

## **INSCAPE September 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!**

### **PRAYING IN THE HEART**

One of the great graces in Father Maloney's life was his own immersion in the teachings of the early Eastern Christian mystics of the desert and to a limited degree to experience in his own life the dynamic they experienced so profoundly; namely, that weeping and mourning for our brokenness brings us in the littleness of our heart before the All-Loving and Merciful Trinity and there to receive their healing merciful comfort.

In the West when we speak of compunction, purification, and the constant thought of our sins, we regard it as totally negative. Father George believed this is precisely because we have lost the concept of our littleness of heart, the conviction resulting from the realization of our true, ontological position in regard to God. It is evident throughout all the Eastern Christian Fathers' writings that the first step in the spiritual life is always to put ourselves before God as we really are, which is a state of nothingness. We are nothingness before *Allness*, and so it is only natural that we find that Christian spirituality is based on this polarity, the transcendence of God and our own littleness.

But strangely enough, far from breeding in us any sadness or long-faced remorse or introspection, the realization of our nothingness before God is what gives us true Christian joy. Indeed, it fills us with great, childlike confidence in God.

### **WEEP—THERE IS NO OTHER WAY**

This inner weeping for our existential state of "zerness" is what the Fathers of the East called *penthos* in Greek. It is a permanent environment wherein a true relationship with God is maintained. This is the only way that God will reveal himself to us. All that we can learn on our own about God is really nothing or so very little, but when God reveals himself to us, and he does this only to the meek and humble of heart, then we can make genuine progress in the spiritual life.

Abbot Pimen, one of the early Egyptian Fathers of the desert, expressed the common thinking of the Desert Fathers and Mothers when he said: "Weep for your sins, there is no other way to salvation." They were completely convinced that such weeping kept them from sinning and that this was the only way to true salvation, to true life, whereby God, even in this life, would come and dwell within them in their hearts.

### **THE BIRTH OF TRUE PRAYER**

True, fiery prayer rises up from the depths of our hearts as a fruit of repentance and a continued conversion. The heart opens up and is poured out in deep yearning for oneness in loving unity with the Indwelling Trinity. This we can call, in the words of the Eastern Fathers, the *prayer of the heart*.

Such prayer of the heart bursts out from the depths of our heartfelt distress with our wretchedness, as Saint Paul expressed: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this mortal body? I thank God for deliverance through our Lord Jesus Christ. Now therefore with my mind I am a servant of the law of God; but with my flesh I am a servant of the law of sin (Romans 7:24-25).

Inner joyful sweetness will gradually dominate in our hearts as we experience the depths of our own sinfulness and brokenness by plunging into the depths of God's tender loving mercy. God in his great mercy granted to the sinful woman in the Gospel...“For this reason, I say to you, Her many sins are forgiven because she loved much; but he to whom little is forgiven, loves little. And he said to the women, Your sins are forgiven. Then the guests began to say within themselves, Who is this man who forgives even sins? So Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you, go in peace” (Luke 7:47-50)]...forgiveness of her sins and a deep union with him “for she loved much.” God loves those who love him. He cleaves to those who cleave to him. He gives himself to those who ardently seek him unceasingly. He abundantly grants fullness of joy to those who desire to enjoy his love.

Saint Theophan the Recluse gives us a beginning description of the prayer of the heart as taught by the Desert Fathers: “To kindle in his heart such a divine love, to unite with God in an inseparable union of love, it is necessary for a man to pray often, raising his mind to God. For as a flame increases when it is constantly fed, so prayer, made often, with the mind dwelling ever more deeply in God, arouses divine love in the heart. And the heart, set on fire, will warm all the inner man, will enlighten and teach him, revealing to him all its unknown and hidden wisdom, and making him like a flaming Seraph, always standing before God within his spirit, always looking at him within his mind, and drawing from this vision the sweetness of spiritual joy.”

## FIERY PRAYER

It was Saint John Cassian who spoke the language of the *hesychastic* (those who pray in the depths of their hearts) Fathers of the Desert in describing such wordless contemplation as “fiery prayer”: “We are affected from the very bottom of our heart, so that we get at its meaning (Holy Scripture), not by reading the text, but by experience anticipating its meaning. And so our soul will arrive at that purity of prayer reached, to the extent that the Lord permit it...This is masked by no attendant sounds of words. It is a fiery outbreak, an indescribable exaltation, an insatiable thrust of the soul. Free of what is sensed and seen, ineffable in its groans and signs, the soul pours itself out to God.”

It is God who has put this yearning to be set on fire by the ever-new levels of union with God that we, by God's grace through his condescending merciful love, can attain. We burn within our hearts to become more one with God. “O God, thou art my God; on thee I wait; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee as in a dry and thirsty land where no water is. As, in purity, I have seen thee, so may I see thy power and thy glory. Because thy loving-kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live; I will lift up my hands in thy name” (Psalms 63:1-4).

No life is worth living without living in oneness with God within our hearts. Yet to attain this requires a dying process as we allow God to strip from us all that prevents us (our brokenness) from surrendering ourselves completely to his love. Tired from fleeing from God's mercy, in the words of the poet Francis Thompson (from *The Hound of Heaven*), we reach a point of true conversion to stand naked before God and allow him to hack from us every binding force that keeps us from surrendering at every moment to God's infinite and perfect love:

Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!  
My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,  
And smitten to my knee;  
I am defenseless utterly...

“All which I took from thee I did but take,  
Not from thy harms,  
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.  
All of which thy child's MISTAKE  
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home...

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
I am He Whom thou seekest!  
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.

## **STRETCHING OUT TOWARD GOD**

Our wounds are dressed and healed by God's sweet balm of merciful love. Our only response is to give continued glory to God for his marvels of love and mercy. Now our deepest yearnings of the heart become the path to heaven. The distance from our heart into the heart of God is measured, not by miles or light-years, but by the constancy and intensity of our returned love and our continued desire to surrender totally to God.

With Saint Paul we can say: "...I do not consider that I have reached the goal; but this one thing I do know, forgetting those things which are behind, I strive for those things which are before me; I press toward the goal to receive the prize of victory of God's highest calling through Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:14-15). But to forget the past and to stretch forth into the next moment to possess God more completely in our hearts, we must learn to live continually in God's presence...an indwelling presence where He Never Leaves Us.

Jesus still tells us as he spoke to the hearts of the desert ascetics of the early church that all Christians are to pray continually: "He spoke to them a parable, that they should pray always and not get weary. There was a judge in a city..." (Luke 18:1-2). Jesus taught his disciples: "Therefore keep watch always and pray..." (Luke 21:36).

Saint Paul challenged the early Christians in Thessalonica to pray continually: "Be joyful always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ concerning you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

## **TO PRAY ALWAYS**

Is it possible for us modern men and women, living in a world of so much movement, noise, pollution of air and waterways, crime, and cities of decaying garbage heaps and contaminated wastes, to find the inner peace to maintain a "recollection" in our hearts of the Indwelling Presence that would allow us to pray always? From the earliest times in Christianity, people sought as expanded consciousness of God's abiding presence within them, in their *hearts*.

They reached out for an ever-increasing awareness, constancy, and sincerity in their intimate relationships with the indwelling Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The hermits that fled into the stark, barren deserts were seeking an expansion of consciousness that God was truly the Source and absolute Spirit that drove them into the desert, primarily of their hearts, to love God with their whole heart, their whole soul, mind, and strength. The heart, as we have already pointed out, represents in Sacred Scripture in the language of all mystics the deepest part of the whole, integrated person. Saint Theophan the Recluse expressed this early inner attention as a focusing in the heart upon God in reverent fear and hope: "Pray is turning the mind and thoughts towards God. To pray means to stand before God with the mind, mentally to gaze unwaveringly at him, to converse with him in reverent fear and hope...The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God, and to go on standing before him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life...Behave as you wish, so long as you learn to stand before God with the mind in the heart, for in this lies the essence of the matter."

Such early Christians did not believe that the injunctions of Jesus to stand vigilantly attentive in the heart and pray incessantly were to be interpreted as Semitic hyperbole. They believed the great truth Jesus came to reveal to us and made possible through the infused power of the Spirit of his gifts of faith, hope, and love, exercised at every moment in every thought, word, and deed—namely, that the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, truly lived within them. The result for all Christians was to become more and more aware daily of that greatest of all realities.

For such heroically dedicated Christians, prayer was more than saying fixed prayers or asking God for gifts and even thanking him for gifts received. Prayer was a state of being, of living beyond the habitual ideas that they had of themselves or that their society fashioned for them. It was a continued journey within (*Inscape*), a return to their true selves, by living as consciously as possible in loving surrender to God as their Source and their final goal (Theosis, Divinization, The Vision and Presence of God Face to Face).

The means to attain such prayer of the heart, they knew, would be all the practices of asceticism (Orthopraxis) of fasting, vigils, hard physical work, guarding the heart against the eight capital vices (The first evil pair: gluttony and fornication; avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride) by putting on the mind and virtues of Jesus Christ. Yet they humbly knew that whatever efforts they used to gain the inner purity of heart, it would not lie in their power to reach this state of “pure” prayer by such efforts alone.

It was the work of the Holy Spirit who prayed in us “Likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses; for we do not know what is right and proper for us to pray for; but the Spirit prays for us with that earnestness which cannot be described. And he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, for the Spirit prays for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that those who love God are helped by him in everything for good” (Romans 8:26-28) with our spirit, our heart, by pouring into our emptied hearts the gifts of faith, hope, and love to surrender in all anxieties through childlike trust to the constant love of the heavenly Father and to grace us with humble love toward our neighbors. Saint Paul clearly teaches this: “But God has revealed them to us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what man knows the mind of man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so, no one knows the mind of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit that is from God, that we may understand the gifts that are given to us by God. For the things which we discuss are not dependent on the knowledge of words and man’s wisdom, but on the teaching of the Spirit; thus explaining spiritual things to the spiritually minded. For the material man rejects spiritual things; they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But the spiritual man discerns every thing, and yet no man can discern him. For who knows the mind of the Lord that he may teach it? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:10-16).

## **REMEMBERING GOD’S PRESENCE**

Praying in the heart did not bring with it a special esoteric technique of *gnosis* given to only the initiated. It is basically an effective attitude that seeks to transcend the limitations of human words and mental images to reach an inner “*STILLPOINT*” where God and the individual Christian meet in silent surrendering love, a person in relationship to another person. In the third century Origen taught that one’s daily works and the keeping of the divine commandments should never take a Christian away from true prayer. All the Fathers taught that true prayer does not mean complete concentration with all one’s strength upon God. For Origen, to pray without ceasing was to combine with one’s necessary works. A Christian’s prayerfulness would be determined by the degree to which one’s action and inner prayerful attitude came from the love of God.

It was Saint Basil the Great in his prudence that brought constant prayer into the practical dimension of ordinary persons living in the world. He knew it was not practical for most monks ever, let alone the average lay person, to recite continually, orally or mentally, a fixed ejaculation or aspiration as a way of centering upon God always. He has bequeathed to all succeeding generations the phrase, “to attend to yourself,” to refer to an inner attentiveness or a state of alert consciousness of God’s ever-abiding presence and an active desire on the part of the individual Christian to live in harmony with God’s holy will, manifested at every moment, but especially in the concreteness of *this* very moment and in the context of this or that action or rest. Saint Basil describes this inner state of attentiveness to do all for God’s glory: “We should watch over our heart with all vigilance, not only to avoid ever losing the thought of God or sully the memory of his wonders by vain imaginations, but also in order to carry about the holy thoughts of God stamped upon our souls as an ineffaceable seal by continuous and pure recollection...as the Christian directs every action, small and great, according to the will of God, performing the action at the same time with care and exactitude, and keeping his thoughts fixed upon the One who gave him the work to do....We should perform every action as if under the eyes of the Lord and think every thought as if observed by him...fulfilling the words of the Lord: ‘I seek not my own will but the will of him that sent me, the Father’.”

Thus we see that if a person does not have this desire to direct all thoughts, words, and deeds unto God’s glory by remembering God’s loving presence, then even the constant recitation of prayers and the performance of heroic works will not be pleasing to God. It is such remembrance of God, the Indwelling Trinity, that allows us Christians to direct all of our thought, words, and deeds toward God.

## **THE JESUS PRAYER**

The Fathers of the desert were not running from cities or from human civilization, but they were running into their deepest selves to find themselves on a higher level of existence—as Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord, who dwelt within them, became the focal center of their true selves in him. They strove to live constantly in the consciousness of God’s loving presence and to surrender themselves completely to his holy will.

When the Fathers urge us to such a prayer of the heart, they suggest the simple but powerful “Jesus Prayer.” They had learned to enter into the deepest areas of their unconscious, and there they found the demonic within themselves. They knew from their Christian faith and experience that there was no other name whereby they would be saved and healed than the name of Jesus “There is no salvation by any other man; for there is no other name under the heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4-12).

In the Christian East, the Christian learned to synchronize one’s breathing with the invocation of the sacred name of Jesus. With no discursive thought about the content of the prayer, the Eastern Christians learned to occupy their senses and imagination with a fixed point of attention that then freed their mind to be docile and supple to God operating in a non-verbal manner.

## **THE NAME OF JESUS**

By understanding the psychology of the Semite who believed the person named—to be present to the one pronouncing the name with reverence and love—we can better appreciate, not only the Christians’ reverence and love for the name of Jesus, but also their insight into the presence of the Risen Saviour by pronouncing that name. This understanding could open to us today a great source of biblical spirituality and a form of simple, relaxed prayer that could be most helpful for all of us in our everyday dash-about world.

When one arrives at the depth of understanding that “reverently pronouncing a name” and/or “praying before a holy icon”, the reality of this experience actually brings one into the very “presence of ” and “communion with” that which is desired.

The “Jesus Prayer,” which eventually over the years took on a fixed formula: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” has its roots not only in the New testament, but even farther back in the Old Testament. In the Old Covenant we see a developed personal conviction that the invocation of the name of God brought with it the conscious realization of his presence: “...they shall call upon my name, and I will answer them” (Zechariah).

But the New Testament gives us a fuller theology of God’s name and the power that emanates from the reverent pronouncing of the name of Jesus.

Saint Paul tells us that “God has given him a name that is above all names in that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend in heaven, on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:9-10). The Acts of the Apostles describe how the good news is preached in the name of Jesus. Converts believe Jesus is truly the Son of God. Christians encounter him in the sacraments that are administered in his sacred name. Miracles are wrought by uttering his name. Martyrs die, pronouncing it reverently.

There is no tone of magic—only a deep conviction among the early Christians that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, who died and was raised up by his heavenly Father, still lived within them and was leading them to a share in his resurrected life. The Gospel stories of the two blind men on the road crying, “Son of David, have mercy on us” (Matthew 9-27), and the humble request of the publican, “O God, have mercy on me a sinner” (Luke 18-13), became the inspiration for this prayer.

Whether a Christian used the entire, traditional formula: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” or merely the name of “Jesus—mercy,” what is important in praying the name and person of Jesus in our heart is to enter into the dynamics of true heart-prayer.

This includes three dynamic, interpersonal relationships between the Christian and the Risen Lord Jesus: the transcendence of Jesus as Son of God, truly divine, of the same nature as the Father; the humble sense of our individual brokenness, sinfulness and inability to heal ourselves; and lastly, the intimate experience of the immanence of the Indwelling Trinity within the Christian, who continuously experiences his/her uniqueness in the Trinity’s healing love.

## A TRUE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Any true Christian religious experience must **first** place a strong accent on the awesomeness and complete transcendence of Jesus Christ. He is Lord (Kyrios), He is the Creator and Redeemer of us all. He is more than just a good man, more even than a super famous person. He is God! “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God!” We must first recognize and accept this awesome fact and respond like Saint Peter “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) by true faith and living by experience that true life in every moment of our existence.

**Second**, we must recognize that we are sinners. We must remember the height from which we have fallen. We, by free will choice, have separated ourselves from God. We have failed to be whom we were created to be. We have missed the mark and the purpose of our existence—to live in communion and union with God and neighbor in His perfect and eternal merciful love. Saint James tells us to humble ourselves before God by realizing our sinfulness: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist Satan, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, O you sinners! And purify your hearts, O you of doubtful mind! Humble yourselves and mourn; let your laughter be turned to weeping and your joy to sorrow. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up” (James 4:7-10).

**Third**, what brings us sinners to Jesus, the Lord and God Almighty, is our hunger for his presence with us and within us, “more intimately to me than I am to myself,” as Augustine wrote. The author of the Acts of the Apostles (17:28) tells us: “He is not far from any of us. Indeed, it is in him that we live and move and have our being.” Because Jesus Christ (Uncreated) is Lord and God and Saviour, completely perfect and transcendent to all creatures (Created), he is able also to be the ground of our being, living within us, sustaining us in being. “Everything came to be by his hand; and without him not even one thing that was created came to be. The life was in him, and the life is the light of men” (John 1:3-4).

Saint Peter typifies these three characteristics of a religious experience. When Jesus told Peter and his companions to lower their nets to a miraculous catch of fish, Peter, overwhelmed by Jesus’ power, threw himself at his feet and said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). He was awed by the transcendence of Jesus as the Son of God, and along with that he sensed his own unworthiness before the greatness of Jesus the Lord; finally he showed a desire to hold fast to him as he clung to his feet in adoring worship: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

### **OUR TRUE SELF IN JESUS**

The Eastern spiritual writers would say that as we are faithful to the simple, heartfelt encounter with Jesus in our heart through the repetition of his holy name, we will gradually experience his presence deep down within our true person at the core of our very being. As God lives in the depths of our being, he will no longer be a mere concept to us, but a living person, penetrating us deeply. We will become more and more what God created us to be, the image of his own Divine Son. We will become aware of our true self, not as a subject adoring some being who dwells in the remoteness of heaven, but as a child of God, participating, as Saint Peter says, in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). We will not become God by nature, but will truly be made Godlike by God’s presence within.

### **THE RELEASE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

The Eastern Christian authors would also say that the presence of Jesus brought vividly to our consciousness by the reverent pronouncing of his Sacred Name, above all, releases the Holy Spirit within us. And the Spirit of Jesus reveals all we need to know about our personal Saviour (John 15:26), the Divine Lord. Above all, the Spirit of Love gives us the power to know that we are loved in all circumstances of life by a tender, loving Father. The Holy Spirit of Jesus speaks to us deeply within our hearts and tells us that we really are God’s children (Romans 8:16). We can now rightly speak of God as our dear Father, Abba (Galatians 4:6).

### **A WAY OF LIFE**

The “Jesus Prayer” is, in the final analysis, a way of life “in Christ Jesus,” a phrase that Saint Paul never tires of using. This living person dwells within us, giving us his Spirit and his power to love the Father with his own love and to love one another as he loves us. When we call upon his name incessantly, Jesus the Lord continually reveals to us the Father. Jesus is always saying: “And I have revealed you [Father] to them and I will keep on revealing you so that the mighty love you have for me may be in them and I in them” (John 17:26).

In leading us to the Father, Jesus brings us into a total presence of the Trinity where we experience the three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as uncreated energies of love, each giving himself to us in the imaged self-emptying Son of God, dying on the cross for love of each of us. Sun's rays can flash off a prism and give colored light. The same rays can hit a lens and become concentrated fire. Not only do they illuminate, but they can burn with the heart of fire.

This is similar to the experience of the continuous repetition, in loving adoration of the name of Jesus. The presence of Jesus generates a burning love within our hearts. A unity that simplifies the whole mystery of God's infinite and perfect love in the first creation, the incarnation, redemption, and our sanctification, takes over and operates in our hearts. Christ, in Saint Paul's words, "lives in your hearts through faith; and, then, planted in love and built of love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breath and the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19).

Synchronizing this name and person with our breath, we know by experience that he is our very breath, our very life. Our "magnificent obsession" becomes the consciousness of his increasing and our proportionate decreasing before his *Allness*. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us into the intimate, mysterious knowledge which Saint Paul wanted to possess: "All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death" (Philippians 3:10).

## **PRAYER OF THE HEART AND TECHNIQUES**

There are many levels of application to our spiritual life in our modern times of the spirituality of the prayer of the heart as taught and practiced by the early desert mystics. The first and most primary benefit to be received from such a spirituality is that you and I retain in our heart the constant stretching forth in the fullness of our freedom as children of God in our desire to pray incessantly by living in the presence of the Indwelling Trinity within our heart, as the core of our being. The meaning of our Christian life is not to repeat a Christian mantra over and over, but to seek to attain ever more that full meaning of our human existence—to move at all times into greater awareness of God's intimate and immediate loving presence, which is to be discovered or unveiled in each moment.

We can attain this through our inner discipline to uproot any pride and self-centeredness, and to put on the mind of Christ, by striving for purity of heart. We do this by accepting the Triune God as uncreated energies of love, always actively drawing us as primary grace to share in the Trinity's image and likeness.

To live in the presence of the risen Lord Jesus who is continually releasing his Spirit, who leads us to the Father, we may be drawn to focus on Jesus as our inner Saviour, risen and raising us to eternal life by means of the "Jesus Prayer." The Fathers of the desert show a wonderful freedom of selecting the "name" Jesus. What is important is not any given formula, as if the words making up the prayer are capable of producing a magical effect. The Spirit reveals in you how that name and presence of Jesus will best come to you in the "incarnation" of a breath prayer.

Any technique used in prayer is only a means to greater union with Christ, the Way to the Father through the Holy Spirit. The German theologian Johannes Lotz lays down for us a prudent guideline in the use of any word-prayer to aid us in greater presence to the Indwelling Presence. "Methods should never be allowed to do violence to our individuality, but they should be used to free it and adapt it for the work of meditation so that each mediator can find his own way."



Prayer of the heart is the gift of contemplation without words or images that come under our own choosing or discursive control and is always the gratuitous infusion by the Holy Spirit—it is never dependent on our efforts alone. Yet a focus of integrating body, soul, and spirit levels on the name and inner presence of Jesus Christ, Son of God, has been a great aid in praying more deeply within the heart by thousands and thousands of Christians down through the ages of ages.

## DISCOVERING OUR TRUE SELF IN CHRIST IN OUR HEART

What we have been presenting in this month's *Inscape* on praying in our heart is a form of contemplative prayer where God's Spirit gives us a new presence of the Trinity dwelling within us, but that is revealed as a "luminous darkness" in Saint Gregory of Nyssa's words. It is a true experience in God-given knowledge of the length, breath, width, and depth of the knowledge of Jesus Christ that surpasses all other human understanding (Ephesians 3:18). This gives us as we bring our mind, our habitual level of consciousness, into our "heart," that inner cave that is fashioned as a spiritual womb by the uncreated energies of God's love, the Holy Spirit, and in deep, dark, stark faith, we cry out: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us sinners!" and surrender totally in renewed freedom to turn our lives over to God's complete domination.

This is the *apophatic* knowledge that only the Holy Spirit can infuse into our consciousness, a true knowing by unknowing. Pseudo-Dionysius of the fifth century expressed this unanimous teaching of the Fathers of the desert that gives us the essence of the prayer of the heart: "And then it [God's essence in darkness] breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate into the darkness of unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to him that is wholly unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding."

The prayer of the heart is the Eastern Christian's way of describing the ongoing process of a human being returning to his or her true state, to a consciousness of uniqueness by *being* in Christ.

Through the love received through the Spirit that lives within the divinized human "heart" or consciousness (Romans 5:5), the Christian seeks at all times to live according to that inner dignity ever experienced within the heart in all human relationships and daily events. The prayer of the heart and its authenticity must be measured, as Jesus insisted upon in the Gospels, by the fruit produced in our lives.

We live out our Baptism, as we cry out to Jesus to release his Spirit of love within our hearts. Through a dynamic process of ongoing purifications and deaths to selfishness, we rise to a more intense, conscious relationship to God. We attain a state of inner harmony and peace, tranquility (*hesychia*) and resting in God as our true Center. There is peace and joy in the oneness attained with the Indwelling Trinity. There is also a burning desire to possess still more the "absent" God by stretching out in a willed desire to surrender ourselves more completely, to suffer even more for love of God and neighbor.

## PRAYER-EXERCISE

1. Using the simple techniques previously outlined, integrate your diaphragmatic breathing deeply in and out, your body and soul and spirit levels. Feel yourself completely relaxing. Enter into the spirit-level in your “heart” through faith that the Holy Spirit is praying with your “spirit” within your deepest consciousness, permeated by the Spirit’s faith, hope, and love.

2. As you slowly **breathe in**, pray: “Lord Jesus Christ.” As you slowly **breathe out**, pray: “Son of God.”

3. **Breathe in** again and pray: “Have Mercy.” **Breathe out** and pray: “On me a sinner.”

4. Repeat, striving to lengthen your breathing as you gently enter into a deeper state of relaxation, while moving yourself to greater self-surrender to encounter the Indwelling Trinity. Gently move beyond any confining words into the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Become one with Divinity within you! Yet, discover your uniqueness, your true giftedness from the uncreated energies of the Father, Son, and Spirit, now capable of more consciously surrendering your entire being to the Indwelling Trinity.

If you experience yourself “touching” God and God permeating you, let go of all words and images and concepts. You can gently come back to your rhythmic breathing as you synchronize the words of the prayer with your breathing if you find yourself becoming diffused and distracted way from Center.

5. Try this formula for several days, going no longer than twenty minutes at one prayerful encounter. During the day, while at your busy occupations, find time to turn within and briefly synchronize your breathing the “Jesus Prayer” of a shortened form, such as “Jesus—Mercy.”

Next Month—THE HEART OF CHRIST.

*Father John Michael Zboyovski*