

## **INSCAPE March 2014**

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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!**

### **THE OASIS OF TEARS**

The final goal of all Christian prayer centers upon adoration and worship of God as our Supreme Being, the Center of our life. He alone is God and deserving of all our love. But a very overlooked aspect of authentic Christian prayer, at least in our modern world, is that of confessing our brokenness and sinfulness before the Lord in a humble stretching out by His power. This confession of brokenness impels us to leave the world of our illusory, self-created desires and move into God's real world of love, peace and joy in harmony with God and His entire, created world.

We fear too much a seeming negativity in our prayer-life. It is true; God is very positive and Life-Giving. But there is a force within us that should not be there. It is really existent, proved by the fact that we so often are influenced by its power from within us. In order to be healed, we must be persuaded that we are sick and not what we should be. We must receive God's grace that summons us to awaken from our sleep, from our life spent so much living in darkness. "Know this also, that now is the time and the hour that we should awake from our sleep, for now our salvation (healing) is nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11-12).

To receive such a grace takes the freeing power of discipline and honesty. In a word, it requires an inner transformation away from our false self to move into humility and the discovery by God's illumination of our beautiful true self in Christ. Much needs to be demythologized from early Christians, especially those of the East. They stressed so much the absolute necessity on our part to be in touch with our darkness and nothingness through a dread of yielding to the enemy that lived inside ourselves. This they called *Penthos*. It was meant to be a constant element in all prayer, whether individual or public, liturgical or private. For they knew that sin in us prevents us from experiencing God's great love for us. That love was experienced only when we had the honesty to confess our inauthenticity and our many turnings away from the goodness and love of God for us.

One of the great graces bequeathed to us moderns are the Eastern Christian writers, especially those of the early Church, is the utter conviction of the necessity of recognizing our sinful condition. In a state of constant conversion or turning of oneself totally to God as the source of all strength, we must cry out continually for His healing and transformation of such brokenness, this accent is summarized succinctly by Abbot Pimen: "Weep; there is no other way to perfection."

In the Latin West we all too readily think of one of the principal elements of prayer, that of sorrow and contrition for sins, as an attitude we seek to put on in preparing for the rite of reconciliation or in a directed spiritual retreat. Paul Tillich captures something of the keen Eastern Christian insight in regard to mourning over human brokenness that is in all of us in his essay, "The Eternal Now." He writes: "It is the act of the whole person in which he separates himself from elements of his being, discarding them into the past as something that no longer has any power over the present."

When we begin to live more consciously and more interiorly, we make contact with what St. Paul describes "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). Sin becomes something more than our deliberate acts of transgression against a divine law. We can learn much from early Christianity and those saints of the desert who had passed beyond the extrinsic aspects of the law. They had entered into a deep self-knowledge of the inner movements of the “heart” as well as a deep consciousness of God’s very immediate and tender love for them. In a word, sin for them was anything that was an obstacle to joyfully living the good news of the Paschal Mystery.

### **CLAIMING ONE’S BROKENNESS**

True Christian prayer possesses four main characteristics: adoration or worship of God; petition, thanksgiving and sorrow unto forgiveness. Let us explore this latter quality of prayer. Adoration is our attitude when we encounter God as supreme through faith, hope and love. You understand by God’s infusion and in your experience of the *allness* of God that you are sheer gift from God’s goodness. Adoration of God in His awesome transcendence fills us with mystery and awe as the Prophet Isaiah experienced as he was lifted up to the throne of God to encounter the holiness of God “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled His temple. And above Him stood the seraphim; each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one called to another, and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:1-3).

But the confession of our unworthiness and sinfulness that Isaiah also experienced flows out of adoration. “Then I said, Woe is me, I am dismayed; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:5). For one who lives superficially, such a confession of one’s unworthiness before God has little meaning. But for those who with St. Paul enter deeply into their consciousness and even unconsciousness, a whole inner world of fragmentation and darkness opens up.

Have you in prayer experienced such an inner duality as St. Paul experienced when he wrote: “...but I am unspiritual; I have been sold as a slave to sin. I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate...and so the thing behaving in that way is not my self but sin living in me...When I act against my will, then, it is not my true self doing it, but sin which lives in me...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:14-25).

### **AUTHENTIC CONVERSION**

In such inner quieting we gently yield to the operations of the Holy Spirit Who shows us what needs continual healing from deep within us. We see our fragmentation and we sorrow at seeing what could have been. We experience how great and tender and lasting has been God’s love for us and we see our ingratitude. We feel caught in a prison of darkness and yet we can see a delicate ray of light leading us through the crack of *metanoia*, a conversion to the Lord Jesus (Sunday of Zacchaeus).

The words of the Prophet Joel become the atmosphere in which we live with urgency as we BEGIN to experience our own inadequacies to set ourselves free from all the falsity within us by our own power: “...Come back to me with all your heart, fasting, weeping, mourning. Let not your hearts be broken, not your garments torn, turn to Yahweh your God again, for He is all tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in graciousness, and ready to relent” (Joel 2:12-13). “For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a good hope at the end. Then you shall call upon Me and pray to

Me. And when you shall seek Me with all your heart, you shall find Me, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

As we sit within our inner desert like the desert Fathers of earlier centuries, we learn to yield to the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ. The Divine Physician alone can bring life and give us that life more abundantly (John 10:10). We cry out as often as we can, day and night, with distrust in our powers to save ourselves, but with childlike trust in Jesus the Healer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner (Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee).” This demands a life of reflection, of sensitive inner knowledge in the light of God’s indwelling presence and infinite love. In His light we see our darkness.

In that darkness we honestly recognize our guilt and sinfulness. We claim it as our own without justification or rationalization. We are broken and we need God’s mercy. We are sinners and have gone astray. The spirit of compunction or abiding sorrow for our godless past and the fear of a future without God strangely enough allows us to humbly contact God. God gives Himself to the weak, the poor, the needy. He looks upon the lowliness of His children who have entered into an experiential knowledge of their creaturehood.

This is the spirit found in all Christian liturgies as the faithful, through their own individual fragmentation, bring a broken world before the merciful God. It is to ask for inner healing of all that is false and proud and not loving. This is a vital part of all our individual prayer before God. It is this that determines the depth of our true and effective conversion to the Lord.

There cannot be any true conversion, which is a turning toward God as the only center of our value system, unless there is a breaking of our pride and self-centeredness. This is the first step of a conversion. It shows us that the Christian life is a constant conversion or a turning away from the false world of our own creation. Thus we can see why one of the elements in all authentic Christian prayer is a recognition of the inauthenticity which is guiding our lives. This is the sorrow and repentance that should be a part of all true prayer.

## **AN EXISTENTIAL DREAD**

Thomas Merton develops the concept of an existential dread from the writings of Gabriel Marcel, the French Catholic philosopher. He writes: “When we are at rest, we find ourselves almost inevitably put in the presence of our own inner emptiness, and this very emptiness is in reality intolerable to us. But there is more. There is the fact that through this emptiness we inevitably become aware of the misery of our condition, a ‘condition so miserable’, says Marcel, ‘that nothing can console us when we think about it carefully.’ Hence the necessity of diversion!”

Merton places the importance of dread upon the realization of our own infidelity to a personal demand, the failure to meet a challenge or to fulfill a certain possibility which demands to be met and fulfilled. “It (the sense of dread) is a sense of defection and defeat that afflicts a man who is not facing his own inner truth and is not giving back to life, to God and to his fellow man, a fair return for all that has been given him.” Such dread is most important for our spiritual growth, provided we confront it and become filled with a “holy disgust” for having spent so much time eating the husks of swine (Sunday of the Prodigal Son).

Such dread and existential anxiety cannot be removed by resorting to some judicial effect obtained in the reception of the sacraments, without involving our own complete upheaval and regeneration by God’s grace to become what God has always desired us to be. In the deepest riches of such inner agony that St. John of the Cross describes so well in his work, *Dark Night of the Soul*, such dread becomes a wrestling with our nothingness and doubt that assails our integrity and spiritual identity. We seem to be lost on a dark ocean and have no direction or light to guide us.

The proud person will not persevere in such inner strife of faith. Instead, he will seek to escape the darkness and feeling of nothingness, and seek in prayer and busy activities the distractions that will perpetuate the myth that he is in charge. Dread divests us of any sense of self-importance. It is a therapeutic cleansing of ourselves by God's Spirit of all remnants of a false world. This is a necessary step before one can live in God's real world of love and self-sacrifice.

## SECOND MOVEMENT IN A CONVERSION

The second aspect of humility in any true Christian conversion is the positive enlightenment that results when we yield to God's grace in our brokenness and begin to live our new life-in-Christ. Its initial stage is a stretching out to possess the new abundant life promised us by Christ (John 10:10). The darkness within your heart begins to turn into light as you stretch out to make contact with your Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. He lives deep down, within your "heart." He promised you and me that He and the Father would come and abide within us (John 14:23). At the center of your being you can still fall down and confess your belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. You can cry out to Him that you are broken in body, soul and spirit and need His healing love.

He releases His Holy Spirit who reveals that Jesus Christ, the Image (Icon) of the Father, loves you unto the madness of the cross. "For me He dies!" (Galatians 2:20) becomes for you an experience that leads you into the awesome presence of the Heavenly Father as perfect Holiness, Beauty and Love. You experience the pulling together of your frightened spirit, your scattered mind. Guilt and fears, anxieties, hatred, feelings of inferiority and judgment against others dissolve in the tears of your own joyful reconciliation to God's immense love. You discover yourself as if for the first time. You enter into a "birthing" of your beautiful, true self in Christ. You feel as though nothing on the face of the earth, not even death, can ever take you from the love of God (Romans 8:34).

You can see how important is this conversion with the inner darkness and nothingness of your false self. Such a confrontation urges you on to leave that world of illusory desires that you built up, in order to enter into God's real world. You learn how to yield to God's healing love in prayer. You cease to "do" anything in prayer for now your prayer is your total, true self, joyfully surrendering to God's holy will. As you surrender to His love, and His peace pours over you like a soft rain falling gently on dry ground, the powers God placed within you as seeds unto divinization (the process of Theosis) crack open. Your potential for *being* expands into a realized consciousness. You feel in the depths of your being a new transformation taking place.

Powers to love, to-be-towards God, towards yourself in a healthy way and towards others, open up slowly like the locked-in petals of a bedewed rose. Gently they let go to expose a new harmony of many things captured in the union of one flower of exquisite beauty. The chaotic past, those dried bones of yester-year, receive the soft breath of God's Spirit of Love and they become enfleshed into your newly transformed being...Life Eternal.

You come out of the past. "And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with burial clothes, and his face bound with a burial napkin. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him and let him go free'" (John 11:44). As you stand in prayer crying out to Jesus Lord to show His merciful love, you receive an expanded consciousness that floods your entire being. You feel the body, soul and spirit relationships within you come together in an integrated, whole person. You experience the divine, uncreated energies of God's triadic life flowing through you in every part, on every level. You are alive with God's life (Lazarus Saturday).

You never want to return to the dark world of illusions and of selfishness. Now you want to live in God's real world that allows you to live in loving harmony with God, neighbor and with all God's creatures. You have been made by God to share in His Being. His is love, and when you love Him and you are loved by Him in return, you *are* what you were made for. Through the healing power of Christ's Spirit of Love experienced in prayer, and in the encounter with Christ as Healer in the sacrament of Confession, and in the sacrament of Sacraments, the Holy Eucharist, you know a new-found peace and joy pervading your entire life (Gal 5:22; Phil. 4:4).

## **PRACTICING COMPUNCTION**

If such sorrow and stretching out from your brokenness and false reality are essential elements in your prayer-life, how can you put this into practice? We have already seen the double movement in a conversion. One is the dread and disgust with the darkness in which we have been living. We recognize our ingratitude toward God Who has loved us with such perfect and holy love. The other is to enter into the light of God's new life. We accept this new life to the degree that we sincerely resolve to leave behind the darkness, and surrender completely to live in God's will, which is to live in love toward God and neighbor.

Each day will unearth from the depths of our being certain areas of darkness. These dark areas still rise up with their ugly hydra heads out of the past, from out of our repressed hurts and fears of the ghosts of yester-years. We need no longer be slaves of the past, of our sins and failures, of the hurts and seething angers because of what others have done to us. There is only the present moment as the Holy Spirit rips off the false posturing and phony masks that have created an illusion out of the past.

What a healing of life's hurts can come from experiencing this personalized love of the triune God Who dwells within us! Such healing can come daily as we stand, deeply in prayer and allow God's love to heal past brokenness. It can come through healing in a prayer group as we join our faith to that of loving Christians. Such Christian prayer brings the powerful intercession of Jesus to intercede with the Father to remove any darkness and bring us into the light of a oneness with Him and the Body of Christ. Healing of such darkness does come through reception of the sacraments...as personal dynamic encounters with the Creator and Sustainer of all Life.

Each evening we can also set up a prayer-session that would highlight the encountering of our darkness to have it dissolved by the light of God's loving presence. Such an exercise could consist of four points. After placing yourself in the living presence of God by an act of faith, adoration, hope and love, first begin by praising God. Thank Him in detail for all His loving gifts and acts toward you that day and throughout your entire life. Secondly, ask that the Father and the Lord Jesus release their Spirit to enlighten you to get in touch with your brokenness of that day.

Thirdly, go through the day and seek honestly to be in touch with your feelings of that day. Give honest expression to those feelings. Just how did you feel then toward those who may have hurt you? How do you feel now? Let any anger come forth. Do not be afraid to complain before God. But also do not be afraid to feel some disgust toward your false self. You are seeking an absolutely untrammelled self-revelation in God's loving presence. He is beyond anything that might hurt or offend Him. He loves you with an everlasting love and will never forsake you. Stand spiritually naked before Him. "Have mercy on me, O God, in Your goodness, in your great tenderness wipe away my faults; wash me clean of my guilt, purify me from my sins" (Psalms 51:1-2).

Fourthly, stretch out to the Lord Jesus, your Divine Physician, and cry in urgency that He come and touch you, and “heal you for Your Name’s sake”. Let the light of the Risen Saviour pour upon you like a gentle shower of healing rays. See Him come in all His glorious healing love to lead you out of your darkened prison. “Lazarus, come fourth!” Imagine Jesus touching you in all those relationships or feelings that keep you bound into a prison of self-pity and of pride. See yourself rising from your created world of unreality to enter joyfully into God’s real world of love and peace and joy.

Is there in this life any other way to experience the true love of God except in contrast to our brokenness? How can God heal us by His love if we have not been broken in our ignorance of not having been loved by Him and others? How can we understand what God’s presence means unless we have experienced His absence? How can we experience the Prodigal Father unless we first have experienced what a prodigal son or daughter means? Truly, “happy are those who mourn: for they shall be comforted.”

May you experience the Holy Spirit coming upon you as you begin The Great Fast.

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