing will exist but God. But Saint Paul rightfully insists that all creation will remain always God's creation, distinct from God the Creator, even in the heavenly Kingdom.

Our spiritual movement, therefore, both in our earthly pilgrimage and in the life to come, should not go from created things to the Creator, but always we move from the Creator, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, toward creatures. It finds shining through creatures the glory and majesty of Him without whom they are nothing. We can see that we and all other creatures "...live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) in God. We are to enter into God by fixing our heart on God and we must never leave Him, not even in action. Truth convinces us that God is truly the ground of all being. How could any creature exist without God's immanent presence sustaining it from within the creature itself? We seek both in prayer and in action to remain completely attached and submissive to the action of God as He leads the world toward the finalization of His plan that includes the "restoration" of all things.

We, the disciples of Christ, become God's living instruments, or, better yet, His "co-creators" as we become more and more submissive to His guiding hand in all we do. Our loving submissiveness gives us true freedom to take our life and our talents and freely offer them to our Divine Creator. Love fixed on God welcomes action because it recognized action as a sharing in God's work. Our actions reveal His work in us. They make us love Him all the more. Orthodoxy must lead to and be fulfilled in Orthopraxis.

THE DISCIPLINE OF WORK

Our loving devotion to God will consist in the kind of familiarity with God which will increase with work undertaken for His love. Our work in all details will find God as its beginning, middle and end. Fidelity to work will be our way of advancing the Kingdom of God. Creatures will progressively reveal for us the glory of God, even as God intended them to do. We will find ourselves returning to Eden as we live in harmony with God's will and in loving service to the world around us.

By recognizing the action of God through us and cooperating with this action, we will glorify Him in His creative work. This supernatural view of all things in God will make us understand human beings and created things more in their full splendor of creation. We will come to see fully that all things are given us to serve and glorify God. Thus we understand that everything is a gift from God and it is right to return it to Him transformed by our love returned. True devotion will grow within us. But this prayerful attitude will be developed only within action, since action alone reveals how God acts in His creatures.

But such consistent devotion demands continual inner discipline. Devotion and discipline, contemplation and asceticism, are two faces of the same reality. No work, even undertaken for love of God and neighbor, is ever performed without becoming to some extent an occasion of

egotistic satisfaction for sense pleasure of the body or mind. To purify yourself and heal the roots of self-centeredness comes about slowly. It occurs in successive stages which your action itself determines. You are plunged into a dangerous arena, not only dangerous from outside creatures acting upon and reacting to you, but dangerous because the given situation draws out the hidden areas of your bias toward self.

Such a situation is an occasion for you to enter into an interior combat, a purifying of yourself of the dross from selfishness to allow the pure gold of love to come forth. Health will be given to you only in the therapy of conflict and suffering pain (self-sacrifice). Thus we see the importance of staying inside any given situation and not turning outwardly to diversions that take us away from the battle. We stay at the work at hand and there purify our intentions as we trust solely in God's strength, as we purify ourselves to work only for His glory.

Thus, union with God by action becomes at the same time a devotion and an inexhaustible source of asceticism. If our understanding demands our whole concentration, we should rejoice in it as an interior struggle, the cross, that goes to the very root of self. Those who fear action without discipline are far from attaining the desired purity to see God. They truly resist God. But true fidelity consists in constantly using all our powers in order to help us to find God and at the same time subdue ourselves.

The discipline is not an end in itself but it brings about the inner purification that will fully transform our wills into a oneness with God's will. This brings about the fruit of pure love that frees us to possess all things in God as we renounce all selfishness or self-love. Our prayer gradually ceases to be so many individual acts, but rests finally and firmly fixed on God, even at the height of greatest activity and struggle. Action and prayer, then, tend to become a single activity. They cannot be separated. When we "will" to cooperate with God's plan of salvation for all of His creation, redemption and sanctification, we become absorbed into a given work which charity commands by the love of God who lives in us. We lose ourselves in the stream of this love as it flows through our creative work done in oneness with God's creative Word. With our intentions clarified by faith, hope and love, we lovingly take our place in the vineyard of the Lord and labor all day with serene confidence because we know that the Master will remain with us until evening comes. "I will never forget you my people."

CONTEMPLATION TO OBTAIN DIVINE LOVE

If you have ever experienced a directed retreat based on the Spiritual guidance of the Desert Fathers, you will be familiar with the beautiful, final contemplative consideration which they propose to the retreatant to help him or her to return to daily life and live as a contemplative in action. We can best summarize what has been expressed in this teaching by outlining the features of this consideration.

We must always begin and end with God Who is love (1 John 4:8). But love is always a movement that explodes outside from the depths of a person's being to share that being with another. God moves outwardly from within the Trinitarian community of love to communicate Himself to us human beings unto communion. Love desires an external expression. Love is proved, is enfleshed, and truly becomes love by deeds. Even true faith without deeds is dead (James 2:17).

Creative action best communicates love given. But such creative action admits of several levels of self-giving of being "present" to the one loved.

1. The first way that God wishes to be present to you is through the created gifts which He gives you. He shows His beauty and perfections reflected in the limited perfections of His creatures. When you reflect upon all the gifts you have received from God and are now receiving, you respond to God's presence in His gifts by praising and thanking God for His gratuitous expressions of His love for you.

We think of some of these great gifts that God so constantly pours out upon us. There is the gift of ourselves, in all our uniqueness. This embraces the gifts of our parents, our existence, our health, our body, soul and spirit relations. We have been made in God's image and likeness reflected in our ability to think, know and love...all our choices become possible through the gift of freedom. We have received and are receiving at every moment innumerable gifts that are unique to ourselves. Included in these gifts are the gift of our Christian faith, the Eucharist, the Charisms of the Holy Spirit, the gifts of loving friends. What is our response to God who communicated HIMSELF to us through His gifts? We should walk through life thanking God for all things, even the trials and sufferings, for we praise God for His constant love working to direct all things unto good if we love Him (Romans 8:28).

2. Yet God wishes to be even more present to us by being inside of each gift. He is not merely content to give Himself to us in extrinsic gifts, but He wishes to be present to us in the very gifts that we receive from Him. Everything we touch, therefore, should be an occasion to touch God who is immanently present in His gifts to us. "Where could I go to escape your Spirit? Where could I flee from your presence" (Psalms 139:7)?

What should our response be to God's presence inside all of His gifts? It should and must be *reverence*. Creatures should not take us away in our working hours but actually should be the occasion to experience God even more present to us that in an extrinsic way of merely giving us things. As we touch each created gift from God, we touch God's holy presence. You move in an atmosphere of reverent awe and wonder at God's all pervasive, loving presence everywhere. Each place and event in which we find ourselves becomes holy for us.

3. But God wishes still more to be present to us in His self-giving merciful love (perfect and eternal) (never failing, never ending). If love is proved by deeds, then God is working inside of each gift He gives you. Absolutely nothing we have from God has been earned by us. All is total gift! He works for you in order that He may share Himself with you, making you "a participator of God's very own nature" (2 Peter 1:4). God is most present to you as He is working constantly in each moment and in each creature (John 5:17) to allow you to receive Him in loving communion and union.

What is your response to God who is "laboring" and has been laboring since the beginning of material creation to provide you with all you need (even before you ask, even before you are aware of it) to develop into the unique, loving person He always has loved in His Son? Your response is to do everything in your daily work (even in retirement) for love of God and neighbor. But now you realize that God is living within you and in the material which you touch and work over. The two of you are working to fashion the total Christ, His Body made up of this material world which has its fullness of being in God's Word, Jesus Christ. No one, no thing is ever left outside God's merciful love, compassion, and forgiveness!

A PRAYER EXERCISE

In the presence of the living Trinity abiding within you, stretch out your hands and ask God to fill them with His uncreated energies of love. Implore and pray and beg of Him to use your weaknesses in order that His glory may appear to you in each event. May you have new eyes to contemplate Jesus Christ, shining "diaphanously" in each moment of your material existence and in each creature which you encounter. Cry out in pain that Jesus Christ be brought forth in glory. Offer your hands and lips to be channels of the healing power of Christ among His people again. God is at the heart of matter. You are becoming a contemplative in action!

Learn that your life, your work is to praise God in His gifts; to be present to God in reverence so you discover Him in all things; above all, work with Him who is working inside each event, that Christ be brought forth and you, with the Risen Jesus and His Spirit of love, can be a *praise*, *reverence* and *service* out of returned love to Him who is love itself.

A DIAPHANOUS GOD

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

He preserves his soul undefiled, who compels his mind to think only of God and of His perfections, who uses his speech for rightly interpreting and expounding these perfections, and who has taught his senses to look rightly on the visible world and all therein and to proclaim to the soul the greatness of the intelligence there concealed. (Saint Maximus the Confessor)

My thoughts dwelt constantly on the Jesus Prayer and I felt a great joy. From that time on I began to experience occasionally a great many different sensations in my heart and my mind. Now and then my heart would brim over with happiness overwhelmed by such lightness, freedom and solace that I was all changed and enraptured. At times I felt a glowing love for Jesus Christ and all God's creatures; and my eyes filled with tears of gratitude to God, who poured His grace on me, a great sinner. (The Pilgrim)

After these words I looked in his face and there came over me an even greater reverential awe. Imagine in the center of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of his midday rays, the face of a man who talks with you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone grasp your shoulders; yet you do not see the hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several years around and throwing a sparkling radiance across the snow blanket on the glade and into the snowflakes which besprinkle the great elder and me. Can one imagine the state in which I then found myself? (A Conversation of Saint Seraphim of Sarov with Motovilov)

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

Father John Michael Zboyovski