

"Letter on Prayer, Meditation & Spiritual Life"

March, 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The life of prayer and meditation is at the heart of the life of the Christian and the Christian community. The Creed we profess each Sunday at liturgy proclaims that we believe in "all that is seen and unseen." It is the unseen quality of God's love that calls us to prayer. Like the values of Love, Freedom or Meaning – our life in God is not visible to the eye, but bears a reality that guides our hearts as the center of what we are.

It is our sincere desire that we begin a deepening of the life of prayer in each community of the diocese, that we "may be able to grasp fully... the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love." (Ephesians 3,18) The life of personal prayer and meditation is one that gives each of us a strong center for our faith, during busy days and overcrowded schedules. Prayer is the way we call upon God for strength and guidance through the concerns of the day – in both intercession and thanksgiving. Meditation is the path of silence in which we hear God's voice and feel awakened in God's love. St. Paul reminds us of "the mystery of Christ in you, your hope of glory." (Colossians 1, 27) We realize this truth, of our life hidden in God, through prayer and meditation.

Those who seek peace through the religions of both the East and the West proclaim the conviction that there are three paths to God:

- The path of adoration, in which we move our consciousness from self to oneness with God – as celebrated in the liturgy and individual devotions.
- The path of service to others, especially the marginalized people of the earth.
- The path of meditative prayer – which Eastern Christians call "divinization" - since it calls us to understand our participation with Christ in the life of the Blessed Trinity, "in whom we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17, 28) It is our sharing in the very life of God.

In the light of Christ we find that these three paths are really one, for in prayer and mediation we develop compassion for others as we understand that we are all one in Christ. In service to others we come to realize the need for prayer as the source of the love we hope to share and the place of guidance for everyday life. When we realize the unity of all things in God and we understand that each of us is one with the divine, our hearts go out to others for we feel their pain as our own and their joy as well.

Too often in the past the Christian Church has been like Martha in the Gospel of Luke – busy about the details of our religious experience. Jesus reminds us that "only one thing is required": that we sit with Martha's sister, Mary, at the feet of Jesus and listen to his words. Through prayer and meditation we fulfill this admonition of Jesus. Soon I hope to aid the clergy and lay leaders of our parishes in providing opportunities to learn more about prayer and mediation. Hopefully, the spiritual life of our communities will flourish through classes, programs, and retreats on this life of prayer.

The path of spirituality is one that has often been considered the area of "saints" or of those in religious orders. This is a mistaken notion, however, for every Christian is called to the experience of the Divine in the life of prayer and the silence of meditation. Too often, Christians are disappointed in the lack of such experience in their own church communities and feel compelled to seek their spiritual fulfillment in the teachings of other religions. Such experiences of the mystical life are not contrary to our Christian faith, but the fact that Christians must find such experiences outside the rich Catholic tradition must cause us to reflect on our shortcomings as a Christian Church in not meeting such needs. We hope that those who find serenity in their experiences outside our Christian tradition will return to us to share their treasures. Moreover, we hope that the peace that they have

found may find its completion in the beauty of Christ, the fullness of his Wisdom, and the love of their brothers and sisters in the Christian community.

We bless and thank our Jewish brothers and sisters for bequeathing their gift of a living faith to the Christian world. For the Lord Jesus was a Jew and lived in the tradition of Abraham and Sara, Moses and Miriam – who were his ancestors. So, too, we stand with the Moslem community in affirming the oneness of God, who exists in that oneness in every human heart, as well as in every moment and place of the Divine creation. Also, our fellow seekers of the spiritual life in the traditions of India have sought the light of Wisdom through devotion and meditation. Such devotion found a pinnacle of this light in the teachings of the Buddha and in the life of those who follow his teachings. We join with all our fellow humans who seek such Truth and Peace.

But, as Christians, we see the fulfillment of all such human desire in the revelation of Christ. For Christ has manifested to us the truth that lies hidden in the center of each atomic particle as well as the center of every human soul. For those who believe, death is seen as an opening to eternal life. For those who believe, the dying to self in everyday life is an opening to finding God here and now, long before physical death completes our journey to the Divine. It is our rich Catholic and Christian tradition that teaches us how to lose the self in order to find the true self in Christ (Matthew 10:39). This tradition includes the teaching of many saints and many practices to lead each Christian to such realization of the fullness of Christ. These include the use of the “Jesus Prayer” (also called the prayer of the heart), the rosary, meditation and contemplation, and meditative use of the Scripture. Such great saints as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, as well as modern teachers, such as Thomas Merton or Father Basil Pennington and Father Thomas Keating (who teach “Centering Prayer”) also provide paths for the spiritual life to the Christian Community.

For so long the people of our diocese have proclaimed each Sunday “All Are Welcome.” This phrase has stated that we are a Church known for accepting all people to the table of the Lord. No one is excluded because we respect the dignity of every person. Women are not excluded from the ordained ministry. This has been so important that we have used this phrase on my Bishop’s crest, which appears on official documents. Yet, our hope is that this will not be the only hallmark of our Ecumenical Diocese. Our desire is that our growth will also be marked by an interior development that matches our external growth in numbers. To be known as a Church that promotes and practices the spiritual life is to be known as followers of the Living Christ and to be the presence of Christ in the world today. As Jesus loved God with the whole of his soul, mind, and strength, so, too, others will see this kind of love in us if we first devote ourselves to the life of prayer that identifies us with Christ and the silence of meditation in which we encounter the Holy One.

As your bishop, I join St. Paul, in the letter to the Ephesians, as “I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name; and I pray that he will bestow on you gifts in keeping with the riches of his glory.” May the riches of the life of prayer benefit each of us and conform us more closely to the image of Christ.