

***Inscape* May 2017**

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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 Communion with the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!

INNER ATTENTION

Have you ever had the experience after having received the Holy Mystery of Our Lord's Sacred Body and his Precious Blood and suddenly found yourself taking an imaginary trip to Hawaii or the Caribbean Islands or elsewhere? Or do you often find yourself speaking to someone, your husband, wife, children, friend or acquaintance and you notice clearly that they are interiorly "yawning"; they are bored with what you are saying and perhaps even a little bored with you? You stop and demand attention from them by your complaint: "You are not listening to me, are you?"

Can any of us really say with conviction the same words as the Prophet Samuel when he heard the voice of God, "Speak Lord, Thy servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10)?

As part of our sinful fallen nature (self-inflicted and not created by God), we cannot seem to concentrate too long without our mind wandering away from the thought, person, or work at hand. We can so easily be distracted by the conditions around us with which we have allowed—almost unlimited acceptance of mass communication and marketing intervention. How true is this when there is something bothering us. Our mind keeps coming back to that same preoccupation or haunting thought.

But even when we are calm and quiet in prayer before the Lord, distracting thoughts with images that "grab" our attention and are more titillating to our sense-desires, rise up to make the vague thought of God seem even more vague.

For this reason, to help you in this important area of mental and spiritual discipline, the topic of "inner attention" has been chosen for this month's *Inscape* reflection. This is NOT prayer itself, but it is the necessary focus of all our powers upon God's presence so we can truly be present to Him in purer faith, hope and love. We can readily see how important this is in our daily work and our love relationships toward those around us (physically and spiritually).

Dale Carnegie (1888-1955) made millions of dollars by teaching others how to win friends and influence them by complete attention in listening to whomever is speaking. In this world, everyone seeks to speak! After "listening to others" as the first step, his books and courses taught ways of handling people, methods of how to change people, how to increase one's influence and prestige and earning power, how to make people like you. His focus was to share his principles he used for enhancing personal relationships and to convert people to his way of thinking.

Only true, loving persons know how to listen attentively to others. This is also a good definition of prayer: to be inwardly attentive to God as He speaks His Word (Logos), Jesus Christ, in our hearts and in our lives so that His Word can transform us into being truly a loving word (logos) to others. To gain divine knowledge (experienced as love) and (beyond human reasoning and understanding) offered to us as total gift, it is necessary to become silent, listen attentively, remembering what was heard, and then putting into practice (praxis) that knowledge in order to teach and share that learning experience with others.

INTIMATE AND CAREFUL OBSERVATION

If you have ever assisted or experienced the celebration of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy you would be struck by the many times during the Liturgy that the priest or deacon shouts out to the members of the congregation: "Wisdom, let us be attentive. Peace be unto all! Wisdom, let us be attentive!" It is a call to become bodily and in spirit attentive for Christ, for God's Wisdom is about to come into this community in a mystically new and dynamic invisible presence.

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

NEED FOR THE DISCIPLINE OF INNER ATTENTIVENESS

Jesus taught us the end of the Christian life is theosis or divinization. Yahweh had commanded His chosen people in the desert to love Him with their whole hearts and with all their strength (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus paraphrased this same command to be the summary of the end of our human life: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also (Matthew 22: 37-40).

The greatest accomplishment or goal in our human existence is to love God perfectly in every thought, word and deed and to love our neighbor as we would love ourselves. But how often we fail to fulfill these two commands, due mainly to our scatteredness of mind, our inattention of God's loving presence and His Word asking us to always live in love toward others. What difficulties we encounter when we strive to place God as the supreme center of all our inner motivations and values!

As we understand the greatness of God and His absolute beauty and goodness in His perfect and eternal merciful love for us, we will begin to understand ourselves on two levels of existence. We will see the areas of darkness that rise up from within the depths of our hearts that take on a force of aggressiveness as an enemy that attacks us from within the very confines of our inner citadel. We will also see our inner dignity to which God calls us and humbly we will stretch out with great desire to put on the mind of Christ.

Jesus taught us of the necessity of inner vigilance and attentiveness. "Therefore, you too must stand ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matthew 24:44). We are to be vigilant like the five wise virgins who were found waiting when the bridegroom came (Matthew 25:1-13). We are to purify our hearts from within for it is there that evil comes forth to make us unclean. "But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and it is these that make a man unclean (Matthew 15:18).

He Himself went against His own will to embrace death out of love for the Father's will (Luke 22:43). And He preached the necessity of giving up a lower level of existence in order that a new and more enriching life might come forth from the death to the former (Matthew 10:39; John 12: 24-25). Saint Paul exhorts Christians to bring every thought as prisoner, captured to be brought into obedience to Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 10: 5-6). And yet how many thoughts within each hour we think without referring them to the dominion of Christ our Lord? Saint Paul understood the principle of his "unspiritual self" that warred against his

spiritual self and he found himself so often doing that he knew he should not do (Romans 7: 14-25).

Yet Saint Paul also knew the importance of disciplining his body in order that he might run to win the crown in the race for salvation (1 Corinthians 9: 24-27). He strained ahead and never looked back, all in order to do whatever would be necessary to gain the “prize to which God calls us upward to receive in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14). He described the spiritual life in terms of a warfare, a battle engaged against spiritual forces that are seeking his destruction. God will grant us strength but we must resist the cunning of the devil by taking up all God’s armor (Ephesians 6: 10-17). And Saint Peter strongly insists on the need for discipline against the attacks of the enemy: “Be sober and watch well; the devil, who is your enemy, goes about roaring like a lion, to find its prey, but you, grounded in faith, must face him boldly” (1 Peter 5: 8-9).

SOBER VIGILANCE

Taking this above text from the first epistle of Saint Peter, the early Fathers of the desert built a teaching about what they termed *nepsis*. This word comes from the Greek word, *nepo*, which means to be sober, not inebriated or intoxicated. It refers to a mental sobriety, a mental balance, an internal disposition of attention to the movement of God’s Spirit leading us to true discernment of how we should react to any given situation or temptation according to our true dignity as God’s loving children. In this state you are not moved impulsively by your own desires or passions, but you hold yourself in abeyance until you know what this or that thought is all about in God’s *Logos*. God is the living criterion of all your choices as you act always out of love of God and neighbor. Freedom is not primarily having the possibility of choosing Good or evil, but ultimately choosing always the Good and the Beautiful according to God’s *Logos*. This is true integration according to the likeness of God, brought about by fidelity to the interior living Word of God within you.

SELF-POSSESSION

Lanza del Vasto, one of Gandhi’s disciples, explains how important inner attentiveness is if we are to remember God and seek to return His love by giving ourselves as a gift to others. He writes: “Self-possession must precede self-giving, for one cannot give what one does not have” (Make Straight the Way of the Lord, page 8). Such self-possession requires great “spiritual effort.” It demands that we attend to ourselves, not to be off center.

Thomas Merton writes in a similar vein: “If I love God with my heart, I have got to have a heart, and I have got to have it in my possession to give. One of the most difficult things in life today is to gain possession of one’s heart in order to be able to give it. We don’t have a heart to give. We have been deprived of these things and the first step in the spiritual life is to get back what we have to give and to be ourselves (Life and Solitude).

ATTEND TO YOURSELF

When father George Maloney was in his novitiate training, he was taught a Latin phrase: “Attende tibi” which came originally from Saint Basil the Great of the 4th century. The novices were told that it meant they were to “mind your own business!” They were not to be curious about the affairs of others. Seriously they were to center upon their rapid climb to sanctity. But it really meant in the mind of Saint Basil and all other great ascetics of the early Church that each of us had to cultivate a greater capacity on body, soul and spirit levels for inner attention

to the given moment and the task at hand. It is a discipline of the human spirit that allows us to draw near to God so that everything we do is done for His love and not out of our own selfishness.

It is the mind and heart focused upon God and the goal of the human journey, to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as we love ourselves. Inner attention drives away any mechanical acting out of routine or a learned experience. In a word, we move toward greater human personhood, away from Pavlov's dog which salivated whenever it heard the doorbell ring.

Lanza del Vasto gives us some practical aids to help us attain this necessary inner attention. The first exercise he helps us to rid ourselves of scattered consciousness and our inability to focus on a single thing for very long. We tend to be too much in a hurry and to try to do too many things at the same time (today; called multitasking). His advice is needed by all of us living in our modern times:

"The first exercise we recommend to you, busy friend, you who have so many important things to do and so little time, will not take you an hour, or even a quarter of an hour, but three minutes....And perhaps three minutes is still too much, so let us divide them into six: six times a day, three times in the morning, and three times in the afternoon, be still. Stop!

You are in a hurry? All the more reason for checking yourself. You have things to do? Stop, otherwise you will make mistakes. You have to look after other people? All the more reason for beginning with yourself, lest you harm those others.

So, unharness. Relax. For half a minute every two hours, stop! Put down what you have in your hand. Hold yourself straight. Breathe deeply. Draw your senses inward. Suspend yourself before the inner dark, the inner void. And even if nothing happens, you will have broken the chain of haste....To recollect oneself is to gather up all the shreds of oneself that were dispersed and cling to things here and there. Answer as Abraham answered God's call "Present" (adsum!).

The exercise consists, then, in remaining present to oneself and to God for half a minute...It is unlikely that in so short a time you will plunge deeply into the mystery of self, but it is not impossible with the grace of God. However, even if nothing else happens during the moment of suspension, we shall at least have broken the chain of events that held us prisoner. We shall have broken it in six and taken the first step toward deliverance."

This exercise del Vasto calls "recall," recalling yourself to yourself. For if we become so engrossed in our work, we really do forget ourselves as free agents, capable of freely moving beyond the demands made upon us from outside of us. He gives us his "perpetual exercise" as distinct from his three minute one as explained above. This exercise demands that you concentrate your attention on yourself while you are acting. He describes this exercise:

"Not just paying attention to the object, to the purpose, to your work, but to yourself seeing the object, yourself going toward the goal, yourself at work.

Which amounts to relating everything to the inner center and centering yourself in what you are doing. It is not enough to pay attention to what you are doing. You must pay attention to yourself doing what you are doing...It requires no change in one's occupation or manner, but the sense, the density, the value of all one's acts are wholly changed."

GOD SPEAKS HIS WORD

Becoming more aware of yourself as a free agent, capable of putting yourself into your work with the maximum of concentration and creativity is NOT the goal of your Christian life. The goal we have already described is loving God with your whole heart and with all your strength and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Ultimately you should strive for inner attention so that you can do all, think, speak, and act, in oneness with God, in the power of God's Spirit of Love. If God's essence is to be love which means **always** to be acting in love, as Judaeo-Christianity reveals to us, then He is **always** seeking to share His being by communicating His presence to us, whom He created according to His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) through His Word. God becomes a God-toward-others by communicating Himself in the gifts of creation through His Word and His Spirit of Love. The entire world around us is being created in a process of God's sign of His burning desire to give Himself in faithful communication to us through His Word. The world at its interior is filled with the self-communicating Trinity. God is filling the universe with His loving Self. His Uncreated Energies of Love swirl through and fill all creatures with His loving, creative presence. "Yahweh's love fills the earth. By the Word of Yahweh the heavens were made, their whole array by the breath of his mouth" (Psalms 33:5-6).

Everything flows out of God's exuberant fullness of being and becomes a reality in His communicating Word. This self-communicating God speaks to us constantly, if we are only attentive inwardly, through His Word in the oceans and mountains, birds and beasts, flowers and all living things that spring into being under His smiling, joyful gaze. Absolutely **nothing** that "is" can escape His loving touch, His presence as the "Giver of Life."

GOD'S LOGOS IN MAN

Of all the billions (actually an untold number) of creatures made by God, you and I alone remain unfinished and open-ended as human beings. God speaks to us in the "coolness of evening" in the Garden. By our possessing an intellect and will, we are able to enter into communication, relationship, and ultimately communion unto union with God to share His very own happiness and nature as being love (1 John 4:8). We can posit ourselves as an "I", dependent on the Absolute "I" of God, or we can refuse to be attentive to His loving kindness and presence. We are being summoned by God continually in every moment-less moment of our existence, in each event, to receive God's Word actively. We are called to be listeners of God's Word, to understand and to believe in His Word.

We are not propelled into our uniqueness as individuals by a predetermined guidance on God's part. We are obligated to stand inwardly attentive to God's Word inbreaking into our lives, calling us to respond in faith and love to obey His Word. He invites and call us to open our hearts to His Word and to accept our becoming existence in His Word by means of a free will decision to live according to that Word.

ATTENTION AS RESTING IN GOD'S WORD [*NESTING IN THE ROCK*]

The language of love is silence. If we are to listen to God's Word, we are in need of silencing the noisiness within our hearts and around us in the multiplied world that is oriented in its brokenness toward "sin and death," symbols of self-centeredness and a movement away from God centeredness. The condition that served as criterion of one's docility in listening to the Word of God was measured by the early Christians who inhabited the deserts in terms of resting in the Lord or quieting all inordinate desires. Teilhard de Chardin calls such a listening state "passionate indifference," whereby we Christians are to surrender ourselves totally to God dwelling and revealing Himself within the living of God that Christians are.

This state of listening is comparable to the seventh day of rest that the Lord took after His labors of creating the Cosmos. It is the new day of rest, the day of *kairos* time of salvation in which we human beings opt always to do that which most pleases the Heavenly Father

according to His Word. This is described by Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews: "...the promise of reaching the place of rest he had for them still holds good, and none of you must think that he has come too late for it....There must still be, therefore, a place of rest reserved for God's people, the seventh-day rest, since to reach the place of rest is to rest after your work as God did after His. We must therefore do everything we can to reach this place of rest, or some of you might copy this example of disobedience and be lost" (Hebrews 4: 1-11).

Jesus speaks of the necessity of our entering into our "inner closet" when we wish to pray, and there we are to pray in spirit and in truth to the Heavenly Father (Matthew 6:6). Sacred Scripture and the early Christian writers referred to this innermost self as our "heart." It is into our heart, into the deepest reaches of our consciousness, that we enter in order to come face to face in silence with God. In utter openness and receptivity we wait without any preconceived ideas of what Jesus, the Word of the Father, will reveal to us from within us and from without, in the world events around us of this new day.

GOD'S EXTERIOR COMMUNICATION

A general emptying of our own driving, aggressive attacks upon God, others and the world around us and a putting on of a gentile spirit to listen to God as He communicates Himself to us is necessary if we are to be in touch with God as He communicates Himself to us both from outside and from within ourselves. A disciplined inner attention is needed if we are to be ready to hear what God's Word is saying to us.

God reveals Himself through His Word as found in Holy Scripture. This requires a listening on the levels of body, soul and spirit as God's message comes to us as history, an intellectual message to us. Then God's Spirit speaks not only a special healing word of love in the broken time and space in which we listen to this word but He also releases the dynamic power of God that gives faith and hope in God's will to fulfill what His Spirit reveals.

We approach listening to the Word of God in Scripture with humility and gratitude, but above all with child-like faith that God's Word made flesh is still with us unto the end of the world in His revealed Word (Matthew 28:20). Yet it is always a fresh, new Word being given to us as we listen with complete inner attentiveness and in deep faith, hope and love. Such listening to Scripture is not merely a dry study, an intellectual exercise, but it is a heart to heart encounter with Jesus that demands great inner attentiveness.

"Christ is among us!" "God is with us, all you nations understand, and submit yourselves, for God is with us" (Nativity Compline). "Be still and know that I AM God" (Psalm 46:10).

Such listening means that we also are listening attentively to God in His revelation within the Church in its authority to teach and preach God's Word from Scripture and from the Living Traditions developed continually as the hierarchical members teach the Truth with their special charism to the other members of the Church.

ATTENTION TO GOD IN OTHER PERSONS

A special listening with attention to God's Word as an unfolding of God's loving presence is developed as you learn to listen to God in others. Here you can see from your own experience what inner attentiveness and love are required if you are truly to listen to God in the presence of other persons who meet you and communicate themselves to you through their words, actions and their very being. At first we listen on the bodily level to God's Word speaking to us through others. We seek to praise God in the positive qualities found in them. We can observe negative qualities also in others, but we seek to move from the bodily level into a faith, hope and love vision that will allow us to pierce beyond the evident negative side of the person to

see deeper the Word of God and to listen to what message of beauty and love the Word is speaking from within that person.

The greater our awareness is of the indwelling presence of God in the deepest center of our being, the greater we will become conscious of this same divine, loving presence, surrounding and penetrating all other things. Gone are the anxious, aggressive moods to dominate each situation to satisfy our physical and psychic needs. A new global sense of God's presence is discovered in each human encounter as we push aside the veils of the externals to enter into the inner, loving presence of God. As we become freed from our false ego, the screaming lies and suspicious doubts about our identity and that of others, we can remain humble and loving, gently looking into the eyes of each person encountered to see there the face of God, shining through as Love in the unique gift of the other person.

ATTENTIVE PRAYER

God does meet us and communicate Himself to us more directly in our own personal prayer. The more attentive we can bring ourselves to His activities in self-communication unto communion, the more "real" He becomes to us. We cannot love and surrender to Someone who is not real to our consciousness. It is distractions that take us away from intense intimacy with God.

Distractions are anything on a body, soul or spirit level, that enters into our communication and communion with God. Voluntarily or involuntarily willed by you, they can prevent you from being attentive in faith, hope and love to God. Distractions tend to dissipate your attention away from God and therefore defeat the prime purpose of prayer: to lift your mind and heart up to God in loving surrender and adoration.

Most of your distractions in prayer will be involuntary. Especially as you move away from discursive prayer and do not employ your intellect, imagination and memory as much in your contemplative resting in God's loving presence, distractions will come as a plague. When such seemingly carrying you away from the focus of God, gently but firmly move back into the faith orbit by centering upon God's presence and what you are about in your prayer.

Only by returning to inner attention in prayer and in all you do for love of God can you fulfill Saint Paul's exhortation: "Be joyful at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Thus your will will become always one with God's will. This is to obtain the goal of your life; to love God with inner attention and in complete surrendering love which results in complete divinization of your being.

Prayerfully your brother in Christ,
Father John Michael Zboyovski