

1] Before the 16th century Reformation in Western Europe, lay people might own Books of Hours as they were called. These contained prayers drawn from the monastic tradition. This would enable them to pray at home, following something of the monastic hours of prayer, dispersed throughout the day.

2] One very beautiful devotional prayer, originally in French, appeared in a Book of Hours in the year 1514. It runs:

God be in my head,
And in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes,
And in my looking;
God be in my mouth,
And in my speaking;
God be in my heart,
And in my thinking;
God be at mine end,
And at my departing.

3] What I find interesting here, is how the prayer in that period still retained the original, biblical and Christian use of the terms, head and heart. It is in harmony with the Fathers of the Church, who used the Greek term, nous, that is, mind, in the same way. As the Psalmist says, 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.'
[Ps.18:14]

4] What do you imagine, what idea do you hold, when you use the word, mind? Often we can read words in spiritual writers, in liturgical books, prayer books and certainly, the Bible, and fall into the trap of imposing a very modern or current meaning upon any ancient word. When the writers of the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church used the term, nous/mind, they did not mean the probing intellect, the inquiring mind, or what we might call today, the scientific mind, useful and needed though it be. Rather, the ancient writers were referring

to our reception or understanding of truth, the comprehension of mysteries. This concept of nous is found throughout that great compilation of writings called, The Philokalia. The fathers there could talk of noetic thought, an idea that is not really found in modern English. But for them it was the way in which the soul comes to the knowledge of God.

5] The nous is the receptive mind, one which, if open and undistracted by busy intellectual speculations, reasonings and investigations, does not so much plunge itself in the depths of the divine, but rather, awakens within itself the mysteries of the kingdom of God; what God has permitted to be disclosed of Himself: what we call, Cataphatic Theology. You will recall that Fr Filip spoke of that a few weeks ago, as opposed to Apophatic Theology, the way of negation, all the rest of God's eternal mystery that the human mind cannot possibly take in or comprehend. No wonder that the Anaphora of St John Chrysostom speaks of God as ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible!

6] Before the Liturgy began, the prayer, O heavenly King... was recited, a prayer to God the Holy Spirit that is generally said at the start of our prayers. We might accept as a theological principle that God, the Spirit of Truth, is in all places and fills all things. We might reason, we might teach, that God is omnipresent and is in all Creation. But to know this, to experience this, is altogether something more. Just as it is one thing to describe pain or joy in words but quite another to know them.

7] In St Luke's gospel the risen Christ opens the minds of His apostles to understand the Scriptures (Lk.24:45). Peter, Andrew, James and John had heard those same scriptures many times before in the synagogue at Capernaum, but now, in the light of all that had happened, all that they had been through with Him, they could understand; they could perceive the truth, they could contend with their opponents and show that Jesus was the Christ.

8] Is it not with the mind, our noetic faculty, that we sense or perceive the presence of God? When you receive the Holy Gifts in communion is your mind busy, trying to rationalise how leavened

bread and fermented grape juice become the Body and Blood of Christ our God? No! That is not the time for distraction and feverish reasoning; it is a time for the restless mind to be quiet before a mystery. 'Be still and know that I am God,' says the Psalmist (Ps.45:10)

9] Of course, we can use this idea of the mind, the nous, anytime: when we suddenly realise what is going on, when we understand a situation, when we come to know and relate to another person. But as we say when it comes to the radio, you have to be tuned in. And when it comes to our knowledge of God, the mind, similarly, has to be refocused, attentive to and listening out for Him. This is the mind, the highest faculty of the soul, that we must bring to the Liturgy: as we gather and come to stand before the mystery of the Word of God in the Scriptures; as our hearts are raised on high to receive the Holy Gifts in the marriage supper of the Lamb, we should each stand in awe, and must not allow ourselves to be distracted through idle talking, and should strive to keep our thoughts from being scattered among things that do not matter for the time being. As the choir sing in the Cherubicon, 'let us now lay aside all earthly care that we may receive the King of all, escorted invisibly by the angelic orders. Alleluia!'

10] This, however, is a tall order; it is difficult for us, for being part of our nature inherited in the old Adam, our mind, our nous, is fallen, it is damaged, it needs healing and restoration and redirection towards its proper purpose as intended by Our Creator. What brought that man in the gospel today to such a state? Was it brain damage, addiction, obsession? Whatever the case, he was clearly infested by a legion of demonic tormentors. He is, of course, quite crazy, perfectly mad: we shall not mince our words. His is not the innocent nakedness of the newly created Adam and Eve: this is the shocking self-exposure against all restraint and convention of one who lives among the dead.

11] We, thank God, have not come to that extreme, though there are those who have teetered on that edge, who have looked into the darkness of that abyss. But, nevertheless, there are none here who have not needed deliverance or healing, or reintegration or

forgiveness and enlightenment. After all, that is the fruit of grace that was imparted at our baptism. Ever since, the whole purpose of all our striving, our repentance, our ascetic struggle, our prayer and our charity to others, is the reorientation of the mind, the setting of our hearts on the kingdom of God first, before all else. St Paul speaks to us today of, 'The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully;' of our being, 'Enriched in all things for every generosity, which works through us thanksgiving to God.'

12] All this implies that we come first to that new understanding, lest the seed of the Word of God lies merely dormant within us, as we were warned in the parable last Sunday. We might well be poor soil along the path; we might well be choked by the thorns of cares or knocked off course by fears and temptations. But we can also take on the spiritual warfare and cultivate the true mind, one that is on its way to re-entering paradise rather than one always beguiled by what is on offer there outside the gates.

13] St Paul instructs the Christians at Rome, 'I beseech you therefore, brethren... do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.' [Rom.12:1-2] And as he tells those at Ephesus, 'Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and... put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.' [Eph.4:23-24] In time, by the grace of God, we shall all be healed, if we pay heed and attend to the spiritual disciplines of Orthodox Christianity, which are given to us for this very purpose, and in this way we shall acquire what the blessed apostle calls the nous, the mind, of Christ. (1Cor.2:16)
'God be in my head, And in my understanding.....God be in my heart, And in my thinking; God be at mine end, And at my departing.