

# Inscape November 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!

## BEING FORGIVEN

Many of us, in our fearfulness, loneliness and separation, do not know ourselves and we are unknown to those around us. We condemn ourselves to solitary confinement and isolation in the prison of self when we live our life only as an “individual,” excluding all references to the “other.” Meaningful relationships are then excluded within the journey of life.

When we stop running from God, hugging our false ego, we see that we have been heading for the wrong goal, and turn around (metanoia). In the mirror of Christ we see ourselves as we are, for the first time. The falsity in our past, the deceit, the selfishness, that have separated us from others and from God disfigure our faces, ruin our good names, and adulterate our true identity. To stare steadily at ourselves without blinking, without turning away, takes honesty, humility and courage. Only because we are in love with God and our neighbor, and “God is with us” are we able to bear the sight of ourselves, ugly as scars, beautiful as the Cosmos, persons on the way toward divinity (theosis)(divinization).

### ***“God is With Us” [Great Compline Prayer of the Orthodox Church]:***

God is with us, understand, All you nations, and submit yourselves.

For God is with us.

Give heed, pay attention, and listen; you unto the ends of the earth.

For God is with us.

All you powerful, submit yourselves.

For God is with us.

For if you again strengthen yourselves, you shall again be vanquished.

For God is with us.

And whatsoever counsel you shall take, the Lord will allow it to fail.

For God is with us.

And the word, whatsoever you speak, shall not remain with you.

For God is with us.

And of your fear we shall be neither afraid nor in dread.

For God is with us.

But the Lord our God, Him will we hallow, and He shall be fear unto us.

For God is with us.

And if I be trusting in Him, He shall be unto me sanctification.

For God is with us.

And I will have hope in Him, and shall be saved by Him.

For God is with us.

Behold, I and the children which God has given me.

For God is with us.

The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light.  
 For God is with us.  
 You that dwell in the region and shadow of death, His light will shine upon you.  
 For God is with us.  
 For unto us a Child is born, unto us the Son is given.  
 For God is with us.  
 Whose government is upon His shoulders.  
 For God is with us.  
 And of His peace there is no end.  
 For God is with us.  
 And His Name shall be called Angel of Great Counsel.  
 For God is with us.  
 Wonderful Counselor.  
 For God is with us.  
 Mighty God, Ruler, Prince of Peace.  
 For God is with us.  
 Father of the Ages of Ages to come.  
 For God is with us.  
 God is with us, understand, All you nations, and submit yourselves.  
 For God is with us.

Because God knows us as the paradoxes we are by our free-will choices—demonic angels, murderous lovers, lights under bushels—God dissolves our guilt in His perfect and eternal divine merciful love. We are broken, but loved, because we are seen through, fully known, accepted unreservedly. God does not hate us for our plots against Him; God does not condemn us for being spiritually ignorant, and on the rack of our false egos. What, then, does God do?

God dies as we must die, and rises transformed, holding us in both hands, close to His heart. No remote Sky-God (up there-out there), this Uncreated Father is ours, but an immerser of Himself in created flesh and blood, planted in the soil of a woman's body (Theotokos), one forever with all human beings. Unless Jesus had come to tell us, we would have never become aware that we are being lifted up in the arms of the Father, loved without knowing it, blind as newborn infants to their mother's face. Now that we know, we can open our eyes and see who it is that loves us, and freely return that gift of love back to God as we surrender our entire life to Him and Him alone. The justice of God is not the justice of human beings. By dying to show us how much we were loved, Jesus showed us that to understand "all is to forgive all." Nothing less than dying for us would have convinced us of God's mercy, compassion, pity and forgiveness, God's parenthood, God's love. This love endures forever, in spite of what our egos have done, are now doing, and will do in the future. God's loves never fails and God's love never ends! The Orthodox Faith and Worship in Spirit and in Truth will not disappoint and will not change!

As the grain of wheat dies giving birth to the new plant, so Jesus dies to bring the Father's loving Spirit to life within us, waking us from our dreamy sleep and the deadly stupor of our false egos. We open our eyes like Lazarus, arising from the dead by hearing the voice of the Lord, walking out of the darkness of the tomb, straight into the arms of Christ, and see the Light. "Unbind him, and set him free." In the mirror of him, we see ourselves united with God, transformed, restored, reborn into new flesh, new blood, each cell recast into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ; true God and true man. The Holy Spirit speaks within us, accurate

and strong as a heartbeat, drowning the tinkling cymbal of that liar, our false ego, which never gives up its attempt to murder God, the world, our true selves, so that it alone might live.

During his lifetime on earth, Jesus preached, taught and revealed the love of God, lived it, healed the sick and the suffering, pulled those drowning in the abyss, up by their wrists and not letting go (Experience the manifestation before the “Resurrection of Christ” icon, his “Descent into Hades”). The crowds and multitudes went wild, and didn’t listen when Jesus told them it was more difficult to heal the soul (intellect, will, memory, understanding, imagination, emotions) than the body. “Unless you see miracles,” he said sadly, “you will not believe.” Like children at the circus, the crowds clapped their hands, wanting the next act. “Jump off the roof of the temple,” the devil urged. “Be an earthly King with power and authority,” said the crowd. They didn’t suggest that he suffer and die and rise again. That was his idea and eternal plan for the healing and salvation of mankind. We would not have thought of it. Only God would think of such a thing.

When Jesus told us that we too would have to die to follow him into the arms of the Father, the crowds were distracted when they remembered that they had other things to do. The circus was over. “But everyone alike started to make excuses” (Luke 14:18). Even his chosen twelve disciples objected. A person suffers for being bad, they thought. Suffering is a punishment inflicted by an angry God. They did not yet understand that love is painful, and that the false ego dies hard. The sight of ourselves as we are, in the Light of God, wounds and heals. To live, you have to die, and dying hurts like birth. Only when the labor pains are over and the real self is born out of them, do we see who we really are.

Saint Peter loved Jesus so much that he would have killed to protect him, but he couldn’t stand *being* killed. When the crunch came, he said he had never known Christ. He ran away from the cross, leaving young John and a handful of faithful women to watch and weep. Such suffering, Peter thought, just might be contagious, and he wanted nothing to do with it. “Unless you suffer, you have no part of me,” Jesus told him, but Peter wanted glory and power. Suffering was not what he had signed up for. In the garden, before Jesus was arrested, Peter took him aside. “From that time Jesus began to make it known to his disciples that he would shortly have to go to Jerusalem and suffer a great deal from the elders and the high priests and scribes, and be killed, and rise up on the third day. So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, far be it from you, my Lord, that this should happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan; you are a stumbling block to me; for you are not thinking of the things of God, but of men. Then Jesus said to his disciples, he who wishes to follow me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it. For how would a man be benefited, if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?”(Matthew 16:21-26). This saying was a hard one, and most people turned away from Jesus rather than accepting and receiving his blessing by hearing the word of God and keeping it. Most of us do too.

Peter, also, like most of us, wouldn’t take no for an answer. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, he lunged at one of them and cut off his ear. Then, of course, he ran away, for it is easier to kill than to be killed, easier to hate and fear than to love, easier to be greedy and self-centered than to share with kindness and compassion, easier to project guilt and blame than to own it as ours.

Yet Jesus went on saying to the end that the only way to follow him was to the death and to the resurrection and with him, to the ascension, into the open arms of the cross, burying who we think we are under a stone so we can become transformed into who we had never imagined.

Does our existence resemble the beautiful butterfly emerging from the chrysalis stage of the caterpillar? Spiritually reflect on the 4-stage life-cycle of the butterfly, the “butterfly metamorphosis.” The butterfly’s life begins as an egg. Next is the larva (caterpillar) stage. Then, the pupa (Chrysalis) stage, when the caterpillar is rapidly changing by a remarkable transformation (metamorphosis). Finally, the adult butterfly emerges; and will master the art of flying. The initial “rather ugly caterpillar” has been marvelously set free from its cocoon.

[ I remember as a child, overhearing a conversation between two caterpillars, one saying to the other as they looked up at a butterfly flying over them, “you will never get me up in one of those things.” ]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (4 February 1906 – 9 April 1945; German pastor and theologian, who wrote: *The Cost of Discipleship*. Executed by hanging by the Nazi regime) died in a Nazi concentration camp when he was thirty-nine, following Jesus into the black nowhere of a crematorium. He knew the difference between cheap easy grace and the true cost of loving as God loves. He knew that only by giving up the illusion that he controlled his life could he follow his Master, go where his Master had gone, become who he really was. He had some sharp words for “otherworldly,” disincarnated Christianity: “We are other-worldly ever since we hit upon the devious trick of being religious, yes, even ‘Christian,’ at the expense of the earth. Other-worldliness affords a splendid environment in which to live. Whenever life begins to become oppressive and troublesome, a person just leaps into the air with a bold kick and soars relieved and unencumbered into so-called eternal fields. However, Christ does not will or intend this weakness; instead, he makes man strong. He does not lead man into a religious flight from this world to other worlds beyond; rather, he gives him back to the earth as its loyal son.”

The earth with all its dirt and blood is where God chose to be born, raised to consciousness, and die. We and all the life of the planet earth beat with his heart-beat, heal with his hands, share what he learned from wearing a body.

Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ came among us to let us know how much God loves us (John 16:27), and words were not enough to speak for him. If parents love their children and do not want to see them hurt or injured in any way, how much more does God love mankind? God would rather suffer and die for us, his children, than allow us to bear pain and isolation and loneliness, frightened and totally helpless in our own efforts. But we cannot know the extent of God’s love and suffering unless we share it in loving relationships. Forgetting our false selves, killing off our illusions, learning to love as ourselves what at first seemed other, always hurts, like the pain described during childbirth. We experience the anguish, but we know it leads to everlasting life, and not to eternal death. If the risk of death were not there, life would not be so precious and cherished.

Only the lover who gives up life for love can know how easy it is, how light the yoke. If one is immersed within a loving, personal relationship, there is no sacrifice. And so the false ego dies, the real self stretches and wakes like a newborn child and is happy and glad and joyful for the birth pangs. As our own cross becomes lighter and more acceptingly bearable, carried with the love for God and neighbor, we are paradoxically more in pain at the crosses of others. Especially heavy is the cross of their false egos, for we must see and understand the anger, the attacks, the rejection they hurl outward at us build walls that separate them from the love they need and are searching for.

In our ears are the words of Jesus: “...the words which I have spoken to you are Spirit and Life” (John 6:63). The pre-incarnate Christ speaks through the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah, “So is my Word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty and unfulfilled, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11). Saint Paul writes to Timothy, “I urge then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and

thanksgiving be made for all people, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all Godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God the Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of his truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:4).

"But I say to you, love your enemy, bless anyone who curses you, do good to anyone who hates you, and pray for those who carry you away by force and persecute you, So that you may become sons of your Father who is in heaven, who causes his sun to shine upon the good and the bad, and who pours down his rain upon the just and the unjust. For if you love only those who love you, what reward will you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same thing? And if you salute only your brothers, what is it more that you do? Do not even the tax collectors do the same thing? Therefore become perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:44-48).

The only way to break down the walls their false egos have struggled to build is to see through them. As we feel with empathy, their pain and suffering at separation from God and from us, we love them as ourselves, see them inseparable from us as our own faces. We do not merely imitate Christ, we become the skin of his hands as he reaches into the world to touch human beings. Is he wearing us or are we wearing him? No way for us to tell which, so close is the fit.

Since only our false egos would require a "program" or model to copy, we know that we are not "imitating Christ" as some outworn Western forms of spirituality would have it. Having known and experienced the living dynamic love of the Holy Spirit, and having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, how can we trade it for a sweet, painted Jesus, created by human beings to teach us a sweet and painted piety? The Christ that burns with the fire of love at the heart of the universe teaches us not by rote but by a transforming experience of himself, which consumes the old ego, all that we thought was *us*.

When we enter into our innermost selves, we find both Christ and the real *us* tangled in an embrace so violent that it is hard to see where he leaves off and we begin. No mere pious imitation is going on here; no school child is parroting a teacher. A marriage of wills and hearts is being celebrated, out of which a new self is born. "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, who is created by God in righteousness and true holiness." (Ephesians 4:23-24). This new self desires to obey God as the hand obeys the head, knowing that only in obedience will the false ego die, and the new person live. Jesus reminded us that love is self-forgetfulness, learned by throwing away all that is not God in us: "If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love" (John 15:9-10).

He patiently longs to hold us close, but cannot if we disobey, shriveling again into the deformed false self. Our body must shape itself to his, if we are to stand heart-to-heart with him, locked in an embrace that gives us his abundant life (John 10:10). Self-surrender to Jesus and the Father, who dwells within us, means that we obey moment-to-moment as God speaks the divine Word within us. As we en flesh our love by obedience to that Word, our ears and eyes open to the likeness of God in us that is our true being (Genesis 1:26). Our self is no longer the dwarfed self ego, but the image and likeness of God.

As Jesus turned inward to hear his Father's voice, he heard himself spoken into being, an echo of God, scarcely distinguishable from God. Because our true selves, other Christs by adoption, are made in the image and likeness of God, we too hear God utter us, if we hang on God's Word (Logos). God's Word issues forth in our acts, because both are shaped by one mind, God in us.

This never-ending day of Christ's indwelling presence illuminates us from inside, where no darkness is, because now this place is his. In its brilliance you can easily distinguish truth from illusion. Simone Weil (+1943), the Jewish mystic drawn to Christianity, wrote of this new clarity of vision: "We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate impressions. It is a transformation analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of the evening on a road, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we had first seen as a stooping man, where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices. We see the same colors, we share the same wounds, but not in the same way."

Because we are new beings, we see a new world, not the poor, narrow one created in the image of our false egos, but the world as God created it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). We become a body fit to be the Temple of the Holy Spirit, a skin fit to shape the bone and flesh of God.

Our shadowy side, our false ego, complains of the light and holds its ears against the voice of Christ. "Don't give me up," it clamors. "I will make you rich, powerful, admired. That other one, he will say you need nothing but him, he'll say to forget yourself, and love. He'll tell you to do his will, not yours, to give, not take. If you want my advice, you'll take everything you can get your hands on." Under this strident voice, we hear the gentle one of the indwelling Christ, saying, "Little children, love one another as I have loved you." That Spirit stirs in us like a child reaching for its mother, and draws our body, mind, and soul with it into a dance with God. Each step is in obedience, yet each step is where we want most to go. What God wants is for us to be more perfectly who we are, to drop those rags of ego that we still clutch over our naked true self, and to let all we thought was ours fall into the hands of others without having to be asked.

As Jesus dispossessed himself and even gave his mother away as he died on the Cross, shedding forgiveness like blood and water on us all, we too will let our ego die so that our real self can be resurrected and live. The love that we already share with Christ, we give away to others as the gift of our true self, having the more as we give, for love given away multiplies as did the loaves and fishes in the hands of Jesus.

The first attempt to walk in Christ's footsteps is to want to do what we think God wants us to do. In any given amount, we need to remind ourselves to do God's will, not our own, and make a serious effort to know the difference between the two. Should we fail, we acknowledge the failure, reaffirm the intention, and turn back to Christ, again placing our feet where his walked. Each moment with him is the first, new beginning. He is not concerned about success. With him, no failure is so hopeless that it cannot be transformed into its opposite. "My sacrifice is this broken spirit, you will not scorn this crushed and broken heart" (Psalms 51:17). Jesus is used to turning water into wine; it was his first recorded miracle. The more we abandon our old self, moment by moment, throwing off the baggage of the ego like a climber approaching the top of the mountain, the more like Christ our true self becomes.

God shapes our very thought, word, and deed as we listen with childlike openness, childlike attention, excitement and surrender to God's word. We peacefully and joyfully accept what we are, persons we meet, and whatever the present situation might be. We give up trying to figure out why we're in this situation, how we can use it to our advantage, get out of it, or lay it upon someone else. Instead, we give it to God, along with ourselves, and follow where it leads, abandoning ourselves like a dancer to music. In fact, we, the dancers, become the dance and the music, because our old ego has been abandoned to both. Each moment, each detail that we lay in God's hands makes us lighter, freer. We surrender to God all the fears and anxieties

of the past, present, and future as we let God's uncreated energies of love pour through us like rain into the parched and cracked earth-soil, giving abundant and eternal life.

"O Lord, Who blesses those who bless You and sanctifies those who put their trust in You, save Your people and bless Your inheritance, preserve the fullness of Your Church, sanctify those who love the beauty of Your House, glorify them by your divine power, and forsake us not who place our hope in You. Grant Your peace to Your world, to Your churches, to Your priests, to the government and civil authorities of our country, our military and to all Your people. For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from You, the Father of Light; and to You we render glory and thanksgiving and worship, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, always now and unto the ages of ages. Amen." [Priest's prayer before the dismissal in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom].

As though we had been dead and entombed like Lazarus in darkness, we come totally to light and life in the complete gift of ourselves to God, who gives us back to ourselves. The Wisdom of the Holy Spirit speaks within us the words of our own mouth, and we know good from evil, common sense from foolishness, peace from violence.

Jesus Christ, is now our Lord and God and Savior, one with our deepest, truest self. "To me to live is Christ," says Saint Paul, making God the subject and active verb of our whole being. Apart from him, nothing is, and we not only know this truth, we act it, live it, *are* it. In loving oneness with Jesus Christ, we discover the Lord of the Universe (Pantokrator) in whom alone we can live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

Prayerfully yours in Christ Jesus our Lord,  
*Father John Michael Zboyovski*