

St. Innocent Orthodox Church

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Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Christ is in our midst!

Over the past month since being welcomed into the community of St. Innocent I have begun to reflect on parish identity. In thinking about our identity as a community, one morning I was struck by some prayers I have been praying for years from Met Anthony Bloom's book *Living Prayer*.

In the epilog to Met Anthony Bloom's *Living Prayer* there are four prayers presented to the beginner on the path to prayer. Two of the prayers deal with identity and the other two deal with our actions towards one another.

The first prayer states "Help me, O God, to put off all pretences and to find my true self." One of the issues that all of us face is "identity". "Who am I?" I know who I think I am and I sometimes know how others perceive me, but who am I really? Also, what is a "true self"? As Orthodox Christians we believe and acknowledge the ancestral fall of Adam and Eve. One of the consequences that man took on when he fell is a split in our true identity. Before the fall Adam and Eve were 100% vulnerable human beings who walked with God in the garden. For Adam and Eve there was nothing hidden, nothing psychologized, no self-consciousness, they abided in the presence of God and their true identity was always in reference to God. In other words, they had no autonomous self identity. After the fall we see immediately that they became self-conscious, they lost their vulnerability and they hid themselves from God. Consequently, they lost their true identity which was always found in reference to God and they began to build up a false identity, a self identity apart from God, based on their own understanding of self. Rather than understanding themselves in relationship to the living God, they began to understand themselves apart from God. This self-understanding in modern times is called the "ego" and one of our tasks as Christians is to



put off all of our pretences, all of that which we think we know about ourselves and to find our true identity in Christ, as our ancestors did before the fall. You see, God does not deal with who we think we are, nor does God deal with our egotistical vision of ourselves which is defined apart from Him. God only deals with us for who we really are.

The second prayer states “Help me, O God, to discard all false pictures of Thee, whatever the cost of my comfort.” There are many who say they believe in God and call themselves Christian who have radically different views of Jesus than the Orthodox Church. Some of these views are simply misunderstandings but some are willful. We live in a time of idolatry, but not in the sense that we worship statues, rather in the sense that we have mental images of who we think God is. The issue this prayer deals with is our false images of who we think God is. God is of course bigger than any image we have of Him and it does not affect Him that we do not understand Him. However, our view of God affects us. If we believe that God is a wrathful despot, then we most likely will not look to Him for help in our weaknesses. If we believe that God is aloof, and a kind of watchmaker in the sky then we will not seek to have God intimately involved in our lives. If we believe that God is our buddy then we will miss out on experiencing the holiness (otherness) of God. All these false views cloud our mind every day when we approach God. The prayer to discard all false pictures of God is essential so that we can approach the real God, rather than the God of our broken minds.

The third prayer states “Help me, O God, to let go of all my problems and fix my mind on thee.” As we begin to see ourselves more clearly and understand that our God is a truly loving God, the next step is involving Him in all of our problems. I have found that one helpful image of “letting go of all my problems,” is when the priest holds up the bread and wine during the Divine Liturgy and says “Thine own, of Thine own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all.” Our life, whether we know it or not, is a gift. Within the gift that we have been given is all the daily victories, struggles and defeats that we may experience. We are called to give thanks in everything, our victories, our temptations, our struggles and our defeats. These are the things we offer unto God. We take our simple broken reality, we hold it up to God, and we ask Him to make something divine out of it. We have no ability to make our life divine in any way but if we are willing to “let go of all of our problems” to God, then He can transform our brokenness into divine life hidden in Christ. It is only when we offer up and surrender our problems to God that we can we truly fix our mind on Him. Surrendering our problems is what we are doing when we confess our sins to God, not simply denoting our falls but actually letting go of our problems to God and asking Him to give us new life and perspective in Christ.

The last prayer that Metropolitan Anthony writes about is “Help me, O God, to see my own sins, never to judge my neighbor, and may the glory be all thine!” Let us circle back to the

Garden of Eden. Notice that after the fall, Adam blames Eve and ultimately blames God for the fall and Eve is content to blame the serpent. Adam states, "The woman whom **You** gave to be with me, **she** gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). In the fallen state mankind has a problem with taking personal responsibility. This fourth prayer focuses on this issue. When we see our own sins and take responsibility for them we have no time to worry about what other people are doing. The person who sees his own sins when he sees another person sin feels compassionate because he realizes that it is easy to fall into sin and that most likely the sinning person does not understand what he is doing to himself. Fr. Zacharias of Essex tells us that "The only time we are infallible is when we confess our sinfulness" (*Enlargement of the Heart*, pg207). The truth is that we need to ask God for help to see our own sins because it is hard to see our own sins, we don't want to see them and often times our mind is set to be tricky and convince us that we have no sins. We should never judge others because in the final analysis we are all committing the same sins, even the most violent sins have the same roots that we participate in. The last part of this prayer is that all glory belongs to God. This is easy to say but more often than not we desire the glory and praise, and if we get it we forget that without God there is nothing of value that any of us have done.

So I leave you with these four prayers and I ask you that you begin to add them to your daily prayer rule. If four is too many just try one. Remember what St. Seraphim said "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved." If we desire this community to grow then we need to pursue a peaceful spirit which is rooted in knowledge of ourselves and God for who we really are and as a community we need to be surrendering our problems to God. We need to take responsibility for our sins and stop judging our neighbors. Finally, we need to give glory to God who has given us everything we need to be saved and enter into His Heavenly Kingdom.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Theophan