

INSCAPE October, 2013

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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!

PRAYER IS A LOVING PRESENCE

God so loved this world that He gave us His only begotten Son so that we would believe in Him and experience His closeness and oneness with us, in order that we might not “perish” but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

This is the incredible good news that God is a God “toward us” and for us. If God is love by His nature (1John 4:8), then He activates that love by wishing to share His very Being (2Peter 1:4) with us intimately as an abiding presence. “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We shall come to him and make Our home with Him (John 14:23).

BEING A PRESENT TO OTHERS

It is quite natural that you think of giving presents to your loved ones and friends. What is a present except your desire to extend yourself through the symbol of the gift into the *being* of the other? You are saying in the gift given: “I want to be a presence of self-giving to you. Accept me, please, as a part of your life, your well-being, your happiness.”

God reveals that to us in the feast of His Nativity, the Incarnation. He now, as a Trinitarian Family, can be forever “God among us”-Emmanuel, through Jesus Christ. God has pitched His tent among us “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His Glory, a Glory like that of the first-born of the Father, full of Grace and Truth” (John 1:14) and now in Jesus Christ will forever be a living and infinitely loving presence to us.

This mystery of being a *presence* to another admits of many levels of self-giving to the other. You have surely experienced many times the movement from absence toward presence as you met a stranger on a plane, train, ship or wherever providence brought you, into the possibility of a further growth into your own human *being*, and allowed a stranger to discover in your openness a bit more of his or her *being*. So often on your journey through your life you find yourself next to people whom you have never met before. They sit close to you. But they are “objects” next to you, “over there,” until one smiles, says a kind word of interest to the other. The mystery of presence begins when one becomes “present” in his or her words and gestures that communicate the mysterious message that says: “I do not know you. We are close to each other. But I would like to be open for you. Let’s be mutually available to each other.”

Such a mystery of presence cannot be forced nor can it be understood and willed for any pragmatic motive. Just as we could not force God to give us His Son, Jesus Christ, so we cannot force any human person to gift us with his or her love. This gift of presence admits of various levels of becoming present to the other as two people move away from the controlled object-object relationship into the movement of one toward the other as toward possible other-self. **Availability** is the first act by which you incline yourself freely to be a presence to another.

Being a presence toward another admits of great intensity, depending on how unselfishly you wish to give yourself in loving service to the other in both affective (expressing emotion or feeling) and effective (producing the intended or expected result; prepared and available for service) love. Passing acquaintances usually do not develop into deep presences. For the development of deep

presence between two persons, time and intimate sharing are necessary. Deep love presence is rooted in a desire to live for the other's complete good and happiness and joy. You would do anything to bring to actuality the complete fulfillment of the other.

AN I-THOU MUTUALITY

Such a presence takes place secondly in a *Mutuality*, in an I-Thou relationship as two interchange the gift of each other. Such a presence is intensified as you do not selfishly look for anything in return; yet there is a mutual gifting which becomes all the stronger when you forget about the returned gift and concentrate only on the gift of yourself.

REALIZING THE EXCHANGE

Thirdly, presence demands an actualization of the exchange. Presence that is not experienced as self-gifting in a coming together will become an absence if never renewed in self-giving. This level of presence is distinguished by one's *Self-Sacrifice* guided by humility in living one's life for the other, giving up what "I want" and going against my "self-will" for the benefit and salvation of the other. There is always a need for communion or sharing the oneness in Spirit. Here, presence increases as you empty all, both the good and even the weaknesses, in trusting, self-gifting revelation of yourself in the most intimate, deepest levels of sharing your total "person" with another.

GOD'S PRESENCE TO US

God's eternal plan of salvation for all His creation can be known and experienced (as much as we are capable of receiving) through the manner and mode in which He chose to reveal Himself to humanity, in His revelation of Who He is and who we are. The Trinitarian Community of Love is present to mankind in the many varied ways in which God Himself wishes to be present to us: through His visible and invisible creation, in the Good News of the Gospel, in His Name, through the Mystery of Iconography, in the Eucharistic Gifts of Christ's Precious Body and Blood, through the Indwelling Trinity within the "heart" of each and every person created in the Image and Likeness of God.

We have been discussing in diverse ways that God is Love by His nature and that, therefore, He is also "presence" as self-giving by His very nature. But in what way can you and I experience God's presence to us? How can you live to make God happy? How can God who is so completely perfect and immutable receive anything from you that would add anything to His personhood? Does God really wish to share His Being with you to the degree of "communion," where you truly can become one with Him in the Mystery of Theosis or Divinization?

God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ to invite you to receive the gift of God's very Being in the most intimate friendship, "This is My commandment: That you love one another just as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for the sake of his friends. You are My friends if you do everything that I command you. Henceforth, I will not call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master does, but I have always called you My friends, because everything that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:12-15). God establishes in Jesus Christ through His death and resurrection the New Covenant whereby God pledges Himself not only to share with you His gifts for your holiness, but to commit Himself in the Gift of Himself to you for your total holiness, "...but God corrects us for our advantage, that we might become partakers of His Holiness" (Heb. 12:10).

God pours into your heart His love through the Spirit Whom He gives you (Romans 5:5) and Who dwells within you (Romans 8:9) in order that in His Spirit you might know that you are truly a child of God (1John 3:1), made an heir with Christ of Heaven forever (Romans 8:17). Jesus is the way, the truth and the life who leads you into the most intimate presence of the Trinity Who wishes effectively to come and abide within you, Father, Son and Spirit (John 14:23).

God wishes to give you His presence of **Availability** for your complete joyfulness in your awareness of your eternal son-ship and daughter-ship within His family, so that you too can live unto God's joyfulness, glory and praise. You praise God most when you live consciously in Christ in order that with His mind you may glorify the Father in His Spirit of love.

A MUTUAL SHARING

You too can share yourself with God when at every moment you seek with Jesus to do God's holy will. This was Jesus' mutual self-gift back to the Father from Whom He received the gift of the Father. You can also enter into a mutual sharing with God. God lives within you and raises you up by His free gift of Himself in His uncreated energies of love (grace), divinizing you into participators in His very own nature (2 Peter 1:4). By God's gratuitous self-gift you are made worthy to receive His fullness of presence, His availability toward you for your complete happiness. "...for I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him Who sent me" (John 5:30).

Desire to share yourself with God Who shares Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so perfectly and completely, He prompts you to seek at all times to live in greater awareness of your communication with God as He gives you His Word (**Logos**, Who is Jesus Christ). How you ought to burn with desire never to lose this consciousness of being one with God, communing at each moment in the events of your life with God as your Ultimate Source and End of your very being! You wish to live in love more consciously as you are aware of your oneness in God's communicating love. You are ready to put to death everything that impedes the new life lived in communion with the Trinity. "Casting down imaginations, and every false thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and capturing every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).

LIVE AS YOU PRAY

There is a basic law of growth in prayer that applies also to your level of growth in your development as mature human persons. Look at the small child praying and you will know where that child is in the long journey toward full personhood. The child is present to God only when it feels a need. God is fashioned out of basic needs on the part of the child. God is the great Santa Claus, the giver of things. God is infinitely present in self-giving love to the child, but is perceived in the child's prayer only as a presence of a Giver.

As you personally develop through adolescence into early adulthood in experiencing yourself more and more in availability, mutuality and in the actualization of your self-giving to others in your human relationships, so you can open up to God and be present to Him in greater availability, mutuality and actual true exchange of yourself with His Being.

Thus you can see---as you live, so you pray; and also as you pray, so you live. But now can we not say: as you are present to loved ones in an intimate presence of an *I-Thou* in genuine self-giving love, so you become present to God in the same way? God's love as presence is being actuated or incarnated when you love another human being. Is this not the meaning of the three key texts in the First Epistle of Saint John the Theologian?

“My beloved, let us love one another; for love is from God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1 John 4: 7-8). “No man has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us. Hereby we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit” (1 John 4:12-13). “And we have believed and have known the love that God has for us. God is love; and he who dwells in love abides in God. Herein, is His love made perfect in us, so that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear is tormenting. He who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:16-18).

LIVING IN LOVE

The presence of God within you becomes a swelling ocean wave that seeks to burst through the space of your heart to flow out and inundate the entire world before you with God’s love. You whisper the Name and Presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit over your world. What was hidden now becomes revealed, what was absent now through your cooperation becomes present.

The presence of God experienced as intimate love within you becomes a presence of God as transforming love around you. You are called to intimacy by living in the Indwelling Presence of God. But such intimacy finds its fullness in the *birthing* of God’s loving presence in others whom you are sent to serve with love.

Intimate love begets other intimate loves. A loving community gives birth to new loving communities. And you find your happiness and fulfillment, as God does, in becoming progressively more open and available to beget others into their unique happiness as they discover their *I-ness* in the *thou* of your gift of self.

RELEASING GOD’S PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

You have moved from being closed to being open to God and you become intensely aware of God communicating with you at all times with His infinite love within you. You wish at all times to pray as you seek in all things to love God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength (Deut. 6:5), and to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18). You are also driven outward toward the world in which you live. You wish to share your newfound *being*, discovering God’s great merciful love for you. It is always a movement, therefore, outward toward those human beings around you. You go to become God’s presence of love toward all whom you are privileged to meet, and you become available to them to call them into their being through the mystery of your unique presence.

God’s presence is infinite; His love is total and perfect. Yet the experience of God’s presence is quite dependent on you and me to release His love in the context of our human situation. God calls others into being by His love in us, shown in genuine, loving presence to those others. Father Maloney witnessed this call into presence one day---a call that is always a *becoming*, an unending series of being birthed into new being. After celebrating a beautiful Divine Liturgy, he observed one of the concelebrating priests turn to one of the little acolytes to ask his name. “John, it was a real privilege to serve at God’s altar today with you,” the priest told the boy with great sincerity. It was a genuine openness to the *I* of that young boy. The priest was God’s presence to him in that moment as the boy understood that he was important in the eyes of that priest. That boy could better understand now that he was also beautiful in the eyes of God Himself.

TENSIONED LIVING

Yet, why are you and I not capable of being God's presence to others at all times? Why are we not more present to God throughout the day? One difficulty lies in the tension between the inner, living experience of the Indwelling Trinity and the outward giving of that love and new life to others. It is a tension between the eternal *now* experienced in those moments of aloneness with the Alone and this present temporal *now* that is so full of the absence of love and openness in self-giving to others. There is a tension and brokenness that more easily separates contemplation from daily living than unites them into the same presence of love for God and neighbor.

Another reason is that many Christians living in the West tend to separate spirit and matter, God and His material creation. Distinction should not be the same as separation. For those who have eyes to see, God is everywhere present, freely inserted into His material creation through the Incarnation of the Son of God, and working to bring it into its fulfillment unto His glory and the sharing of His own life and happiness with His human creatures (Theosis, Divinization). The Divine Presence through the physical, created world assails us, penetrates and moulds us. God shouts out from inside of each material moment in space and time that He is here present and this place is holy by His presence as an activating, loving energy. God is revealing Himself everywhere, through our groping efforts, as a universal milieu, an environment, the air that we breathe. All beings have full reality and are holy in proportion as they converge upon this Ultimate Point. God is the source of all perfections and the goal toward which created beings are moving in an *élan vital* to their completion. "For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from You, the Father of Light, and to You we give 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." (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

This vision of worshipful communion between you and your Divine Creator, whereby you can lose yourself in God as in an "Other", is grounded in the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. In Him, as St. Paul teaches with such insistence, all things are reunited and are consummated. By the Resurrectional Presence of Christ Who fills all things, the whole of creation has a meaningful consistency.

THEOTOKOS: VIRGIN AND MOTHER OF GOD

That is why the archetype of the Church and of us Christians from the earliest centuries has always been Mary, virgin and mother of God. She is the perfect, totally human Christian and perfect contemplative. It is not enough to realize in prayer throughout the day and night that you have been chosen by God's predilection to be His spouse, a pure and empty virgin with no power but the power of awe-ful expectancy to receive the Triune God's gift of indwelling, intimate love. You are called to be mother to the life and presence of God in the world around you.

"Commemorating our Ever-Holy, Ever-Pure, Ever-Blessed and Glorious Lady, the Birth-Giver of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, together with all the Saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life unto Christ our God". (Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).

PRAYER OF ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA TO THE MOTHER OF GOD

O Most Holy Lady, Birth-Giver of God, the light of my darkened soul, my hope, my protection, my refuge, my rest and my joy. I thank you, for you have permitted me, the unworthy, to be a partaker of the most pure Body and precious Blood of your Son.

Give the light of understanding to the eyes of my heart, you who gave birth to the True Light. Give life to me who am deadened by sin, you who gave birth to the fountain of Eternal Life. Have mercy on me, O loving Mother of the merciful God. Grant me compunction and contrition of heart, humility in my thoughts, and a release from the slavery of my own reasoning.

And enable me, even until my last breath, to receive the sanctification of the Most Pure Mysteries, for the healing of soul and body. Grant me tears of repentance and confession, that I may glorify you all the days of my life, for you are blessed and greatly glorified always, now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Just a reminder that the aim of "Stillpoint Contemplative Ministries, a non-profit organization, is to give a theological and psychological underpinning to the contemplative life whereby a person can change his/her mental framework of perceiving God, other persons and the entire material creation and see "All Things in God, and God in All Things."

Share the richness of your own contemplative life experience and the self-gift of your presence with others in the setting of your own daily life.

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

Fr. John Michael Zboyovski